

Zeitschrift: Trans : Publikationsreihe des Fachvereins der Studierenden am
Departement Architektur der ETH Zürich

Herausgeber: Departement Architektur der ETH Zürich

Band: - (2016)

Heft: 28

Artikel: Manyness and contradiction

Autor: Abhelakh, Anneke / Flammer, Pascal

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-918786>

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MANYNESS AND CONTRADICTION

Anneke Abhelakh
Pascal Flammer

CALIFORNIA MAP PROJECT
PART I: CALIFORNIA

The following are photographs of letters that spell CALIFORNIA and of the map used for locating the site for each letter. The letters vary in scale from 1" to approximately 150", and in materials used. The letters are located as nearly as possible within the area occupied by the letters on the map.

C. Off Jones Valley Road. 9 miles from Hwy 299 leading from Redding. On bank of finger of Shasta Lake.
Materials: Found logs.

A. On road to Paradise. 7 miles from intersection of Paradise Road and Hwy 99 (near Chico).
Materials: jacks on road.

L. 3.6 miles from Newcastle on California 193.
Materials: telephone pole and faded shadow.

I. 8 miles from San Andreas on Hwy 49. Near Angel's Camp.
Materials: Non-toxic color in creek.

F. Ben Hur Road. South of Mariposa. 3.4 miles from California 49.
Materials: scattered bits of red cloth.

G. 3.4 miles on Road Road from Junction 180. Near Hinkler.
Materials: red yarn.

B. 14 miles north of Kernville in Sequoia National Forest. In Kern River.
Materials: Found rocks.

H. 4.10 miles from Hwy 395 on Death Valley Road. .6 miles on south side of road.
Materials: rocks and dry color.

J. Quartz Lucerne. 11.8 miles from Lucerne Fire station. 2 miles off Old Woman Spring Road. Turn at 55th reading Parlin Limestone Products.
Materials: white dry color. (The letter is nearly invisible).

N. In Joshua Tree National Monument. 15 miles from Twenty nine Palm Visitor Center on road to Cottonwood.
Materials: dry color, rocks, desert wildflower seed.

John Baldessari
George Nicolaidis
September, 1969



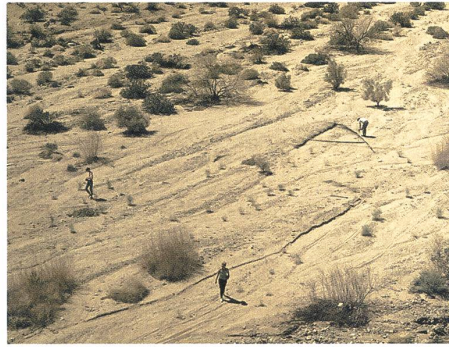


fig. a. California Map Project, John Baldessari & George Nicolaidis, 1969.

House in Uehara by Kazuo Shinohara

Anneke Abhelakh (aa): This is an impressive and brutally beautiful house, but somehow I find it problematic if I try to fully grasp the proposal it makes. I feel it questioned my existence from the very moment I entered and this idea did not let go upon leaving. I wonder how one can live in this house without constantly being in a kind of existential pursuit.

Pascal Flammer (pf): I think, I experienced this somewhat differently. As much as I share your experience, I did not really feel confronted with these thoughts at all, it was also just some spaces, concrete, some diagonal pillars. I like to read this house actually within the oeuvre of Shinohara. At one point one masters one's own ambitions, depending on people's character it's then time to leave the known behind for the unknown, in order to get further and also, in honour of oneself. Once we have left the known, we enter the field of the unknown, the field of hope and doubts. This is how I read Uehara, mostly. As a superhuman trial and less as a danger.

aa: (laughs) It's not danger I feel but the claustrophobic haunt of defining myself which I find an almost impossible demand to make from a house, hence also from the architect. Who can live in a house that seemingly offers so little comfort? I understand what you mean within the oeuvre and that might be the explanation on a meta-level but my question remains: who wants to live there? I read the house indeed more as a personal architectural pursuit of Shinohara than of a home for someone. Could it be that—or perhaps I have some unclarified issues with life that the house tries to confront me with.

pf: What produces this discomfort?

aa: I am not talking about the presence of the enormous beam in the middle of the room alone. I feel quite unpleasant with the questions the house poses about mankind, my role in the universe, how to live?

pf: Fantastic that a house can do that. What exactly is it that managed to do so? The concrete? The triangular/round windows? The glass above the stairs? The seemingly over-dimensioned double-V pillars that looked like living organs/absent presence of «something»? The tightness? The fact that too many things go on

in your immediate proximity? The clash of spaces? The structure? The physicality and materiality? Postmodern fragments? Low door openings or the limited relation with outside?

aa: I guess the tightness you describe could well be the reason for the sense of claustrophobia of thoughts I had. The presence of the creature with the ancient soul disguised as an enormous concrete pillar certainly makes me question my surroundings and expectations. And the multitude of spaces makes my wishes dynamic and fluctuating. I wonder if I would ever fall asleep in that house?

pf: OK, let's ask the question differently: In relation to doubts, what might be the optimal house?

