

Interview: Sarah Herda and Terence Gower

A conversation between Sarah Herda and Terence Gower

For the presentation of *Ciudad Moderna*, an exhibition by Terence Gower at the Storefront for Art and Architecture, May 2, 2006.

Terence: Let's make this a kind of two-way interview. I have all these questions I want to ask about your eight years as director of Storefront. What was your first priority when you started?

Sarah: What I tried to do when I got to the Storefront was embrace the exhibition space, because I think the program had started to "bleed" outside of the space. There was an interest in bigger projects. This makes sense if you're someone who was there for sixteen years. You would want to take the program and extend it beyond the space.

I really wanted to reactivate the exhibition space and exhibition program. I tried to look at the history of the program and mission and define its limits. This meant looking at all kinds of different spatial practices. In a funny way you could say Storefront's program is comprised of things that don't really belong anywhere else.

T: A process of elimination!

S: In a weird way. It's a funny way to think about a program. There were so many things I thought we could do, and that it was obvious we *should* do, and therefore I would never do. And then there were a lot of things in the program that I think *should* happen somewhere else, but no one else will do them.

T: Do you have an example?

S: The Yves Klein *Air Architecture* show. It came to Storefront and not a larger institution or gallery. We had original Yves Kleins in the Storefront, which turned out to be the perfect framework for the show. There are a lot of examples. Storefront has ended up being the perfect framework for a really diverse group of works. It's never squarely in architecture, it's never squarely in art, it's always this strange combination of being on the street... it's historical... it's contemporary...

I think there probably *is* more work produced at the art/architecture divide. Now you see a lot of work that people would expect us to show, that we haven't shown...

T: Give me a brief history of the Storefront.

S: Storefront was started in 1982 as an artist-run alternative art space, on Prince Street between Mulberry and Lafayette, and like many alternative art spaces, Storefront started to become institutionalized through different grant initiatives. I think NYSCA was a big part of Storefront's becoming a non-profit.

Storefront was a little bit slower to institutionalize, it was kind of a mom and pop shop for quite a bit longer because the founder, Kyong Park was here for 16 years.

T: Was Kyong really identified as the *director* or was it a much more nebulous system?

S: He was the founder-director, he was the personality. When I started, it was a question of surviving the founder, or "founder-syndrome." I experienced that in a very real way, because a lot of people held back to see if it could survive.

T: To see if it developed the structure...

S: Exactly. I came to the organization with an interesting perspective: I was a completely different generation, I knew about Storefront independent of the "personality," though I did know Kyong through a project in San Francisco. But I knew about Storefront through the program, through this newspaper we would receive in San Francisco. Thus I had a very different relationship to it, maybe a kind of naïveté, an optimism, which I think is my nature. I understood it to be one of the most important exhibition spaces, and certainly one the most important spaces in New York City, given my involvement in architecture. And that's what I went in with. I didn't construct the problem of the founder in those terms, which helped me.

T: We're sitting here in my apartment, looking through my collection of architecture magazines and monographs from the 1950s and 60s. I know you come from an architectural-book background, and I'm wondering how that background has influenced what you've done at Storefront.

S: I learned about architecture from books, from working with a great bookseller in San Francisco. You could say my knowledge of architecture is based on William Stout's incredible book collection. My knowledge of architecture was formed in this way, through access to these books.

T: I had a similar experience. In 1989, just before I went to art school, I worked at an architectural bookstore in London—The London Art Bookshop. That was the point where I was trying to decide between art and architecture school, and reading the books in the store really helped form my ideas around architecture. Well, my formation really began with my family, the influence of the architects in my family, but my bookstore knowledge is what sent me to art instead of architecture school. I realized I was more interested in the representation of architecture than the creation of buildings.

S: My experience was exactly the same. Though we have very different backgrounds: For instance your father was an architect. I had no architecture at all, I don't even think I knew what the word architecture was until I was about 15. But it was the 1980s so it was all around. I thought I was going to be an architect, so I went down to SCIARC and I looked at architecture school. But I realized I couldn't possibly do that yet, I needed to learn how to read and write, so I went and

studied literature, but I immediately started working in Stout's bookstore full-time. It was a parallel education. And that's also when I decided I didn't want to be an architect.

T: Partly through meeting architects? For me it was! (laughter) Did you have time to read at the store?

S: Yes, and they had a very liberal lending policy... At the bookstore, I became really fascinated with books and exhibitions as catalysts—for the effect that they had once architectural ideas became more public. I was hired from the bookshop to be the director of a very small space in San Francisco modeled after Storefront. It was called 2AES—Art and Architecture Exhibition Space—it was a major acronym thing. 2AES and CfCA: Center for Critical Architecture.

