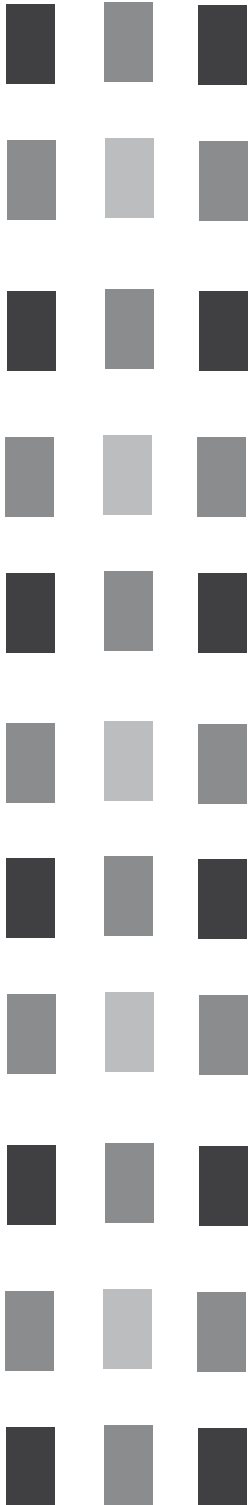


# The Dilemma with Disjunction:

Architecture and Discourse in Bernard Tschumi's Early Work

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## Introduction

Since the late 1960s, architecture and its discourse have been continuously reinvented, reinterpreted, and expanded through other discourses. It has become increasingly difficult to establish what precisely is meant by 'architecture', when contemplating questions like those this workshop seeks to discuss, e. g. whether architecture is a cognitive process in its own right. It is often especially difficult to define how, within this expanded understanding of architecture, architectural design, building and discourse relate to one another and what constitutes theory within architectural discourse.

This paper addresses these questions by looking at the example of Bernard Tschumi's work of the 1970s and 1980s and its use of and relationship to interdisciplinary discourse. These writings and projects, assembled in his book *Architecture and Disjunction*<sup>1</sup>, represent an early case of the questioning of architecture and its disciplinary boundaries by means of interdisciplinary discourse. Tschumi's work is important as an early protagonist of this phenomenon and will be discussed as an example of the particular difficulties with which architecture is often faced when using other theories.

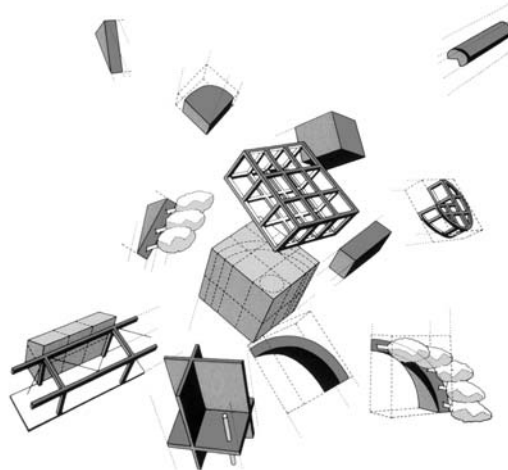
The first part of the paper introduces Tschumi's Theory of Architectural Disjunction and its practical application to architecture. The paper proceeds to look at the problems inherent in his architectural appropriation of Georges Bataille's 'anti-architecture'<sup>2</sup> and discusses why it may be that Tschumi neither identifies these as problematic nor attends to the function of disjunction in the discourses of linguistics and logic. In the end the paper turns toward the understanding of architectural theory implicit in Tschumi's theory of disjunction, and the detrimental effects that arise for architecture as an intellectual discipline from the implied submission to other theories.

## Bernard Tschumi's Theory of Architectural Disjunction

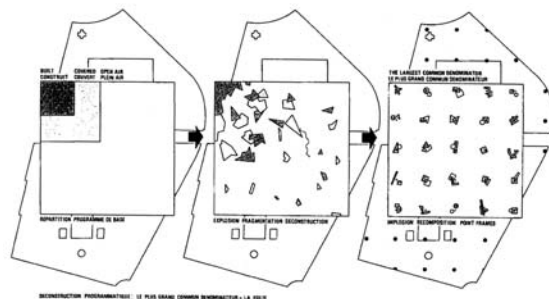
Bernard Tschumi does not see disjunction in general as an architectural concept, but claims that its effects are impressed upon the site, the building and the programme. Tschumi defines disjunction in the words of Webster's dictionary as 'the act of disjoining or condition of being disjoined, separation, disunion. The relation of the terms of a disjunctive proposition.'<sup>3</sup> *Architectural Disjunction* more specifically is portrayed in that it rejects the notion of synthesis in favour of dissociation or disjunctive analysis. It further rejects "the traditional opposition between use and architectural form in favour of a superimposition or juxtaposition of two terms that can be independently and similarly subjected to identical methods of architectural analy-