House of Earth by Kazuo Shinohara from 1966

aa: Maybe this house comes close to an answer, at least for a couple without children. They can live here until old age. The eighty-five-year-old woman who lived there said the house was perfect; the basement is cool in summer and warm in winter. She had lived there for fifty years and had commissioned the house with her late husband. The house appeared to be simple, yet very complex in its composition and it proposed a pleasant way of living life rather than questioning it as strongly as the Uehara house. The intense colours on the walls, the incredibly beautiful triangular ceiling, the intimacy of the main space, the fitted furniture, the earth on the floor, I liked all of it. I remember that I tried to look at Shinohara's houses beyond the four categories he compiled himself. This house is perhaps indeed the art he talks of.

pf: True, that house is fantastic, I experienced that space free of any imposed intentions. Even though it is a conceptual and formally meticulously composed building. I could hardly imagine a building as designed than this. Still, that little amount of friction is hardly endurable for me. At one moment I wish to enter conditions of strong doubts and contradictions—like the Uehara House. Or, instead of the heaviness of Uehara, I could also imagine a light and less explicit formalisation of doubts, actually a joyful cosmos of doubts, maybe that can be found in the work of early Toyo Ito, Frank Gehry or John Baldessari. With them doubts seem to be the basis of a surprisingly play- and joyful body of work.

aa: Indeed! Ito is this chameleon who has produced boundless experimenting in all directions; Gehry is this fun loving bear that failed and kept on trying rather successfully. Baldessari's projects are repeatedly able to put a smile on your face. For instance, the project where he goes and searches for the letters CALIFORNIA from the map. He searches for the actual location of all individual letters, places the letter that is supposed to be there (but obviously missing) and then records and photographs these places. The work is absurd, it twists the world as we live it and which we no longer seem to be doubtful of (since we would normally not search for the Z of Zurich in the city...) and it totally pushed the boundaries of what was considered art at the time. All three men seem to develop their work out of great curiosity.

Which reminds me, last December I was at a crit in your studio at ETH and I must say doubt and curiosity are quite present in many of the projects the students presented. I understand doubt as an instinctive subliminal tool to help us survive or secondly as a doubtful hope from which to develop further on. I think you investigate a third possibility in the studio.

pf: Yes, doubts and hopes are a crucial first trigger in my studio. Doubts (and hopes) reveal topics one cares for. When these doubts are made conscious, we are able to re-question automated answers. I then try with the students to leave the initial personal relation to the doubts and find in that doubt to the general aspect to it, the aspect that is dealing with all of us. From there we develop form. So, it's guaranteed that the work is both authentic and general. Since there is no brief, no site or predetermined stylistic form, personal topics are the students' starting point to then develop into a universal proposal. Baldessari does something similar when he puts dots on people's faces in depictions. He extracts the essence, takes away the personal expression in the face and replaces it with a coloured dot to enable the image to be more generic: We can hardly feel empathy to a specific person we don't know, but we can do so for the condition of man in general.

By that he experiments and works within and against arbitrarily imposed limits to finding new solutions to problems. That work shows in an exemplary manner what I believe is crucial, also in an architectural work: the ability to transform a personal thought into a work of general value. In our case as architects the result is physical.

CALIFORNIA MAP PROJECT

PART I: CALIFORNIA

The following are photographs of letters that spell CALIFORNIA and of the map used for locating the site for each letter. The letters vary in scale from 1" to approximately 100', and in materials used. The letters are located as nearly as possible within the area occupied by the letters on the map.

C. Off Jones Valley Road. 9 miles from Hiway 299 leading from Redding. On bank of finger of Shasta Lake.

Materials: Found logs.

A. On road to Paradise. 7 miles from intersection of Paradise Road and Hiway 99 (near Chico).

Materials: paint on rock.

L. 3.6 miles from Newcastle on California 193.

Materials: telephone pole and faked shadow.

I. 5 miles from San Andreas on Hiway 49. Near Angel's Camp.

Materials: Non-toxic color in creek.

F. Ben Hur Road. South of Mariposa. 3.4 miles from California 49.

Materials: scattered bits of red cloth.

O. 3.4 miles on Reed Road from junction 180. Near Minkler.

Materials: red yarn.

R. 14 miles north of Kernville in Sequoia National Forrest. In Kern River.

Materials: Found rocks.

N. 4.10 miles from Hiway 395 on Death Valley Road. .6 miles on south side of road.

Materials: rocks and dry color.

I. Outside Lucerne. 11.8 miles from Lucerne fire station. 2 miles off Old Womans Spring Road.

Turn at sign reading Partin Limestone Products.

Materials: white dry color. (The letter is nearly invisible).

A. In Joshua Tree National Monument. 15 miles from Twenty nine Palms Visitor Center on road to Cottonwood.

Materials: dry color, rocks, dessert wildflower seed.

John Baldessari
George Nicolaidis
September, 1969

fig. b. California Map Project, John Baldessari & George Nicolaidis, 1969.

Anneke Abhelakh, born 1975 in Paramaribo, develops and produces tools for reflection and narration on architecture. Lately she moved to Switzerland.

Pascal Flammer, born in 1973, is a Balsthal based architect. Since 2014 he is a Visiting Lecturer at ETH Zurich.

Recently they travelled together and visited private houses in Japan and another few places and had insights on doubts they share in fragments by space, time and location.