T: It's interesting to hear what the formation might be for the director of a space like Storefront because it's a peculiar in-between world. I like to think of my practice as caught in some kind of gap between art and architecture. For example I get a kind of a cross-over thrill out of a review or a text on my work published in an architecture magazine as opposed to an art magazine. It seems to have more meaning to me. I do, of course, out of necessity, place my practice within the structure of the art world. But then, luckily, artists like me find spaces like Storefront that we can call home.

S: I've been thinking of your show here as part of a group of projects I've been presenting on different forms of Modernism. I would include the Yves Klien show, and the Cuba project, which was really a first step in a possible series. That was Eduardo Luis Rodriguez' project, *Architecture and Revolution in Cuba*, about building projects from the first 10 years after the revolution. It was great to make that material available to the public. We're still working on the book.

T: It's interesting how these projects relate to each other...

S: You can draw a lot of lines through them. There's a line in the Cuba project that connects to the Klein show; a utopianism that really exists in the original work itself—its not necessarily being interpreted. And then I'd trace that line more recently to Marco Lulic's project, and your project,

which are really exciting for me because there's also this point where, as a practice, you're dealing with this period and this work.

Let's talk about the work you're showing here at Storefront. How does *Ciudad Moderna* fit into the body of work you've created in and about Mexico?

T: This piece started as a commission from Mexico City's media museum, Laboratorio Arte Alameda. I had already been producing work in Mexico for 12 years, and was working with Mexican magazines and architectural monographs from the 1950s and 60s as source material. With the Laboratorio project, I started extending that kind of analysis to narrative films. The museum and I started assembling other projects I had done on Mexican Modernism, and finally, last summer, opened a ten-installation exhibition. The dialogue between works was fantastic. I showed a series of works that ran the gamut of architectural representation: narrative film to documentary films to books, to the photo mural, to the model... almost a process of *exhausting* these many strategies of representation.

S: In another piece from this body of work, your video *The Polytechnic*, you basically turned a book into a movie, and with *Ciudad Moderna*, you turned a movie into something like a book of images. Through out the video you freeze on a frame and by removing all of the traces of the narrative film create still images which never existed. They're almost burned in a disconcerting way into my memory as these iconic, modernist architectural images.

T: ...which actually never existed as photographs. There are often larger formal games in my work, and one of them would be the kind of symmetry which occurs between those two videos. In *The Polytechnic*, released last year, all the imagery in the video is taken from a single book, published on the Mexico City Polytechnic in 1964. In *The Polytechnic* I'm animating still images. The opposite happens in *Ciudad Moderna*, where I'm taking the animation *out* of moving images and creating these stills that read like architectural photographs. I specifically chose scenes that featured the architecture like iconographic Modernist architectural photographs. I *mined* those moments, those frames, from the film, and put them out there as stills. These "photographs" could almost have been taken by Armando Salas Portugal (Barragán's photographer). Watching the video is a bit like watching a Russ Meyer sex comedy being interrupted by an architectural slide show.

S: What I also think is interesting is what this historical moment meant in the context of Mexico. This was a pivotal moment, a kind of tipping point between first and third worlds for Mexico in terms of development. There were different paths to the future depending on how Modernism played out.

T: In this larger body of work on Mexican Modernism I'm working with period images; contemporary images from the 1950s and 60s. I'm looking at these things formally, but I'm also looking at them as some kind of conduit, maybe they're communicating a little bit of the ideology of the time as well. The architecture depicted in the images certainly communicates this, but so do the forms of representation, the camera angles, etc. I'm interested in this huge, government-sponsored project of bringing Mexico out of the Third World and into the First—"Let's all work together"—that sense of post-revolutionary optimism and possibility running from the 1930s through the 60s. This, of course, went hand in hand with all sorts of government corruption, but I would say there was quite an amazing sense of optimism then. You get this sense looking at some of the film material from the period, or still images. The optimism of the period was kind of infectious for the audience that went to see the Arte Alameda show where this whole body of work was brought together.

We, in the art and architecture worlds are used to thinking about the utopian period of Modernism in the 1950s and 60s. You could almost say it's become fashionable. But it seems for the general public that went to my show, it wasn't really something they were used to thinking about. The responses I was getting were quite revelatory: "Wow, I'd never thought of that, it was an incredible period...", "Mexico really was advancing, now look at us, what a disaster." In 1968 the fantasy fell apart. There were student protests, a terrible student massacre, the population explosion within Mexico City. The planning fell apart. But up until then I think there was a sense that things were being held together, a sense of progress. I don't think it was just government propaganda, I think it was within the popular imagination as well. If you read the books and look at the films from the period, you see that it was part of a public ideology.

