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‘WAKE UP AND DREAM FOR THE 80S’: Nigel Coates 1975-82

Claire Jamieson

Abstract

Nigel Coates graduated from Bernard Tschumi’s unit at the Architectural Association in 1974, before joining him in 1977 to develop a new unit together. These were formative years for Coates, and a period that shaped his architectural preoccupations for the following decades, though remains relatively unexplored. Between 1974 and 1977, Coates produced a number of installation and performance works with artist Antonio Lagarto, and fellow AA graduate Jenny Lowe. These were artworks influenced by Tschumi’s own explorations with curator RoseLee Goldberg, and their exhibition at the Royal College of Art *A Space: A Thousand Words* (1975). The works considered the potential for space to be amplified by the introduction of markers, representations of other spaces and the movement of the body. This article exposes these works for the first time, tracing the changes in Coates’s thinking during this period and how it was reflected in the Unit 10 briefs that he and Tschumi developed between 1977-80. The article chronicles Coates’s pivotal trip to New York during 1980-81 to teach at Bennington College, where his exposure to a dynamic club-scene and influential new art would mark a step change in the young architect’s trajectory. Charting Coates’s development both through his own work and his teaching at the AA, the article constructs the background from which the radical architectural group NATØ emerged in 1983.

Keywords:

Architecture; narrative; Nigel Coates; NATØ; 1980s; performance

Introduction

Critical to an understanding of how Nigel Coates and the 1980s radical architectural group NATØ – ‘Narrative Architecture Today’ – developed their ideas of narrative architecture, is an examination of Coates’s early influences and the evolution of his ideas teaching at the Architectural Association (AA) from the late 1970s. For NATØ, narrative experience was inherently linked to the polyvocal and polyphase nature of the city, and the moving body that is able to narrativise layered perceptual content to create open-ended meaning. In this way, narrative is not a pre-determined storyline played out in space, but an ‘anti-sequential framework of associative meanings held in wait to “drench” the unsuspecting visitor’.¹ Through their drawings, magazine and installations, they proposed a narrative city to be navigated in a freely associative drift through space: ‘NATO does not create the creativity but, like the Cages and Enos in music, set out to create the conditions and preconditions by which everyone may participate’.² This article traces the evolution of this approach – developing an understanding of how Coates’s ideas departed from Bernard Tschumi’s, and the influences of art practice, the post-industrial city, and club and street culture that he brought into the studio at the AA.

Initially taught by Tschumi at the Architectural Association between 1972 -74, Nigel Coates joined Tschumi as co-tutor in the autumn of 1974 for one academic year, before the pair took two years away from the school. They returned in 1977 to form Unit 10, which they developed together until Tschumi’s departure in 1980. During their two-year hiatus between 1975-77, both Tschumi and Coates experimented with installation and performance works, collaborating with other architects and artists who shared their evolving conception of space. This was a particular period when Conceptual art was evolving into new performative modes, and ideas of space became central in the work of a number of artists.

In 1973, writer and critic Lucy Lippard had described how the dematerialisation of the art object, that had evolved from Minimalism, came to shape Conceptual art between 1966 and 1972, a type of work ‘in which the idea is paramount and the material form is secondary, lightweight, ephemeral, cheap, unpretentious and/or “dematerialized”’.³ In her text *Six Years: The dematerialization of the art object from 1966 to 1972*, Lippard loosely defined and began cataloguing

such Conceptual artists, including Daniel Buren, Lawrence Weiner, Bruce Nauman, Dennis Oppenheim, Seth Sieglaub, Dan Graham, Sol LeWitt and many others, whose works defied the 'sacrosanct ivory walls' of the 1960s gallery.⁴ It is from within this framework of Conceptual practice that RoseLee Goldberg's ideas on performance began to emerge, considering it as a mode of Conceptual art that, like Lippard's artists, was driven partly by the desire to circumvent the increasingly commoditised art scene and the gallery system. Goldberg observed a growing number of artists whose work was beginning to overlap with those that of dancers, musicians and performers, artists including Nauman, Klaus Rinke, Graham, Trischa Brown, and Lucinda Childs, as well as British artists such as Gilbert and George, Susan Hiller, Bruce McLean and the Kipper Kids.⁵ The work of these artists implied a sense that space and its relation to the body was a now key part of Conceptual art. Writing in *Studio International* in 1975, Goldberg articulated the idea that via the dematerialisation of the art object that had taken place in Conceptual art, these new performance works used space as a 'materialization of theory'.⁶

For Tschumi, his personal relationship with Goldberg shaped these years, leading to a move away from architecture concerned with the formal, materialised qualities of space, to one constituted by concepts – proposing that architecture is made as much by writing and drawing as it is by built outcomes.⁷ The impact that Tschumi and Goldberg had on each other's thinking has been documented, with Tschumi's Unit 2 at the AA taking on the modes and conventions of Conceptual art and performance – students the 'media and strategies' of art, including texts, photography and storyboards, in ways new to architecture.⁸ Tschumi and Goldberg's reciprocal relationship and the ideas they seeded together came to a head in the exhibition *A Space: A Thousand Words*, which they co-curated at the Royal College of Art in 1975. It was also during this period that Tschumi embarked on his 'Manhattan Transcripts' project, many of the ideas of which developed Goldberg's thinking on the situated nature of performance art, and the body in space.

