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**PABLO BRONSTEIN:
ENLIGHTENMENT
DISCOURSE
ON THE ORIGINS
OF ARCHITECTURE**

Essay by
ELLIS WOODMAN

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This brochure accompanies the exhibition *Pablo Bronstein: Enlightenment Discourse on the Origins of Architecture*, presented at REDCAT, Los Angeles, January 24–March 15, 2014. It features an essay by the writer and architecture critic Ellis Woodman and original drawings by the artist made especially for the occasion.

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FOREWORD

You may be sure of it: furniture knows many a story. The younger Crébillon, a severe and informed chronicler, heard furniture talk. He was not a victim of hallucination. The proof of it lies in those swelling chests of drawers, those pleasingly curved armchairs, those desks and their delicately wrought coppers. They all testify to the elegance of life under Louis XV, and they...are still talking.

—Victor Champier (1891)

I consider Pablo Bronstein's project at REDCAT to be a kind of “staged essay,” in which the artist simultaneously assumes the roles of historian and choreographer while he carefully—but also with a carefree joy—directs the action of the exhibition. The mise-en-scène reveals a series of architectural drawings and furniture items in which Bronstein fantasizes about the origins of architecture, highlighting the naturalist perspective that characterized Enlightenment thought. In a certain sense, he satirizes the insistence with which the architectural culture of the Enlightenment sought to guarantee a “nature” uncontaminated by historical events.

Within the walls of the gallery, which in this case also hint at the theatrical fourth wall, Bronstein adds a solo performer to methodically “demonstrate” the performative quality of inert furniture. Each piece functions as a signifier that refers indirectly to the search for the original building or the architectural model of universal validity. By exaggerating their decorative and constructive morphology, Bronstein gives his objects an

essential and practical function, creating a “real architecture” that emphasizes the archaeological interests of Enlightenment thinkers, rather than focusing on the mythological perspectives that dominated the era.

However, the inherent contradictions established between the drawings and the furniture/buildings; the shapes they refer to; and their irreducibility to pure theory or mere physicality, functionality, or artifice are also ironic comments about the role of art historians, highlighting the pleasure but also the danger of historical discourse. Bronstein establishes processes that enable fissures between the past and the present, the human and the inanimate, and above all between the practice of history and lived experience. He essentially questions the common ground between the construction of discourse and the subject of study, as well as our physical presence and the way we look *through* objects, involuntarily searching for their capacity to reveal a history. He shows us how things become transparent and can

be read within the dialectic of looking at or looking through, taking as reference Vladimir Nabokov’s point of view in his novel *Invitation to a Beheading*: “When we concentrate on a material object, whatever its situation, the very act of attention may lead to our involuntarily sinking into the history of that object.”¹ This transparency requires us to make them disappear as objects unto themselves and to pass through them with our gaze in order to search for clues that define us as subjects.

When considering the drawings by Bronstein that appear in this brochure, it is important to point out the ironic opacity of the windows and the doors on the facades; outlines and templates that can be moved from one place to another regardless of what they really contain. Perhaps it is this exterior quality taken to the extreme that creates an abstract space beyond time, as opposed to the interior transparency insinuated by the furniture, which is continually opened and closed, revealing all the secrets of its organism.

This project is surely a metaphor that speaks of a blurred and unlimited past but at the same time fulfills our need for a grammar of origin, which can be interpreted imaginatively and functionally at the same time, according to the dictates of our desires and our way of looking at or through things. In this instance, Bronstein’s desire leads him—as Ellis Woodman observes in his essay for this brochure—to repeatedly adopt the guise of a fictitious designer.

As in any historical discourse, however, in the end Pablo Bronstein creates a temporary, incomplete setting, one that can always change shape, demonstrating to us that there is no single origin and that the original always seems to be preceded by its copy.