sis"<sup>4</sup>. Thus it emphasises methods like dissociation, superimposition, and combination. Tschumi continues: "The concept of disjunction is incompatible with a static, autonomous, structural view of architecture. (...) [I]t simply implies constant, mechanical operations that systematically produce dissociation in space and time, where an architectural element only functions by colliding with a programmatic element (...). In this manner, disjunction becomes a systematic and theoretical tool for the making of architecture."<sup>5</sup> (fig. 1, 2)

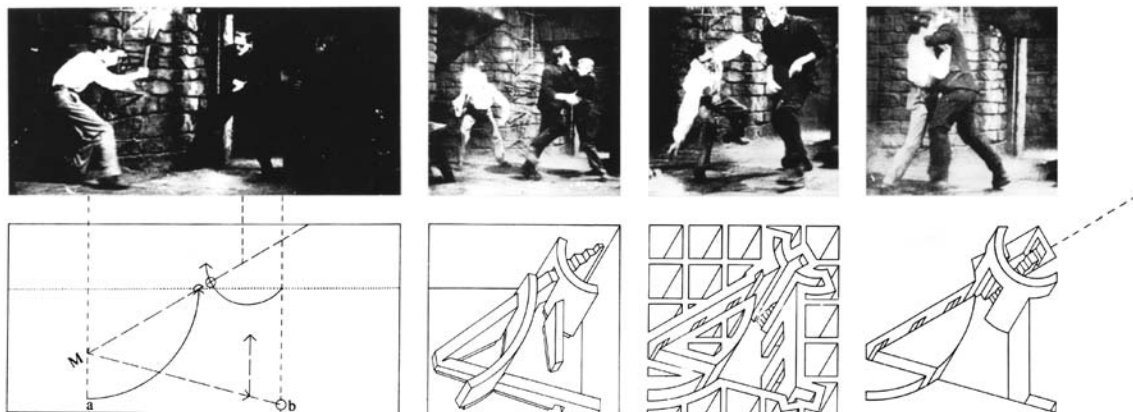
Tschumi's Theory of Architectural Disjunction is based on disjunction as a given state. It is on the grounds of the general, cultural, state of disjunction in modernity that Tschumi rejects 'the notion of synthesis' – most fundamentally expectations of a unity of experience. In his texts, the reader is confronted with various types of disjunction: between form and content, or between use, form and social values, and, more generally, with the non-coincidence between being and meaning, man and object. Tschumi exclaims that these non-coincidences have been explored from Nietzsche to Foucault, from Joyce to Lacan, and continues to ask



1 | *Exploded Folie*: The concept of disjunction simply implies constant, mechanical operations that systematically produce dissociation in space and time



2 | Bernard Tschumi: Parc de la Villette – Deconstruction Programme



3 | The disjunctive design method is indebted to montage in film and image, whose practice Tschumi used in many of his early works, e.g. in his Screenplays

who then could claim, today, the ability to recognise objects and people as part of a homogeneous and coherent world.<sup>6</sup> The motivation for Tschumi's project of Architectural Disjunction thus lies in the given, disjunctive, state of culture as such. Because this is true for certain thinkers in philosophy, it is also true for architecture. Given the cultural state of disjunction and Tschumi's rejection of any synthesis, however, his aim to turn disjunction into a 'systematic and theoretical tool' is somewhat surprising, and highly self-contradictory.