Coates was heavily influenced by Tschumi's work during this time, and himself exhibited in *A Space: A Thousand Words*, describing through a photograph of an installation, the potential for distorted perception and fragmentation that a mirrored space can produce. Positioning four mirrors reflecting each other in a circular position on a beach, Coates contrasts the constructed space of the mirrors with the expanse of the landscape. Upon entering the space between the mirrors he observed that though

he is able to mentally construct the space represented in the mirrors, the space itself 'has no imagination'.⁹ This was the first of a series of works to explore the potential for space to be amplified by the introduction of markers, representations of other spaces and the movement of the body, as well as the start of a fascination with the mirrored body – with its homoerotic connotations. Coates was part of a loose collective of architects during this period – referred to as 'The London Conceptualists' by Peter Cook – including Jenny Lowe, Paul Shephard, Peter Wilson, and Will Alsop, Leon van Schaik, Dereck Revington, and Jeanne Sillett, who had emerged from the AA and formed around Tschumi and Goldberg.¹⁰ The group present an interesting counterpoint to Tschumi, because although they were heavily influenced by him, they gradually moved away from what they perceived as his highly theoretical approach towards one that involved directly performing and acting on the fabric of the city. After all, although Tschumi spoke about the body in space, his ideas were only ever concepts – they were never physically enacted.

This article examines work produced by Coates's in collaboration with his then partner Antonio Lagarto, a Portuguese artist and set designer. The importance of these works in the development of Coates's thinking during this period is interrogated through an examination of the briefs that Coates and Tschumi set for students at the AA in the late 1970s; from the 'Soho Institutions' brief that embodied Tschumi's interest in the collision of site and programme, to the 'Mayfair Squares' and 'Modern Life' briefs that saw Coates invite a theatre director into the studio.

This period is also marked by a pivotal trip that Coates took to New York in 1980-81, where he exposed to the rich night life of New York City. Here he also experienced new works by emerging artists such as Judy Pfaff, Nam June Paik and the transavantgarde – Sandro Chia, Francesco Clemente, Enzo Cucchi and Julian Schnabel. As the article shows, each of these artists influenced Coates in particular ways that formed the basis for a new phase in his thinking about architectural design and representation. Coates's *Ski Station* (1981) project represents the culmination of these influences, and when brought back to the AA in 1981, marked a significant new trajectory in Unit 10 that formed the background from which NATØ emerged two years later.

There has been relatively little written about Coates's work during this period, and even less about NATØ – indeed, Rick Poyner's monograph on Coates published in 1989, *Nigel Coates: The City in Motion*, is one of the few texts to cover NATØ and

Unit 10, and its main focus is on Coates's built work from the mid 1980s onwards.¹¹ A volume published by the AA in 1983, *The Discourse of Events*, to accompany an exhibition of the same name, charts the development of Unit 10 between 1974-83, edited by Coates and Tschumi.¹² This is an informative text, but fails to provide the objective analytical perspective that this material has yet to be subjected to. Most recently, Coates has published *Narrative Architecture* (2012), briefly retelling the story of NATØ and a genealogy of narrative concerns in architecture, before elaborating a theory of how such an approach can be realised in built form.¹³ Sandra Kaji-O'Grady's 'The London Conceptualists: Architecture and Performance in the 1970s' (2008), traces the work of Tschumi, Coates and a number of other architects who emerged from the AA during this period, and the ways in which they were influenced by conceptual and performance art – centring on *A Space: A Thousand Words*.¹⁴ Building on Kaji-O'Grady's research, this article shifts emphasis onto Coates, and seeks to fill a gap in the literature about NATØ and Coates, explaining how the concept of narrative architecture evolved in Unit 10 between 1980-82, an important two years before NATØ formed. This article also contributes to a more general gap in the histories of the period, which most often fail to recognise Coates or NATØ, who represent an neglected strand of postmodernism. Importantly, through Coates's collaborative projects and teaching methods, a mode of polyvocal and multivalent narrativity emerges – upon which NATØ based their proposition for a narrative architecture.

The Performance of Making Space

Shortly after taking part in *A Space: A Thousand Words* at the RCA, Coates spent three days producing works at Blythburgh Lodge, an empty house in Suffolk, with Lowe and Lagarto. Blythburgh Lodge formed a spatial backdrop for Coates to experiment with the ideas he had seeded at the RCA exhibition, as the introduction to documentation of the work describes:

Chance found us excited by an empty farmhouse, hidden behind trees in a deserted corner of the health-land near the sea. For three days, three people used the house as a context in which to apply action to found space, and to exploit the links between ourselves as we worked side by side, but separated by walls.¹⁵

In the small portfolio that records the work, a series of six double-page spreads features text next to photographs arranged on graph paper (fig. 1). Initially, using photographs to logically document a room in the house, Coates developed methods with which to explore space through photographic representation – mirroring the orientation of the walls with the position of the camera, and then laying the photographs onto the page so that they corresponded to each surface of the room. He then introduced his body into the photographs, inserting a temporal dimension through the changing form of the body between frames. In the next set, a series of photographs taken in a landscape centred on a fir tree are placed in the room, photographed again, and arranged on the page. By arranging the landscape photographs in a circular formation, which imitates the manner in which they were taken, Coates describes one space inside another. This referencing of another space, another moment in time and another situation which he himself inhabited, was a strategy he would use frequently during this period – providing conceptual markers within a space to heighten the experience of it – emphasising what he described as the 'performance' of the space.¹⁶ In this work Coates was taking the first steps towards reducing the autonomous nature of a space, reaching outwards to another space in order to fill the first with some perceptual content.