So I hope this body of work conveys that. I think it comes through in the video *Ciudad Moderna*. And I think it comes across even stronger when you see the work together. I was excited to see that, and I think it had a positive effect. I started to think, maybe we could look for models in this period which can have some relevance to us now—that go beyond just structural models. Spiritual models? Spiritual is the wrong kind of word! Yikes.

S: There is something very powerful about this period and a reason that people are drawn to it.

T: Utopianism is seductive. I think it's something we've lost in society. We live in very cynical times, hence this obsession with utopias. Perhaps it's a return to a belief in imagination, in the sense that we've got to *imagine* a better alternative before it can actually be achieved.

S: The work you've been talking about is primarily the body of work done in Mexico about Mexican Modernist architecture. Where do you see that going now?

T: The Mexican project is continuing: I'm currently working on a project about the huge Mexico City housing project—Tlaltelolco—built in the early 1960s. But I'm also starting research and documentation for a couple of projects on the United States in that same period. In a year or so I'll start a project on mid-20th Century Canada, as that's where I'm from. For my U.S. project I'm researching public school design and construction in New York City. Something I've always been fascinated with, living here in New York, is this critical mass of good design found in the New York Public Schools built in the 1950s and 60s. I'm analyzing what kind of ideology produced that focus on good design. I've spoken to a few principals of schools built in the 1950s, and they're raving about their schools, saying they're the envy of the system because the quality of the design, planning and construction. I'm interested in tracing the relationship between the ideology of the period and the forms which emerged.

S: I see your work as firmly rooted in an art practice, but when I think about your projects and think about the audience of *Storefront*, there are so many different access points for people with different interests. I can see people coming to this work that would never go to a contemporary art exhibition.

T: This piece (*Ciudad Moderna*) is particularly accessible, which is unusual for me! But seriously, all of my work is designed to offer a range of access points. I think very carefully about how the viewer enters the work. An example would be *The Red Wall*—a project I've shown in different versions in various museums, including the Queens Museum here in New York. The main element of this piece is a giant red wall, an incredibly graphic, emotional "flag" for the viewer. The piece always consists of this red wall and a second element, either a text, photograph or drawing. This other element is a summary of my research into Modernist architectural polychromy up to that point. The piece offers very polarized access points. For instance, the latest version, about to be

inaugurated in a gallery in Oslo, displays this very dense text about the battle between Le Corbusier and Theo van Doesburg on the subject of architectural polychromy in the 1920's. The text is an analysis of that conflict, and is definitely inaccessible to some viewers (laughs). It would be thrilling for an architectural historian – "finally someone who speaks my language!" In contrast to this text you have the red wall, which is the most basic graphic, accessible even to a newborn baby. That's the most polarized I get in terms of accessibility.

I'd say *Ciudad Moderna* has all sorts of access points, including an unusual one for me which is this very seductive, entertainment level, which I usually don't play with in my work. It's a really unusual piece that way. The piece is installed at Storefront in a way that the entertainment comes last. The viewer first encounters a series of prints that were made from the video. In other words, when the viewer walks into the Storefront exhibition space they enter a straightforward exhibition of black and white architectural photography. When the viewer later enters the projection space of the video they encounter the source for that photography, and realize that these photographs were actually extracted from a film.

S: I want to ask you about one of your most recent projects: your intervention in the collection of the Carrillo Gil Museum in Mexico City in which you created a series of new interior spaces within the galleries of the museum to re-hang works from the collection. It's such an interesting project in terms of context. You have taken works from the collection out of the museum context that we understand, and created a new context to see the individual works. When I first saw the installation shots I did not know that you created the interiors, I thought they were original.

T: Like they could be from a 1950's Del Moral monograph...

S: I think you're taking architectural representation to a completely different scale. For instance you had a series of *brise soleil*'s built for that show to divide the spaces. In a sense you are both representing and creating space at full scale.

T: Perhaps my experimentation with those kinds of spaces started with the *Projection Pavilion* I did last year, which was the centerpiece of the show I did at Laboratorio Arte Alameda: among other things, it was the support for the projection of the video *Ciudad Moderna*. It was my museography

for that show that led to the invitation to do the Carrillo Gil Museum project, which just opened a month ago. For the Carrillo Gil, I created a series of "display interiors" in which to show off the museum's collection. My hanging of the collection, entitled *Prácticas públicas/Vidas privadas*, was designed to question the mythology which has been built up around the great Mexican Modernist painters, such as Siqueiros and Rivera. I contrasted their heroic, public, political sides with their activities in a more private realm, namely their production of easel paintings for bourgeois collectors' homes. It was an opportunity to set up these display interiors which would evoke the Modernist homes of the Mexican bourgeoisie. Like full-scale representations of the interiors you see in the video *Ciudad Moderna*.