Ruth Estevez

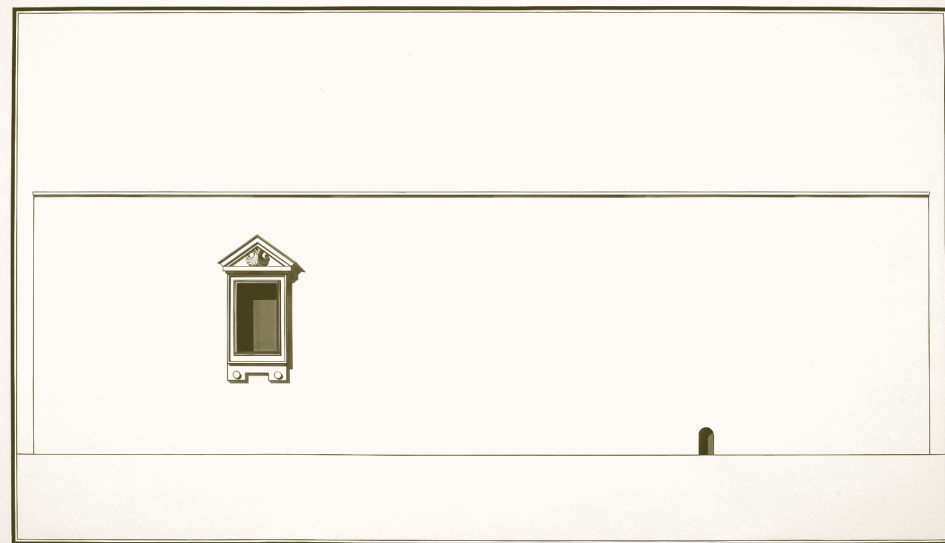
Gallery Director and Curator

NOTES

Epigraph: Victor Champier, “Les Arts fraternels au Salon du Champ-de-Mars” (1891), quoted in Debora Silverman, *Art Nouveau in Fin-de-Siècle France: Politics, Psychology, and Style* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 215.