Later in 1975, Coates, Lowe and Lagarto, carried out *Housework*: 'a continuous performance in making space', in which the trio occupied a three-story house on the corner of Theobalds Road and Red Lion Street in London's Clerkenwell, loaned to them by Camden Council for two weeks (figs. 2, 3, 4). Taking up his space in the living room, Coates's portfolio from the event diarises his stay through a description of 16 'actions' (and one 'post action'), with accompanying diagrams and photographs. Using the same set of landscape photographs as at *Blythburgh Lodge*, a real fir tree, (mirroring the fir tree in the photographs), a strip light, and his own body, Coates constructed a series of installations which again manipulated the perception of the space in the house and the photographed space outside. He also moved from room to room, superimposing the 'sensitivity' of one room onto the next through the arrangement of props, echoing the ideas initiated at *Blythburgh Lodge*.¹⁷ Coates's exploration of notation in these works, bear the influence of the performance artists that Goldberg had exposed him to, many of whom employed an 'informational aesthetic' of lists, numerical arrangements, diagrams and photographs – visible works for *A Space: A Thousand Words*.¹⁸ His description of 'actions' in which simple

instructions for an action or a series of actions provided scripts to be interpreted or enacted by the viewer, blur the distinction between the artist, the performer and the audience.¹⁹ Both these works were also Coates's first attempt at forming a collective, drawing together artists and ex-students from the AA to participate and observe, and making connections with Lowe and Lagarto's works within his own.

In 1976, Coates and Lagarto performed *A Marat*; in it, Coates hid behind a folding mirrored screen in the centre of a room, passing photographs of himself and Lagarto taking a bath together to Lagarto, who laid the images on the floor in radiating lines so that they were reflected infinitely in the mirror (fig. 5). The posed photographs of the couple in the bath imitated the painting *Death of Marat* by Jacques-Louis David (1793), and indeed the title of the piece and the text inscribed on the back of the mirror held by Coates was a direct copy of 'A Marat, David' written on the original painting. *Death of Marat* is a deeply political painting that depicts the murder of Jean-Paul Marat, a prominent figure in the French Revolution, by Charlotte Corday – portraying him as a hero in a form of art-as-propaganda. The re-enactment and staging by Coates and Lagarto, drawing the context and connotations of the original painting into a new context, had the effect of dramatising the space it was performed in, providing a field of references and associations. The recurring use of the mirror evoked a surreal space within a space – and a space that was un-enterable: the endless mirror space. In this respect the work recalls the *mise-en-abyme* – the artwork that contains an infinite copy of itself, often through the use or depiction of mirrors.²⁰ This deconstructive tactic of creating such an 'abyss' not only destabilises meaning, but extends the space of the room infinitely, creating depth and extension.

The work can also be viewed in terms of Michel Foucault's concept of the heterotopia – and indeed, all these early works create heterotopic spaces in the way that they draw in other places and other times, creating connections that complicate the site of the work.²¹ In *A Marat* and Coates's work for *A Space: A Thousand Words*, the presence of the mirror enhances the heterotopian reading, as Foucault describes: the space of the mirror is both physically present – it exists in our hands – but at the same time presents a space that is a 'placeless place':

The mirror functions as a heterotopia in this respect: it makes this place that I occupy at the moment when I look at myself in the glass at once absolutely real, connected with all the space that surrounds it, and absolutely unreal,

since in order to be perceived it has to pass through this virtual point which is over there.²²

The complexity of the mirror space is the archetypal heterotopia, and in *A Marat* exaggerates the juxtaposition of time and space that is already present through the photographs – which refer not only to the time and space of the original painting, but of the time and space of the Coates and Lagarto's bathing – against the backdrop of the room the work is situated in. The effect is of a time and a space within a time and a space, *ad infinitum*.

The mirror also carries with it a strong homoerotic symbolism – a theme that runs throughout Coates's work and coloured much of NATØ's work too, despite Coates being the only homosexual member of the group. In their use of mirrors, Coates and Lagarto evoke the concept of the mirrored body implicit in homosexuality, an effect amplified by the endless mirroring of photographs of the pair's erotic bath scene. Indeed, critic and curator Aaron Betsky draws on the trope of the mirror in his 1997 text *Queer Space: Architecture and Same Sex Desire* to explain both the nature of homosexuality and the way space is occupied in so-called 'queer spaces' such as the nightclub.²³ The mirror is symbolic of homosexual love because it represents the inherent mirroring of the body:

Same-sex love is, after all, about the love of the same, a kind of idealized (or perverted, if you will) mirroring of the self in the other. The essence of queer love is that it loves itself in another form, or loves another form that it wishes were itself.²⁴

Betsky goes on to relate this mirroring of the body to a Foucauldian understanding of the heterotopic mirror space, describing that the formation of 'queer space' is through the 'shifting and ephemeral' mirror space that allows the body to dissolve into 'orgasmic space' – another unreal, real heterotopia.²⁵ In this respect, the mirror space allows the confines and restrictions of society to be removed and the space between bodies to dissolve – the gesture of sexual intercourse allowing the body to extend into space.²⁶ Thus it is possible to understand the homoeroticism of Coates's works with Lagarto – his romantic partner as well as collaborator – and his preoccupation with the body. As this article will go on to describe, these themes came to a head in Coates's thinking about the nightclub in the 1980s, and in particular the club scene he experienced in New York in 1981.