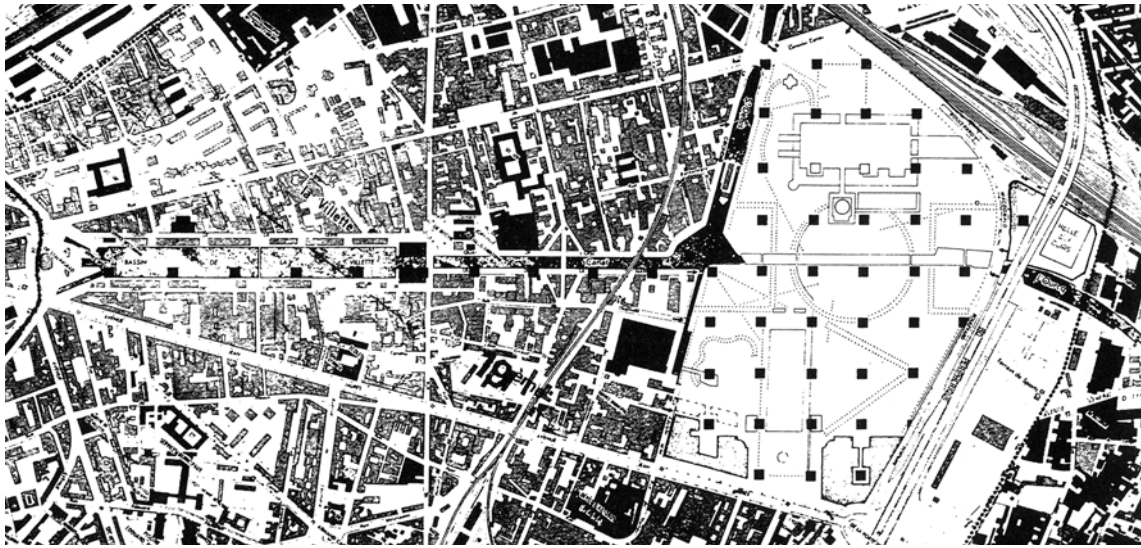
Tschumi's Theory of Architectural Disjunction contains two forms of application: These are 'programmatically disjunction' as conceptual tool, and his 'disjunctive design method' as a form of creative practice. *Programmatic disjunction* relies on an antagonistic tension between related architectural terms, which Tschumi often presents as both mutually exclusive and inextricably linked. It is used to address particular phenomena that Tschumi criticises in the architectural discourse of the 1970s and 1980s. Most notably he aims at the canonised design ideologies of modernist architecture, which had linked certain expectations of use, content or social value to certain architectural forms. Tschumi argues that modernism – in its condemnation of academicism's formulas as repetitive compositional recipes – had also disregarded disjunction. Instead of exploring the ruptures between architectural forms and their new contents such as railway stations or department stores, modernism fixed these by mediating factors such as building typologies. Architectural Disjunction's main counter-strategies here are 'transprogramming', 'disprogramming' and 'cross-programming'. These strategies mix programmes that are spatially or programmatically incompatible, or force a programme into inappropriate spaces. Intellectually, programmatic disjunction establishes a rigid opposition between two terms, for example between form and content, between architecture representing something

else and self-referentially describing itself, between sensual experience and the rationalised space of the architectural concept, or between architecture and event. These oppositions are then to be bridged at what Tschumi calls the rotten point.<sup>7</sup> Giving way to his 'fascination with the dramatic'<sup>8</sup> Tschumi relies on the rigidity of definitions and boundaries as prerequisite for their 'eROTicisation' – a term Tschumi creates by 'transprogramming' the adjective erotic with the verb to rot<sup>9</sup> –, their 'violation' or 'transgression'.

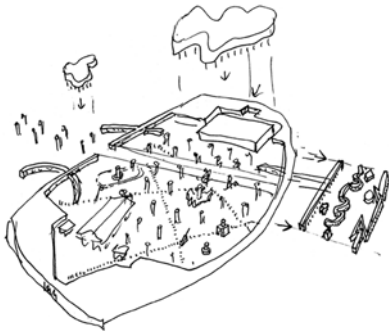
*Disjunctive design* answers the need for a design methodology that unites fragments on the level of formal juxtaposition. Its aim is to leave the individual elements unreconciled and highlight the fragmented experience of modernity in the friction between them. The disjunctive design method is indebted to montage in film and image, whose practice Tschumi used as an alternative to composition in his early works, e. g. in the Manhattan Transcripts, the Screenplays and his scheme for the Parc de la Villette in Paris (fig. 3, 4, 5).