1. Vladimir Nabokov, *Invitation to a Beheading* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1972), 1.

WORKS



Pages 9–10

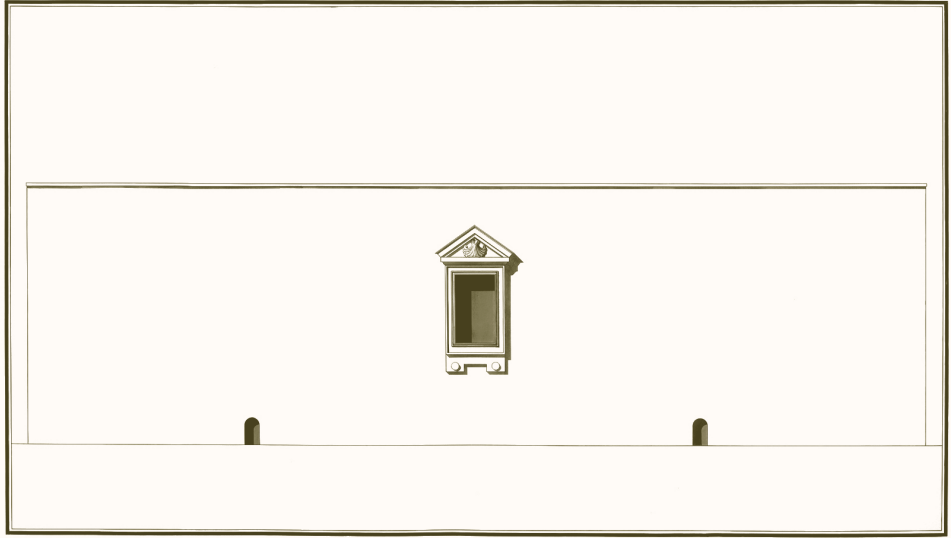
Pablo Bronstein

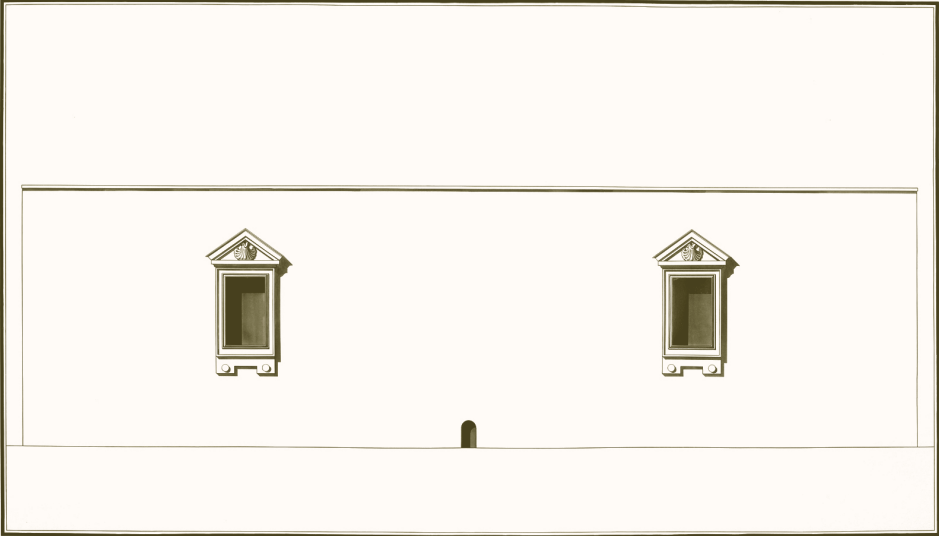
Primitive facade variations, 2014

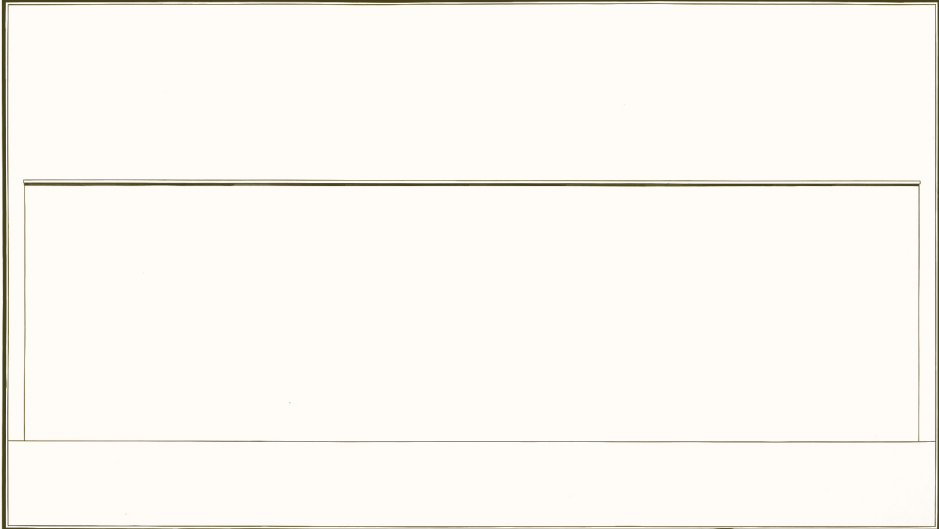
Ink and watercolor on paper

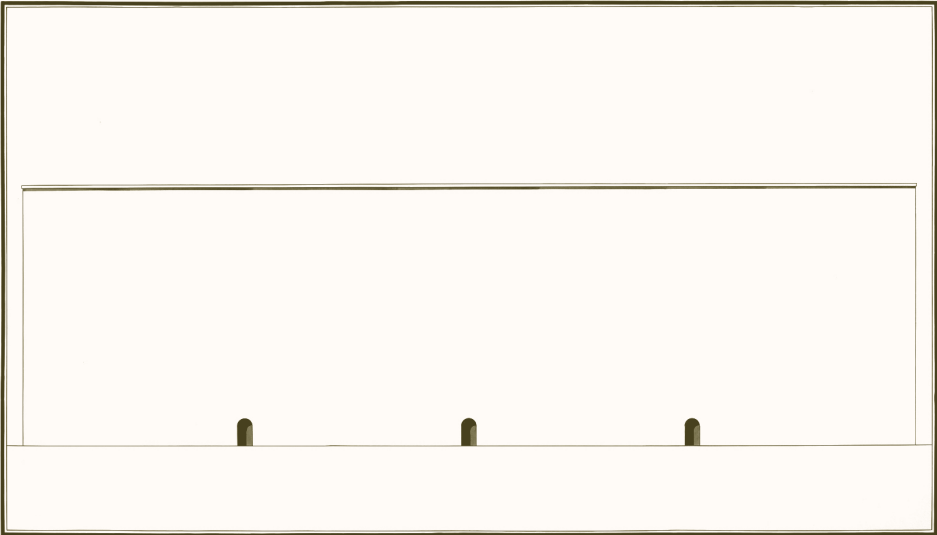
6 parts, 45³/₁₆ x 78⁷/₁₆ in. (115 x 200 cm) each (approx.)