Though at this point Coates's ideas were still far removed from his later conception of narrative with NATØ, and the works could be considered juvenilia, there is a growing notion of space that reaches outside itself, in a similar manner to Tschumi, striving to escape neutral conceptions of space. This was an idea that would become central to the young architect's work in the following years, as he discovered exciting content for architecture in the rapidly changing city and street scene. Indeed, what unites all these works, and those of 'The London Conceptualists' more broadly, was the occupation of disused and derelict spaces in the city and a blurring of the distinction between performer and viewer, the public and private, revealing 'architecture as simultaneously the product of larger economic forces and of individual action and perception'.²⁷

Coates and Lagarto collaborated again in 1976 for an exhibition entitled 'Alternativa Zero', at the Galeria Nacional de Arte Moderna in Lisbon.²⁸ In the piece, *Dialogue du Sphinx*, the pair were photographed lying on a beach, each assuming the position of a sphinx, facing each other; the situation was photographed from both sides (from the sea and from the land) and the two photographs were then installed in the gallery on opposite walls facing each other (fig. 6). In using the 'half sculptural and half architectural' symbol of the sphinx, the pair infused the work with a plethora of referential meanings, evoking the many places and situations associated with the image of the sphinx, and the myths and legends such an image contains.²⁹ As Coates described in an essay on the piece published in *Artscribe*:

She [the sphinx] has ranked highly in the pantheon of evocative classical images, chosen to guard avenues and rooms with her chilly seduction. If I see her in a lump of stone, she is the mythical figure made real, solid in front of me, to be seen, touched, walked around or passed. I may remember Oedipus, or just be affected by a sense of archaic grandeur. Despite her role in the history of aesthetic expression, she is part of the world of permanent objects, to be moved towards or left behind, noticed or ignored.³⁰

The use of the image of the Sphinx also carries with it a specific homoerotic undertone, reflecting Sir Richard Francis Burton's notion of the 'sotadic zone', which described a geographical area that included Egypt, associated with relations between men and boys.³¹ Jarman's *Garden of Luxor* features similar imagery of the pyramids and the Sphinx, recalling the history of 'Western homoerotic fantasy', and it is difficult to ignore the word association of Sphinx with sphincter.³²

In the work, Coates' and Lagarto's bodies are understood as sculptural objects, existing in a spatial relationship with each other and their surroundings. As conceptual markers in the landscape they amplify the spatial experience of the scene, as Coates described:

Together they not only exist as a pair of identical objects, but as a gap towards which I can focus my path. They do not order the landscape, but vigilate it; whatever my path, they give it reference. If I pass between the columns, I have mixed my presence with theirs, and if I pass by them, my path coincides with the one they offer. Their visibility in open space suggests a horizontal line and a perpendicular axis. In so doing, they idealize my movement and intensify my sensations.³³

When the photographs of the performance were placed into the gallery, a new space between the photographic viewpoints was created. As in the original performance, the sphinx-like bodies heighten the spatiality of the gallery by providing reference points around and between which the viewing body forms a dynamic path – constantly changing its relation to the sphinxes. In this respect there are traces of Tschumi's ideas around the effect of the body on space that he and Goldberg had explored in the work of performance artists such as Brown, Rainer and Childs. Indeed, after watching a performance of Philip Glass and Robert Wilson's opera *Einstein on the Beach*, Tschumi likened Childs' performance to architecture:

I was struck, in the Bob Wilson show *Einstein on the Beach*, by the fact that Lucinda Childs, at the beginning, crossed the stage diagonally. Ten times, twenty times, thirty times, for practically a quarter of an hour. And all at once this extraordinary thing happened when you looked at her cutting across this space diagonally, her body became the wall, the space of the stage was cut in two, diagonally.³⁴

For Tschumi, architecture was literally 'space, movement, action', a notion which forces the consideration of architecture to move beyond form to something that is more dynamic – wherein space is sculpted by the movement and flow of the body or bodies within it. In this way, it is possible to understand Coates's and Lagarto's sculptural bodies as the body becoming architecture.

From Theory to Action

By the time Coates returned to teach Unit 10 at the AA in 1977, the parallel influences of Goldberg, alongside his work with, notably, a sculptor and set designer – Lagarto – engendered a position that blended the ideas of performance and installation art with the practice of architecture. Back in the unit, he was able to superimpose his ideas that had focused on the somewhat restricted conditions of a single room in a house, or the clean space of the gallery, onto the far messier fabric of the city. In 1978-79, after a year of thinking about issues of drawing and notation in the 'River Notations briefs', the unit began focusing its projects in a much smaller area of London – Soho. The continuation of Tschumi's preoccupation with the programmatic content of space evolved in the 'Soho Institutions' brief, with the students designing buildings that contained sharp juxtapositions of programme with space. Students were asked to design what Tschumi termed 'aberrations' – programmes which purposefully contrasted with their spatial setting:

We consciously suggested programs impossible on the sites that were meant to house them: a stadium in Soho, a prison near Wardour Street, a ballroom in a churchyard.³⁵

Destabilising the use of the building, this collision of events and spaces had the effect of amplifying situations and actions, overlaying the meaning and content of the existing architecture with the signs and patterns of the new programme. For Coates, this was an important shift from the 'sphere of the author to architecture in use', in that architecture only really became truly realised once it was inhabited.³⁶ This echoed Roland Barthes' contrast between the readerly text, where meaning is defined and controlled by the author, to the writerly text which contains fragmentary meanings and thus shifts greater interpretive agency to the reader, contributing to the 'Death of the Author'.³⁷ In addition, the siting of each student's project adjacent to the next meant that much more complex propositions could be made, and linkages between projects began to take shape.