Tschumi describes his design method and its different components when he explains the design for the Parc de la Villette. Its system of lines, system of surfaces and system of points are each to represent a different and autonomous system, and the superimposition of these textual systems onto one another is to maintain differences. It refuses any privileged system or organising element: "The independence of the three superimposed structures [...] avoided all attempts to homogenize the Park into a totality."<sup>10</sup> (fig. 6)

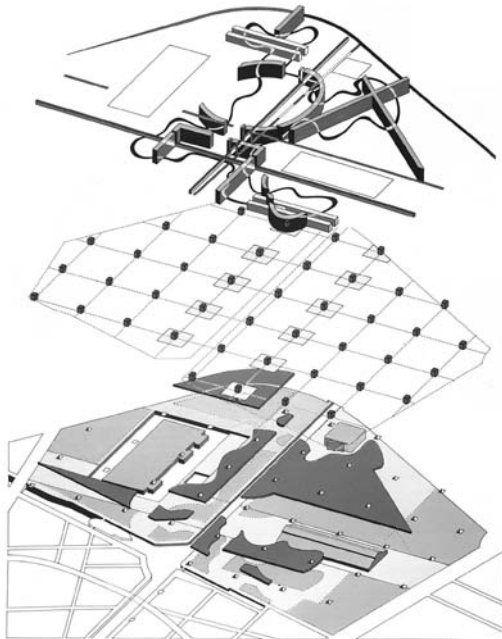
Tschumi's texts themselves form a superimposition of fragments on geometry, mask, bondage, excess, eroticism, etc. – fragments, which he asks us to consider not only as ideas but within the reality of our own spatial experience, e.g. when he describes discomforting spatial devices to remind the architectural designer of the sensual experience of space. "Steep and dangerous staircases,



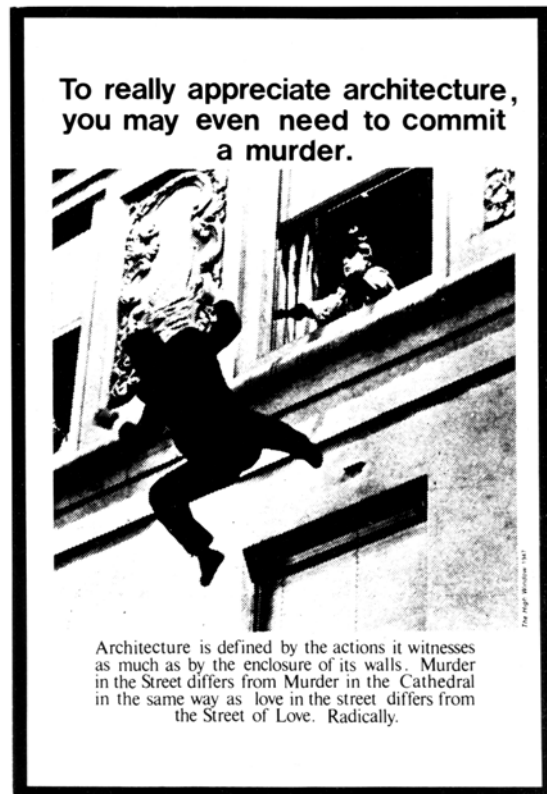
4 | Bernard Tschumi: Parc de la Villette, Siteplan



5 | Bernard Tschumi: Parc de la Villette, Sketch of the Competition Scheme



6 | The independence of the three superimposed structures refused any privileged system and avoided all attempts to homogenise the park into a totality



7 | Bernard Tschumi: Advertisements for Architecture, Murder

those corridors consciously made too narrow for crowds, introduce a radical shift from architecture as an object of contemplation to architecture as a perverse instrument of use. At the same time it must be stressed that the receiving subject – you or I – may wish to be subjected to such spatial aggression, just as you may go to a rock concert and stand close enough to the loudspeakers to sustain a painful – but pleasurable – physical or psychic trauma.<sup>11</sup> (fig. 7) It is in these experiential fragments that we find the basis for Architectural Disjunction's effectiveness and strong impact.



## Architectural Disjunction and Interdisciplinary Discourse

When looking at Tschumi's Theory of Architectural Disjunction from the perspective of interdisciplinary discourse, it is striking that he neither refers to the existing, discursive meanings of disjunction within discourse nor addresses the inherent difficulty arising for his architectural theory from the flirt with Bataille's anti-architectural thought.