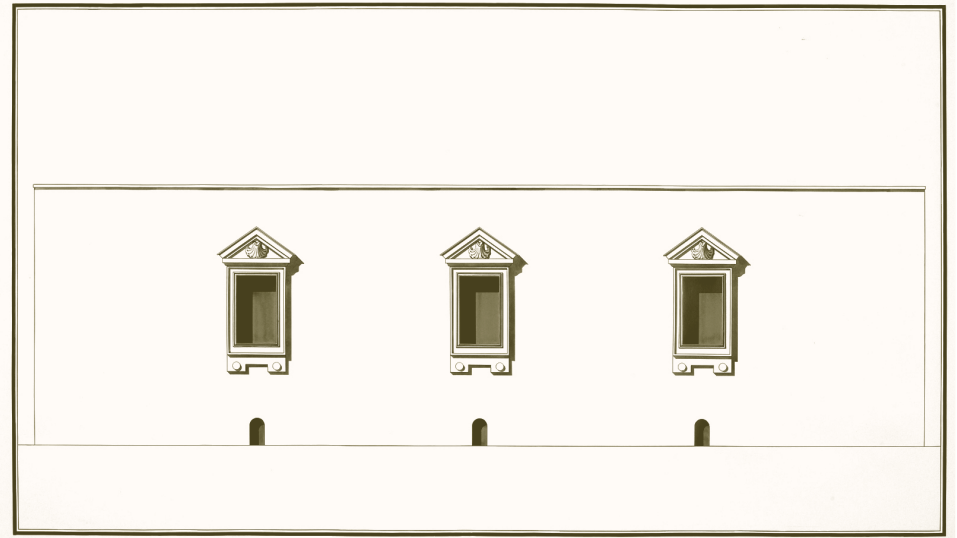
Courtesy of Herald St, London, and Galleria Franco Noero, Turin











ONE-MAN SHOW

Ellis Woodman



Charles Eisen (1720–1778), allegorical engraving of the Vitruvian primitive hut. Frontispiece of Marc-Antoine Laugier, *Essai sur l'architecture*, 2nd ed. (1755).

PERFECT MOMENTS

The Enlightenment inquiry into the origins of architecture might be classified alongside such ponderously abstract questions as the fate of Schrödinger's cat and the angel-bearing capacity of the household pin. Its mission, characterized by Joseph Rykwert as the attempt to describe Adam's house in paradise, was evidently doomed from inception.¹

The extensive literature on the subject may tell us little about the actual methods of prehistoric construction, but its significance in shaping the imagination of the modern architect can hardly be overstated. For figures like the abbé Marc-Antoine Laugier, whose 1753 *Essai sur l'architecture* (Essay on architecture) represented the most influential contribution to the genre, the primitive hut was far from an object of purely archaeological

concern. The attraction lay rather in the hut's potency as a standard against which contemporary architecture might be judged: both as a beacon of good practice and as a measure of degeneracy.

For Laugier, the hut's immediate function was therefore to illuminate by counterexample what he viewed as the faults of the baroque: the elevation of columns on pedestals and their engagement with a building's wall surface were prominent among a list of devices that he duly claimed as anathema. The elemental character of his fantasy bivouac provided architecture's new and exclusive paradigm.