Though somewhat detached from the actual output of the unit, and perhaps the maturity of the students and their capabilities, Coates developed his thinking in an important direction during this academic cycle, and began to be increasingly interested in not only programme, but also the people who inhabited these spaces – their lifestyles, actions and emotions. Siting the project brief in Soho was for Coates not just a location with a compelling urban fabric and situation, but one that had a rich

social life with multitudinous associations of bohemia, a history of underground music and illicit sexuality. If for Tschumi the consideration of programme in opposition to formal space was a strategy to create a conceptual sense of disjunction, for Coates, the event or programme contained by architecture was a way to understand architecture in relation to life itself. As Coates reported:

Tschumi asked, 'if space is neither an external object nor an internal experience (made of impressions, sensations and feelings) are man and space inseparable?' We decided to single out the contents of the brackets; it was the effect that needed to be worked on.³⁸

In the year following the 'Soho Institutions' projects, 1979-80, Coates introduced theatre director Ricardo Pais to the unit – inviting him to run workshops for a series of briefs based in Mayfair (fig.7, 8). For Coates it was integral that the unit begin literally enacting space, rather than merely discussing it, as a way to access the 'internal experience' of architecture which Tschumi had described.³⁹ Ideas of 'staging' and 'mise-en-scène' were added to the unit's growing vocabulary, with strategies focused on producing effect rather than 'logical constructs'.⁴⁰ Coates was beginning to draw back from the more 'theoretical contemplation'⁴¹ advocated by Tschumi, and though both were concerned with the content of architecture, Coates increasingly felt that Tschumi's discussion of the 'event' of architecture described action that was too predetermined or planned, and strove to move the unit's discourse towards notions of action, reaction, perception and experience.⁴² He described how architecture should be:

[...] Forthright and expressive, for the distortions of the mind to be thrown onto the building so that once built, they would throw some of the same feeling back.⁴³

In order to generate such an expressive architecture, Pais's workshop aimed to discover the potential of a simple studio room at the AA – using movement and the body to explore the space. The performance focused on the mundane process of checking-in at an airport, adding moments of tension around four distinct phases of the night: 'expectation, excitement, deception and tedium'.⁴⁴

There was a continuing focus throughout these projects on modes of notation, as the students struggled to express the purely performative actions of the theatre workshops onto the two-dimensional surface of the drawing. Though Tschumi spoke

of escaping the confines of architectural expression during these years, it is clear from drawings of this period that students were still restricted to using pencil and ink on paper, despite the introduction of more unusual formats such as scores and diagrams.⁴⁵ It took a period spent in the United States for Coates to break these confines.

New York 1980-81

Taking two periods of six weeks away from the AA in 1980 and 1981 to teach at Bennington College, Vermont, Coates was able to spend some time in New York – a three-hour drive from the college. The New York City that welcomed Coates inspired the young architect with its frenetic art and club scene, providing the stimulus needed to take his work to the next stage.

The Downtown scene in the late 1970s and early 1980s, as it was referred to, centred around the East Village, what was called ‘Alphabet City’ – a reference to the Avenues A, B, C and D where most of the galleries and alternative spaces showing new art were located, away from SoHo, where the 1970s scene had been focused.⁴⁶ The term ‘Downtown’ had evolved in the late 1950s to refer to artists living and working south of Fourteenth Street, and specifically to John Cage, whose work differentiated so strongly from the work by ‘traditional’ composers at Columbia, in Uptown Manhattan.⁴⁷ The 1974 Tenant Protection Act had regulated rents and made it legal and affordable for artists, filmmakers, performer, and writers to live and work in disused industrial spaces throughout Lower Manhattan. Entertainment had a transformative impact on the art scene of the late 1970s and early 1980s in New York, and increasingly artists such as Robert Longo, Eric Bogosian, Ann Magnuson, John Jesurun, and Michael Smith sought nightclubs and cafes to perform in, featuring on the same bill as musical acts and often taking on the guise of cabaret or burlesque.⁴⁸ Clubs such as the Danceteria, Pyramid Cocktail Lounge, Mudd Club, Club 57, Performance Space 122, WOW Cafe, Limbo Lounge and Plaza Culturelle opened in the late 1970s and early 1980s with themed parties, all-night performances, film screenings and bands, attracting artists, writers, designers and graffiti writers.⁴⁹ There was a constant cycle of performance in the city, with many clubs presenting up to four different acts a night, and many involving the audience in their shows.⁵⁰

Coates describes his experience visiting these sorts of venues for the first time as eye-opening, with an ‘anything-goes’ aesthetic that eschewed a sense of contrived design in favour of a ‘decorated-in-an-afternoon...no design elegance’.⁵¹ What appealed most to Coates was their focus on experience and sensation, emphasising the present rather than creating a nostalgia for another time, whether past or future:

Some would describe the place [the Danceteria] as post-modern, with its reference to post-war living-rooms, its undisguised warehouse carcass, its mixture of art gestures, musical experiment, and all that. But I wouldn't: it's modern because it doesn't line up behind any breed of modernism – post past or whatever. If anything, its investment is in a ‘no future’ kind of present, maximising the moment with straightforward sensation.⁵²

This notion of the maximised, sensational present would be one of the enduring legacies of Coates’s trip to New York, an idea that shaped NATØ relation to the past and the future – instead of historicising or envisioning the future, they wove elements of both into a hyper-stimulating presentness: a condition that Coates began to describe as narrative.