When Tschumi appropriates Bataille's ideas for specific objectives, e.g. to bring out the dominance of reason and rationality in modernist architecture, his manoeuvres prove extremely effective. In order to stress the sensual qualities of experienced space, Tschumi leads architecture into Bataille's labyrinth of experience – a space that has no inventor, no author and no architect, that cannot be described but is the disoriented space of someone who has lost his way (fig. 8).<sup>12</sup> He finds his own critique of the modernist form-content-unity supported by Bataille's interest in programmatic issues and in the displacement of form and content.<sup>13</sup> Echoing Denis Hollier's comments on Bataille, Tschumi makes an "effort to bring out the "unity" in terms that are apparently contradictory"<sup>14</sup> and is "never concerned with architecture but with its expansion".<sup>15</sup>

However, certain programmatic discrepancies arise from the fact that Bataille uses architecture as an analogy for man<sup>16</sup>, as a metaphor for regulation, for order. He attacks architecture but aims for mankind's superego. Tschumi's attacks merely challenge architecture in order to transform it, to lessen the influence of reason and rationality, to question the relationship between form and programme, etc. Destroying architecture altogether would be counterproductive to Tschumi's intention, as, after all, Architectural Disjunction is to be a tool for the making of architecture. For Bataille on the other hand, this is the very objective, his chances depend entirely on how convincingly he aims for the total destruction of the 'architectural' in the human mind.

These programmatic differences become even more problematic when Tschumi tries to model Architectural Disjunction into a systematic theory, similar to Bataille's heterology. Bataille establishes heterology, the science of fragmented difference, to oppose scientific knowledge, which only applies to homogeneous elements.<sup>17</sup> The majority of Bataille's dualist concepts, like heterology or scission, refuse to resolve contradictions and exclude a third term. Yves-Alain Bois elaborates on the distinction between dialectics – thesis, antithesis, synthesis – and scission – the division of everything in two, a high and a low part. "The respective engines of these two operations might run on the same fuel (...) but the dialectic is geared toward a final reconciliation (...), while scission, on the con-



8 | Tschumi leads architecture into Bataille's labyrinth of experience to stress the sensual qualities of experienced space.

trary, always tries to (...) make the reconciliation of the two opposites impossible. Scission is the basis of heterology (...). The dialectic, for its part, aims only to reinforce homology."<sup>18</sup> Tschumi's writing might exude an air of rebelliousness and non-conformity, and he might claim that, due to its fragmentary, experiential qualities, there is no room for thesis, antithesis and synthesis in *Architecture and Disjunction*. Most of his attacks on architecture, however, set two alternatives in opposition, and then bridge this opposition to generate a solution for his critique. For Bataille, on the other hand, there never is third term. Bataille denounces even the wish that anything have a solution. Far from being an exit from the labyrinth, it is this very wish that transforms the labyrinth into a prison. To will the future, to wish to construct it, is to devalue the immediate experience of the present. According to Bataille<sup>19</sup>, the project as such – no matter how disjunctive – is the prison.

The way Tschumi uses disjunction – a term that holds specific meanings in linguistics and logic – appears essentially non-discursive. With a man like Tschumi, who so openly displays his access to ideas of French philosophy and linguistics<sup>20</sup>, it is surprising that his use of disjunction stays within the very broad sense of interruption, rupture or being disjoined, and that his attempt at defining it is limited to the above-mentioned quote from Webster's dictionary. Furthermore, Tschumi never picks up on those lines in the quote that point

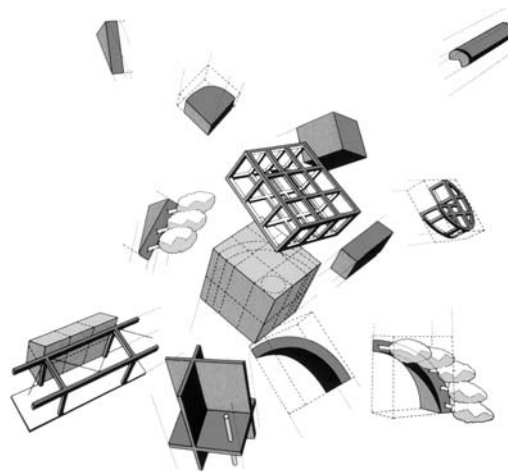
towards disjunction's meaning in the discourse of logic: 'the relation of the terms of a disjunctive proposition'.