As such, the primitive hut can be seen as a fundamental myth of modern architecture and one that maintained its authority well into the modern era through the polemics of such figures as Le Corbusier ("There is no such thing as primitive man; there are only primitive means."²) and Adolf Loos ("Why do the Papuans have a culture and the Germans not?"³). Perhaps the only myth that exerted an equivalent influence over this period is that of

the ideal city. This has a longer history, traceable to Plato's *Republic* and represented by celebrated drawn examples during the Renaissance, but it too emerged as a subject of extensive speculation in Enlightenment Paris⁴ and continued to find significant manifestation in the twentieth century in such examples as Le Corbusier's *Ville Radieuse* (1924) and Frank Lloyd Wright's *Broadacre City* (1932).

The primitive hut and the ideal city make similar appeals to the architect's conscience. Both are projections away from the present moment—one to an idealized prehistory, the other to a perfect future—and it is through these acts of distancing that they acquire their critical authority.

PEOPLE PROBLEMS

One dubious aspect of Laugier's narration of the discovery of architecture is his casting of the drama as a solitary performance. Propelled by meteorological events, a lone savage seeks first to make

his home beside a stream, before retreating to a thicket, then a cave, and finally—resolving "to make good by his ingenuity the careless neglect of nature"—sets about constructing a shelter by spanning felled branches between close-set trees.⁵ Robbed of social context, this eureka moment is presented as an act of pure rationalism. Any idea that architecture might function as an embodiment of cultural values finds no acknowledgment here.

Although *Enlightenment Discourse on the Origins of Architecture* (2014) is the first of Pablo Bronstein's works to make explicit reference to the intellectual milieu within which Laugier was such a central figure, a longer-standing affinity between the methods of artist and abbé can be detected. Role-playing serves a primary function in both men's practices: as Laugier projects himself into the imagination of the first architect, so Bronstein repeatedly adopts the guise of later but no less fictitious designers. For both, these restagings of the past serve as commentaries on a less than ideal present.

Of the two, however, the artist is the less nostalgic. Laugier offers his primal scene as an image of the Eden from which man has found himself exiled through the corrupting effects of civilization. Bronstein entertains no such confidence in a golden age. His fictions operate in the manner of fairground mirrors: we find in them the pretensions, tragedies, terrorism, and entropy of our own environment reflected back to us through the distorting lens of dead style. For all his forensic interest in the history of its forms, the artist ultimately sees architecture in terms of flesh-and-blood themes—the assertion (and forfeiting) of power, the accumulation (and stripping away) of vanities—that remain unchanged from era to era. Bodies appear in his drawings almost only as a register of Brobdingnagian scale while the actions of the real ones that populate his performances are so stylized as to deny them all personality. Nonetheless, what we encounter in his work is always a human drama, one that plays out in the same blackly comic register, endlessly.

FALSE STARTS, WRONG CONCLUSIONS

Beginnings and endings abound in Bronstein's work, although invariably their veracity proves wanting. *Erecting of the Paternoster Square Column* (2008) is a drawing depicting the installation of a monumental Corinthian column by means of pulleys and winches mounted on a wooden scaffold. From the artist's characteristic use of ink and wash to such details as the urban skyline and the dress of the minute spectators in the foreground, the image is rigged to suggest a premodern setting. The construction between 1671 and 1677 of Sir Christopher Wren's monument in memory of the Great Fire of London is evoked, but Bronstein's drawing determinedly fails to persuade as a genuine historical record. The surrounding landscape is all too completely the embodiment of a tabula rasa, while the mechanism's scale extends some way beyond the bounds of technical plausibility. And for anyone familiar with the recent architecture of London, the scene's preposterousness is evident from its



Pablo Bronstein, *Erecting of the Paternoster Square Column*, 2008. Ink and ink wash, pencil on paper. 87 $\frac{3}{8}$ × 59 $\frac{1}{8}$ in. (222 × 150 cm). Courtesy of Herald St, London, and Galleria Franco Noero, Turin

title. Completed in 2003, Paternoster Square is a speculative office development that stands beside St. Paul's Cathedral, a context to which it defers through the adoption of a pseudo-historical street pattern and a classically inflected architectural vocabulary. The column that stands at the center of the development—and on which Bronstein's depiction is very freely based—doubles as a ventilation shaft for the service road extending beneath it.