Inspired by these clubs, and also the ones he frequented in London, Coates wrote an article for the first edition of *AA Files* in 1981 titled ‘New Clubs at Large’, in which he described the particular architectural and sensory quality of the contemporary nightclub.⁵³ Key to his analysis was the comparison of the nightclub to the theatre, and the inherent difference between the two forms: in the theatre the spectator and the performer are divided, whereas in the nightclub there is a blurring of this boundary – everyone is a performer and everyone is a spectator. This creates a continuous condition of delirious bodies, a state emphasised by lighting that constitutes the architectural qualities more than the form of the space. Indeed, the nightclub, as Coates admits, has often very few formal architectural qualities, with sensation instead produced by the effect of light on bodies, the movement of those bodies to music and the delirium enhanced by alcohol and drugs. Betsky describes the 1980s nightclub as a ‘gesamtkunstwerk’ (total work of art), and explains the qualities of this dematerialised spatial condition:

Instead of walls, floors, and ceilings, here was a space that appeared and disappeared continually. Instead of places of privacy where design was unwanted, and public spaces where architecture had to appear in a correct guise, here was a place where the most intimate acts, whether real or acted out in dance, occurred in full view through a structure of lights, sounds, and

arrangements that made it all seem natural. Instead of references to building or paintings, instead of a grammar of ornament and a syntax of facades, here was only rhythm and light.⁵⁴

Essential to both Betsky's and Coates's description of the nightclub, and to Betsky's theory of queer space more broadly, is the prominence of the body. He explains that queer space at its most extreme is seeking to dissolve 'the structures and strictures of society and obliterate the space between the self and the other' – in the nightclub the body and the architecture are seemingly discontinuous, dissolving into each other.⁵⁵

Alongside the experience of the club scene, Coates was exposed to a number of artists and artworks in New York which, to his mind, echoed the spatial delirium of the nightclub – and proposed a set of visual and representational techniques that could be carried into architecture. In particular, Coates was influenced by the transavantgarde, an Italian neo-expressionist movement whose paintings were displayed at the Holly Solomon Gallery.⁵⁶ In the works of Sandro Chia, Francesco Clemente and Enzo Cucchi, as well as the American Julian Schnabel, he saw a form of painting which, in challenging the reductivism of earlier forms of conceptual art, bore a new energy. Though the various painters of the transavantgarde produced works which were very different to each other, they shared a wild and erotic form of imagery which was eclectic in its pillaging of history, references and styles – as transavantgarde theorist Achille Bonito Oliva described, the artists were 'nomadic' in their approach.⁵⁷ Through this wild expressionism, Coates began to understand how the movement of paint on a surface could bring the sense of animation and gesture that both he and his students at the AA had so far failed to express.

Also at the Holly Solomon Gallery, Coates saw Judy Pfaff's *Deep Water* (1980), an installation that created an environment, or a sensation, merging sculpture, painting, and objects into one experienceable whole. Claire Bishop defines the installation as 'the type of art into which the viewer physically enters, and which is often described as "theatrical", "immersive" or "experiential"', and importantly, where the objects on display are perceived as a 'singular entity' and 'situation'.⁵⁸ Moreover, these are works that require a viewer to complete them; Bishop quotes theorist of installation art Julie Reis: 'the spectator is in some way regarded as integral to the completion of the "work"'.⁵⁹ Thus the viewer is activated through their engagement with the work – and 'intrinsically dislocated and divided', guided by their own particular relationship to the work and the world.⁶⁰ In this way, *Deep Water* required

the viewer to move through space, demanding 'visual navigation', and transformed what Pfaff describes as 'the gestural energy of painting into the language of sculpture'.⁶¹ The layering of three-dimensional and two-dimensional material of varying levels of detail and scale had the effect of immersion, with no single element more or less prominent than another. It was this immersive, sensational effect, driven by the viewer or user of space that Coates had been seeking, and in Pfaff's work he saw how 'conflict, disorder, motion' and a 'raw subjectivity' could achieve a new dynamism.⁶²

Pfaff's work also had a particular urban quality that aligned with Coates's, and later NATØ's, response to the post-industrial city. Though an American, Pfaff was born and grew up in post-war London and recalls playing in the decaying rubble of the Blitz and the sense of liberation this brought: 'My experience in post-war London was that I was free'.⁶³ She has referred to the street as her 'cornucopia', suggesting something of the abundance and plenitude of the street as a source of inventive and creative materials, but it was also the way that the city was navigated and understood that she sought to introduce into her work.⁶⁴ She said she wanted to create: 'sculpture that would act on you [...] the way the city acts on you, a kind of very active and kinetic space [...] that keeps you spinning and surprised', and that she sought 'dramatic and sensual environments' that 'edit' and 'splice' the urban environment she saw around her.⁶⁵ In this respect, although Coates and Pfaff were creating works in different cities – Pfaff in New York and Coates in London – they both sensed the same dynamic, exciting and unstable creativity emanating from the urban condition that was so specific to this period in time. This sensibility became key to NATØ's approach later in the 1980s, and in particular their installation works share many qualities with Pfaff's. The paintings of the transavantgarde artists, and Pfaff's spectacular installation, as well as the New York club scene, underpinned a new way of thinking for Coates, but one more discovery would complete the new palette of references he brought back to London and form the basis for one of Coates's own projects that became the turning point in the young architect's trajectory.