You could say the beginning of my work with architecture was my work with the pavilion typology. I was doing work about display before—the relationship between museum display and merchandise display—and what kind of aesthetic apparatus they share. I was also interested in the problem of use-value: For instance, when an object is put on display—say, an umbrella, normally used to shield you from the rain—it ceases to function as that object, and becomes a model of itself. Its function is suspended.

I was looking for a similar model within architecture, and the pavilion presented itself, and that led to all this other work with pavilions and display. The Carrillo Gil show comes out of that specific interest in display and architecture. The pavilion projects are all being brought together in a book called "Display Architecture" coming out this autumn. I see the pavilion as another form of representation. This object is a model for itself, it represents itself. In a way, the pavilion represents architecture at 1:1 scale, on a scale you can actually enter.

S: Like a full-scale model.

T: Exactly. The two pavilions I've designed—*The Bicycle Pavilion* and *The Projection Pavilion*—allow the viewer to enter them. These are architectural spaces, but they also feel like models. There's both a familiar and uncanny feeling inside those pavilions, and the same kind of thing occurs in the Carrillo Gil show, where I've recreated domestic spaces within the museum. The viewer enters these kinds of display spaces and immediately all sorts of things are triggered: it feels like domestic space, like institutional space, etc. Hopefully there's a weird kind of vibration that occurs between those distinct notions of space. I think that did occur in the Carrillo Gil show—a bit of confusion, a bit of "where am I?"

S: I've only seen the installation in photographs. A building or pavilion you can identify because it's autonomous, but these interiors—these environments you've created—are disorientating, even in the representation of them. It wasn't clear to me as we looked at images of the show what you did and what already existed in the museum. This is of course in part because I do not know this space. Upon looking closer and I imagine this must be true of being in the space, there is something off and indeed jarring about the spaces—for example seeing a Siqueiros painting in a modern bourgeois domestic interior. The installation both complicates and reveals something about our relationship to the work in the Carrillo Gil collection and with certain preconceptions about these artists and their work.

T: Well, I was building *brises soleils* in the space, I was paneling the walls with wood. These were period signifiers of domestic space that were very strong. I think this show was about generating these interior spaces, but equally about intervening in the architecture of the museum. I think it's that threshold between something that's absolutely about the architecture of the museum and the creation of these kind of "decoy" or display spaces that makes the piece vibrate or resonate.

S: The same thing happens with the video you made of the series of cardboard models: *5 Notable Pavilions*. It's through the video you're able to accept access to the space at that scale.

T: Yes, that was a study of Modernist pavilions. For me, the piece is about layering media on top of other media. About re-representing things. First of all, these things that we call models are actually scale *reproductions* of the original pavilions. These scale reproductions get translated into still photography, then later into video, which is later projected large. At this scale, the body is invited to have a relationship once again with the volumes and spaces of those pavilions. You could almost do a reading of all my work through the idea of the body's understanding of space. That's at the root of the *5 Notable Pavilions* project. Do these things small, then project them large. You end up with something reminiscent of Mies van der Rohe's photo-murals. Images of architecture projected to such a huge size can trick the body into feeling that it is inhabiting those spaces. A photo-mural of an interior offers a continuation of the space of the viewer. It's an illusion that occurs on several different levels, not just on the visual, even the corporeal level.

S: In terms of representation, this piece also creates a sense of confusion with regard to what the

media actually is. The film of the model almost feels like a rendering. It could be digitally generated.

T: Yes, that's what the immediate response to this piece was: "Wow, was this done digitally?" But no, it is an actual filmed tour of this group of models. There were little elements left in the video which were flaws that occurred during the shooting of the piece: some focus issues, some bumps, etc. These trigger an awareness that these models are actually existing in space.

Coming back to *Ciudad Moderna*, one of the reasons I'm excited about showing it at Storefront is that when the video is presented as an installation and projected to the right scale, the still photographs which pull out of that film footage become photo-murals. I've always thought of the images in my video work in this way. To me, the black and white *Ciudad Moderna* stills really become "Miesian" photo-murals with all the same sense of illusion, the extension of the space, etc. Again, I hope this occurs on an intellectual as well as a corporeal level for the viewer. So when the piece is set up correctly the viewer should have these kind of "photo-mural moments."