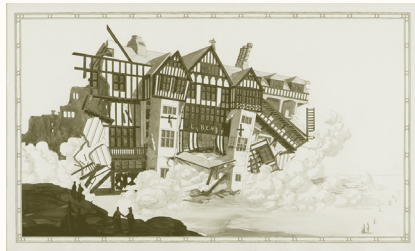
Meanwhile, in *Liberty Department Store under Demolition* (2012), the artist references—and parodies—the history of the depiction of ruins. Joseph Michael Gandy's *An Imagined View of the Bank of England in Ruins* (1830) suggests itself as a central object of his satirical attentions. Produced at the behest of Gandy's employer—and the bank's architect—Sir John Soane, this aerial perspective shows the building in a state of strategic dilapidation so as to reveal the considerable complexity of its interior. Lacking people, plants, or rubble, Gandy's scene is so tidy as to invite doubts as to whether it might



Joseph Michael Gandy (1771–1843), *An Imagined View of the Bank of England in Ruins*, 1830

not in fact represent a mysteriously abandoned building site, but its motivation is clear: to suggest the profundity and longevity of Soane's work through association with the remains of classical antiquity.

Liberty Department Store, which was completed to designs by Edwin Thomas Hall in 1924 and still stands in central London, is the product of an altogether more opportunistic attitude to history. Built in substantial part from the recycled timbers of HMS *Impregnable* and HMS *Hindustan*, Hall's building is a piece of pseudo-Tudor set design of a kind that would carry little of the grandeur of the Bank of England if ruined. In pointed contrast to the epoch-straddling stillness of Gandy's image, Bronstein shows his architectural victim at the very point of spectacular collapse. There is something of the glee of the Hollywood special effects department at play in that choice. A faux censoriousness too. We might easily picture the figure with his finger on the detonator as the architectural historian Nikolaus Pevsner, who averred of Liberty: "The scale is wrong,



Pablo Bronstein, *Liberty Department Store under Demolition*, 2012. Ink and watercolor on paper. 55 x 86 $\frac{1}{2}$ in. (140 x 220 cm). Courtesy of Herald St, London, and Galleria Franco Noero, Turin

the symmetry is wrong. The proximity to a classical facade put up by the same firm at the same time is wrong, and the goings-on of a store behind such a facade (and below those twisted Tudor chimneys) are wrongest of all."⁶

It is of course that last crime, the failure to be modern, that draws Bronstein to both Liberty and the Paternoster Square Column. These are structures that make no pretense to originality—the defining attribute of the modern—and so forgo the aura of authenticity that a Laugier, Soane, or Pevsner would consider a fundamental determinant of architectural worth. However, child of postmodernism that he is, Bronstein views that aura with suspicion. Origins (and conclusions) presuppose a progress in which his work evinces no faith.⁷

REAL TIME

The primitive hut and the ideal city are mutually supporting fantasies. The hut is offered as an ur-condition that every building should take as its

model, and in the unity and self-evidence of the ideal city, we find that demand answered in absolute terms. The possibility of a universal architecture—a central ambition both of eighteenth-century neoclassicism and of twentieth-century international modernism—takes its foundations from that precarious intellectual structure. *Enlightenment Discourse on the Origins of Architecture* functions as a theatricalizing of this mythic dialectic. Bronstein's installation comprises an ensemble of metamorphic pieces of furniture, of a scale and massing that lend them a comically architectural effect. Collectively they allude to the image of the ideal city while individually they conjure archetypal structures: tomb, shelter, toilet, store, and shrine. In significant contrast to Laugier's conclusions, Bronstein's origins of architecture are defined by their multiplicity and by their evolution from social relationships.