In logicians' terms, the disjunctive operator  $\vee$  (or) asserts of the statements it connects that at least one of them is true. Thus  $p \vee q$  means either  $p$  is true or  $q$  is true. In an 'exclusive' sense  $p \vee q$  means either  $p$  is true and  $q$  false, or  $p$  is false and  $q$  is true. Thus an extra condition has to hold: that both statements cannot be true at the same time. If both statements may also be true at the same time, this is defined as an 'inclusive' disjunction in the sense of 'both' – 'and' –.

In linguistics, on the other hand, a disjunctive coordinator distinguishes alternatives, e. g. in 'She will come by bike or she will take a bus', the word 'or' is a 'disjunctive conjunction'. A question such as 'Will you go or will you stay?' is a 'disjunctive question'. In the end it is the resistance of a disjunction like 'but' or 'or' that distinguishes it from conjunctions such as 'and'.

From these few comments one may develop a general, inter-disciplinary meaning of disjunction that differs from that of Tschumi, who insists on the idea of limit, of interruption.<sup>21</sup> While the linguistic use of disjunction may support the notion of resistance, limit or friction, we find that in both discourses disjunction carries an element of choice. More importantly, it also acts as a qualifier in terms of relationships. The inter-disciplinary meaning of disjunction thus highlights an interesting aspect of Tschumi's theory: how little it is interested in the relationship between disjointed elements. Architectural Disjunction holds but one answer for that: the elements are to be disjointed, further dissociated and to keep their fragmentary independence.

In architectural discourse, other sources of the late 1960s or 1970s also make the challenging of modernist architecture's unity of experience the starting point of their critique, e.g. Robert Venturi's *Complexity and Contradiction* or Colin Rowe and Fred Koetter's *Collage City*. Venturi even resorts to disjunction as it is used in logic, when he uses the operator "or" in the inclusive sense of "both... and" as an explanation for the ambiguities of architectural signification.<sup>22</sup> These two examples also illustrate how complexity, ambiguity and disjunction proved a difficult ground for the construction of new theoretical systems. And it is primarily because of Tschumi's will to turn disjunction – despite of its own nature – into a systematic tool that the more radical aspects of Architectural Disjunction end up being domesticated: Tschumi denies the possibility of synthesis in architectural design, yet the general dominance of disjunction reveals a profound homogeneity linking culture, art, film, literature, philosophy and architecture in their condition of being disjointed (fig. 9).



9 | Architectural Disjunction contains a profound homogeneity linking culture, art, film, literature, philosophy and architecture in their condition of being disjointed

This strong coherence between practice and product, between the state of culture, architectural theory and architectural design contradicts Tschumi's own objectives. Given the 'noncoincidence between being and meaning, between man and object' etc., the coherence *within* Tschumi's project of disjunction is inexplicable. While he himself asks who today could claim the ability to recognise objects and people as part of a homogeneous and coherent world, his project applies disjunction homogeneously – and claims that this must be so. Architectural Disjunction is presented as the obvious architectural reflection of the general, cultural, state of disjunction. This fundamental cultural coherence at the heart of Tschumi's Theory of Architectural Disjunction shows its essentially non-discursive and anti-interdisciplinary nature. Architectural Disjunction ignores disjunction's existing meanings and the programmatic ambiguities between architecture and other discourses. Its understanding of inter-disciplinary discourse cannot accommodate the discussion of architecture's complex relationships to other disciplines or an analysis of the important disjunctions within the architectural discipline.

### The Role of Architectural Theory

Most of the problems mentioned above arise from the conflict between the individual aspects of disjunction on the one hand and Tschumi's desire for disjunction to become 'a systematic and theoretical tool' on the other. One might even rephrase Tschumi's dictum on architecture for it: "Caught between sensuality and a quest for the absolute, [Architectural Disjunction] seems to be defined by the questions it raises".<sup>23</sup> With regard to this workshop's topic, the main question raised from this discussion of Tschumi's work – in relation to

architecture's position in contemporary interdisciplinary discourse – is the implicit problematic equation of architectural theory with the application of theory in general to architectural tasks. This understanding of architectural theory excludes interdisciplinary exchange on equal terms. On a practical level, the social or cultural responsibility of architects to react individually to the state of cultural disjunction is lost. On the level of the discipline, architectural theory ceases to exist as a discourse in its own right, as it merely continues other discourses' theories by applying them to the field of architecture. Understood in this way, architectural theory is still limited to design theories – which often merely support and intellectualise architectural design's products, by linking them to other discourses' theories. Yet without a theory originated from its own – disjointed – discourse, built according to its own particulars, architecture is impeded in arguing culturally itself and in contributing theoretically to a wider cultural discourse.