Korean American video artist Nam June Paik had been working in New York since the 1960s, pioneering video art through installations, performances and films. The impact of Paik's work on Coates was profound, as the young architect experienced the potential for video to capture the spirit of both the city and the age, and the innovative ways in which Paik used the television and video screen to

physically interact with the body and space. However, one piece struck Coates more directly – *Lake Placid* (1980) a short colour film collage commissioned for the National Fine Arts Committee of the 1980 Winter Olympic Games.⁶⁶ The fast flowing video in lurid colours mixes sporting events with some of Paik's recurring visual tropes in a montage which strongly reflects the movement and frenetic pace of the sports it represented. Fragments of sportsmen and women are sped up, layered and edited into visual patterns of rhythmic movement and fast flowing action – with no particular thread or narrative linking them together, only a sensation. The video could be considered a live action version of Pfaff's installation, with a similar seemingly random mixture of layered elements, colours, textures and energy – and for Coates it represented a feeling that he immediately wanted to capture, and to 'translate into architecture.'⁶⁷

'Ski Station'

While still in New York, Coates experimented with the creation of images that indeed sought to evoke the dynamism of both Pfaff's and Paik's work – producing a design for a building embedded in a mountain setting, *Ski Station* (1981). The final drawings produced for the project are a set of six colourful oil pastel and pencil drawings on paper which employ a language of strokes, streaks and marks suggestive of the velocity of the skier (figs. 10-15). Each drawing features a key architectural element, as well as a sense of the landscape and skiers, in complex compositions. In each case, fragments of conventional architectural drawing – plan, section, and perspective – are combined with elements that inject sensation. Indeed, throughout the set of drawings Coates relegates architectural detail in favour of evoking the experience of the space. The mountains, snow and sky are drawn in a large spectrum of different types of markings: from long sweeping curves, to short repetitive dashes and dots, cross hatching, blocks of colour, scribbles, shaded areas and delicate outlines – combined to create a collage effect which mimics the blurred impression of moving past something very quickly. The architectural elements are drawn to emphasise a fluidity and rhythm – particularly of the roof and façade, which seemingly responds to the landscape it is set in. Though depicting an environment that in many ways could not be further from the city, the strategy of juxtaposing scale and drawing formats (plan and perspective) would be key tools for Coates's representation of the city once back in London.

This set of drawings, in contrast to the highly conceptual arrangements of photographs made at *Blythburgh Lodge*, *Housework* and *A Marat*, show how Coates's approach to architecture and to drawing had developed. He provides more content in these highly pregnant images, though retains a level of indeterminacy – never providing all the elements of a narrative, just enough information for the viewer to complete a fragmented narrativity in a way that can be compared to the navigation of Pfaff's installation. The drawings provide the perceptual cues necessary to construct a storyworld: a mental image of the experience of skiing, and the dramatic scenery and architecture to complement such a feeling. Displayed together, the collection of final drawings present different moments and scales of narrative, some evoking a particular interior scene, and others focusing on a broader representation– with each image referring to each other to create a conjoined sense of the spatial and temporal. Some of the tropes from his earlier pieces are carried into these works, in particular a fixation on the male body, however the project does not take sexuality as its subject matter. At their most basic level, the drawings represent Coates's move away from theorising and conceptualising spatial concepts, to enacting them on paper. Taking this set of drawings back to the AA in 1981, as well as the influences of new painting and video art, Coates began what would be a seminal two years of teaching – equipping his students with the representational tools and references to create architecture which was stimulated by the prevailing city condition.

Bringing Sensation to Architecture

Back at the AA, balancing his trips to New York with teaching Unit 10, Coates continued the trajectory established by Tschumi – though Tschumi himself left the AA at the end of 1980, leaving Coates to lead the unit alone. A comparison of the outline for that year, against the one for the previous year led by Tschumi, reveals a subtle but noticeable shift (fig. 16). In 1980-81, Coates replaces a set of dark, blurred student drawings done in a rather conventional manner, with a pop-influenced illustration featuring a man leaping towards the viewer with dramatic motion lines in the background. Contrasting with the uniform blocks of text of 1979-80's prospectus, Coates slashes a headline across the page, interrupting both the text and the image with a call to arms: 'WAKE/UP/AND/DREAM/FOR/THE/EIGHTIES'⁶⁸ – an indication of the content of the year's work: 'Instead of looking at hallowed models,

we worked with the down-and-out side of cities'.⁶⁹ Coates was very clear that although he was building upon ideas of performance, and the inseparability of the programme of architecture from space, there would be a new concentration on the presentness of the city, street life and street culture, sensation and style:

Simultaneously architecture will be engendered as art, as passion, as sensation. Articulating a dedication of experiment, programmes will explore an attitude to design in parallel with the most intense of contemporary urban issues, its crises, its fads and transgressions [...] Embracing the widest aspects of style and life, they will instate architecture as an aggregate expressionism for now[...] By exploring the neurotic edge between action and deliberate style, fundamental issues will be cast into architectural role.⁷⁰

The vitality of the street and club culture Coates had experienced in New York, and the emphasis on the present moment, clearly began to influence the unit during this academic year; in turn, the resulting student projects showed a changing approach to representation. Importantly, this was a period when Coates encouraged the students to work across two scales – the individual and the city – striving to understand large pieces of the city's terrain, but also to imagine what they felt like.⁷¹ Individual projects took fragments of daily life to generate larger architectural schemes based around housing and unemployment – both social and political themes which were drawn very much from the decaying and depressed London of the early 1980s. A number of the student's drawings from this year show the influence of Coates's 'Ski Station' project, with student portfolios expressive drawings techniques using oil pastel and pencil.