Yet, as with the abbé's narrative, Bronstein's is also a one-man show. The scene is animated by a dancer who systematically opens each piece

as a means of demonstrating its symbolic function before returning the resultant chaos of unfolded doors, flaps, and panels to an ordered state. As members of the audience, we are separated from the world of the performance by the physical arrangement of the pieces, by their stylistic autonomy, and further still by the mannerism of the dancer's gestures and his scrupulous maintenance of the fourth wall. One of the defining qualities of both the myths being addressed, it would seem, is an absence of neighbors.⁸

As always in Bronstein's work, however, the fragility of these thresholds and the camp theatricality of the space they define remain in view. In their gimcrack construction and overscale detail, the pieces of his "furniture village" could not readily be confused with their eighteenth-century models. This ideal assembly is always on the point of being absorbed back into the world: a possibility that—for all its comic pathos—the artist clearly views as both inevitable and welcome.

NOTES

1. Joseph Rykwert, *On Adam's House in Paradise: The Idea of the Primitive Hut in Architectural History* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1972).

2. Le Corbusier, *Vers une architecture* (Paris: G. Crès, [ca. 1925]).

3. Adolf Loos, "Architecture" (1910), trans. Wilfried Wang, in *The Architecture of Adolf Loos*, ed. Yehuda Safran and Wilfried Wang (London: Arts Council, 1987), 104–9.

4. As exemplified by Claude-Nicolas Ledoux's proposal of the 1770s for a city of circular plan at Arc-et-Senans.

5. Marc-Antoine Laugier, *An Essay on Architecture*, trans. Wolfgang Herrmann and Anni Herrmann (Los Angeles: Hennessey & Ingalls, 1977), 11.

6. Nikolaus Pevsner and Bridget Cherry, *London*, vol. 1, *The Cities of London and Westminster*, 3rd ed. (London: Penguin, 1973), 579.

7. Bronstein's treatments of Liberty and the Paternoster Square Column satirize his subjects' shallowness but take pleasure in their transparency too. Bathed in otherworldly light, Gandy's *An Imagined View of the Bank of England in Ruins* shows architecture's contract with the past as a near-mystical transaction. By contrast, Bronstein celebrates the very nakedness with which his subjects employ historical imagery as a means of validating their commercial projects. All architecture is a form of storytelling. For Bronstein, those buildings whose fictional construction is most explicit have, at least, the merit of honesty.

8. The history of ideal cities is characterized by a notable coyness about the social underpinnings of such visions, the exceptions clustering at the crackpot-utopian/crypto-fascist end of the political spectrum.

CONTRIBUTORS

Pablo Bronstein (b. 1977, Buenos Aires) lives and works in London. He has had solo shows at the Centre d'Art Contemporain Genève, Geneva (2013); the Institute of Contemporary Arts, London (2011); Kunsthal Charlottenborg, Copenhagen (2011); Sculpture Court, Tate Britain, London (2010); the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (2009); and the Städtische Galerie im Lenbachhaus und Kunstbau, Munich (2007). He has participated in numerous group exhibitions, such as *Tate Live: Performance Room*, Tate Modern, London (2012); *MOVE: Choreographing You*, Hayward Gallery, London, Haus der Kunst, Munich, and K20, Düsseldorf (2010–11); and *The Garden of Forking Paths*, Migros Museum für Gegenwartskunst, Zurich. Bronstein has participated in Manifesta 8 (2010–11); Performa 07, New York (2007); and the Tate Triennale, Tate Britain, London (2006). His books *Postmodern Architecture in London* (2007), *Ornamental Designs* (2008), and *Gilded Keyholes* (2013) have been published by König Books.

Ellis Woodman (b. 1972) is a writer on architecture based in London. He is the executive editor of *Building Design* magazine and the architecture critic of the *Daily Telegraph*. He curated the exhibition *Home/Away: Five British Architects Build Housing in Europe* for the 2008 Venice Architecture Biennale and is the author of *Modernity and Reinvention: The Architecture of James Gowan* (Black Dog, 2008) and *Habitat: Biq Builds the City* (Nai Publishers, 2013).

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Assistant Curator: Sohrab Mohebbi

Exhibition Manager: Ian Page

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