The general cultural coherence exemplified in Tschumi's Theory of Architectural Disjunction can be found at the base of many theoretical ventures within architecture. Yet the complexity of today's expanded field of architecture, no longer limited to architectural design and its theorisation, raises doubts with regard to both the coherence of the architectural discipline itself and to the relationship between architecture and culture as implied in Architectural Disjunction. Architectural discourse today blends architects' creative theoretical appropriations plus their designs and buildings with various design methodologies, the theorisation

of the art of building, the contemplation of aesthetics, with cultural studies of the built environment, architectural media studies, art historic research, Marxist urban analyses, etc. etc. into one highly disjointed discourse. Additionally, the many protagonists of this broadening discourse – historians, art historians, theorists, and architects working somewhere between commercial building and conceptual art, etc. – all operate within the same discourse, yet follow diverse agendas and different programmatic interests, furthering the largely unacknowledged disjunction within architecture.

Tschumi's Architectural Disjunction suggests an opening up of architecture's disciplinary boundaries. At the same time, however, it portrays a scenario in which, ironically enough, architects are to remain authors of buildings-concepts-and-design-methodologies, without a theory of their own that is not intellectually subjected to external theories in a general cultural discourse. Tschumi's theory of disjunction obstructs the use of its own important concept for an analysis of the architectural discipline's inner disjunction. And in its negligence towards the nature of disjointed relationships and due to the underlying assumption of a general cultural homogeneity, it also prevents an analysis of architecture's inter-disciplinary relations. These analyses, however, are highly necessary wherever a comprehensive view of architecture is required, e.g. in architectural education.

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#### Notes:

- 1 Tschumi, Bernard: *Architecture and Disjunction*, Cambridge, 1994.
- 2 See Hollier, Denis: *Against Architecture: The Writings of Georges Bataille*, Cambridge, 1989.
- 3 Op. cit., note 1, p. 3.
- 4 Ibid., p. 212.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Ibid., p. 176.
- 7 Ibid., p. 76.
- 8 Ibid., p. 148.
- 9 Ibid., p. 70.
- 10 Ibid., p. 201.
- 11 Ibid., pp. 124–125.
- 12 Op. cit., note 2, pp. 57–58.
- 13 Bois, Yve-Alain; Krauss, Rosalind: *Formless: A User's Guide*, New York, 1997, p. 15.
- 14 Hollier about Bataille's *L'Erotisme*, in: op. cit., note 2, p. 90.
- 15 Hollier about Bataille's article *Architecture*, ibid., p. 51.
- 16 Ibid., pp. 76–77.
- 17 Bataille in Hollier, ibid., p. 89.
- 18 Op. cit., note 13, Bois, p. 67.
- 19 Op. cit., note 2, p. 61.
- 20 For an account of Tschumi's use of different, mostly French, philosophers and linguists see Louis Martin: *Interdisciplinary Transpositions: Bernard Tschumi's Architectural Theory*, in: Coles, Alex; Defert, Alexia (eds.), *de-, dis-, ex- The Anxiety of Interdisciplinarity*, London, 1998, pp. 59–88.

21 Op. cit., note 1, p. 210.

22 Venturi, Robert: *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, New York, 1966, p. 20.

23 Op. cit., note 1, p. 69.

Credits:

- Fig. 1 Tschumi, Bernard: Parc de la Villette – Exploded Folie
- Fig. 2 Tschumi, Bernard, Parc de la Villette – Deconstruction Programmatique
- Fig. 3 Tschumi, Bernard: Screenplays
- Fig. 4 Tschumi, Bernard: Parc de la Villette – Siteplan
- Fig. 5 Tschumi, Bernard: Parc de la Villette – Sketch of the Competition Scheme
- Fig. 6 Tschumi, Bernard: Parc de la Villette – System of Lines, System of Points, System of Surfaces
- Fig. 7 Tschumi, Bernard: Advertisements for Architecture – Murder
- Fig. 8 Tschumi, Bernard: Advertisements for Architecture – Sensuality
- Fig. 9 Tschumi, Bernard: Parc de la Villette – Exploded Folie