As this looser drawing style developed, in the following year, 1981-82, Coates introduced video to the unit. The AA had recently established a video-editing suite and appointed architecturally trained video artist Tony Carruthers as the school's video tutor. For Coates, video was an even more expressive medium than theatrical performance alone, with the possibility for camera angles and editing enabling a more sophisticated recording of the experience of space. In Paik's work he had seen how video had the potential to capture the relationship between the body and space, and the expressive potential the medium had in conveying the sensation of experience. Critically, filmic narrativity allowed Coates 'perceptual access to space and characters', so that emotions and experience could be felt in a more direct and tangible manner.⁷²

The year's project, titled *Giant Sized Baby Town* after a song by pop band Bow Wow Wow, took over a large chunk of the derelict Isle of Dogs to explore the connected themes of home and work – in particular imagining a future for the defunct factories and docks that littered the area.⁷³ Together, Coates and Carruthers devised a method wherein students produced short films in small groups, then after completion, deconstructed those films into a storyboard format. Coates's instructions to the students outline the method:

You are now asked to redraw you video in a manner which is compatible with the (city) section and its details. Naturally it will be a strip - but rather than being rigidly organised as a series of "windows", it may include other representational devices to clarify the flow of things, or the dominance of one particular set of narrative relations. This implies representing the key qualities of the video's form, its space and its effect - not just its bare recipe. If you like, see it as a kind of reversed notation - not a statement of intent, but an emotive response to something which you have already done, or are in the process of doing.⁷⁴

The focus then moved to the geographical site, with the map divided into parts and each student allocated a linear strip of land, which was then both photographed and explored on foot. Back in the studio, each element was combined – the film storyboard, the photographs of the site and the experiences they had encountered while there – in a complex and subjective process of layering, juxtaposing and overlapping. The technique specifically involved overlaying the linear storyboard with the path through the site – creating new associations and correspondences between the two.

The resulting projects bear a complexity born out through this process, a considerable move away from the more straightforward collisions of a single programme with a single space in earlier briefs led by Tschumi. In Mark Prizeman's 'Chemical Works', a factory pumping liquid sulphur at the dockside spawns a number of smaller, subsidiary industrial spaces which are mixed in with housing – with shambled structures wedged underneath energy pylons and butted up against bridges (figs. 17-19). The extremely sketch-like, gestural drawings describe structures traversing others, with people, buildings and vehicles enmeshed in a depiction of a dense urban environment. Similarly, Carlos Villanueva-Brandt's 'Timber Fibre Factory', which originated from witnessing a fire on a housing estate on the site, combines factory buildings with offices and housing – with each function slipping

over the next and spaces juxtaposed (figs. 20-23). Villanueva-Brandt's drawings, though more conventional than Prizeman's, display a fragmented, montaged sensibility – with flashes of views and sliced vignettes imbuing the scheme with a feeling of movement, interaction and inhabitation.

Describing this chaotic anti-planning strategy, critic Brian Hatton transforms Marshall McLuhan's 'the medium is the message'⁷⁵ into 'the madness is the method'⁷⁶ – summarising well the essential characteristic of the approach, which would come to characterise NATØ. This 'madness', derived from montaging the three elements of the film, the site and experience, created far looser drawings and spaces, and in turn a fragmented, multivalent narrativity. In this respect, the result is not a single story in space, but a flexible structure which disturbs and layers the existing reality of the city with parallel subnarratives that act to amplify its narrative possibilities – triggering users and viewers to insert their own imagination into the gaps. By slicing up the masterplan into different parts, each taken on by a different student, the overall urban strategy avoided the impression of a single, static image. Each part is in some way linked to another – reflecting, referencing and sharing each other's content and form, but without a predetermined structure or trajectory. The line, derived from film and the storyboard, represented as the section and the horizontal panning drawing, is thus distorted and disrupted. This is emphasised by the fluid nature of the drawings, which unlike a conventional set of architectural drawings do not present a comprehensive and measured final entity, but instead establish the cityscape as dynamic, layered and unresolved, composed of pieces and views. In this respect, the polyvocality of the unit, and subsequently of NATØ, was an essential component of narrativity – establishing a plural and polyphase narrative experience.

Almost a decade after Coates had graduated from the unit in 1974, by 1982, its preoccupations and outputs had changed dramatically – but they were not unrecognisable from key principles Tschumi had set out in those early years. Both Tschumi and Coates were concerned with the content and programme of architecture and its inseparability from the building itself, however Coates took this idea in a direction which he described as a 'cultural stocktaking stance', with references drawn from fashion, television, music, nightclubs and gay culture, using the strategy of bricolage to piece together a subcultural architecture – his found object the city itself.⁷⁷ The influence of Tschumi's preoccupation with event and performance, and the related idea of notation, were essential in the evolution of Coates's approach, as it

was the idea of the body acting in space which can be traced throughout. In New York, he saw new ways to express that collision of the body with space – through video, painting and immersive installation. What he found in New York, and on the streets of London, was a rich and provocative cultural moment which triggered the search for a way to produce architecture with the same vitality. Critical to the development of these ideas was the combination and collision of numerous voices and projects in Unit 10, which produced more complex, layered propositions. The formation of NATØ in 1983 can be seen as the formalisation of this polyvocal approach – that nurtured the plural and fragmented nature of the city, and thus a polyphase, multivalent model of narrativity.

(8438 words)

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