

WHEN THE FOLDED ARCHITECTURE BEGAN TO LIVE

A Comment on Gabi Schillig's Work

Funnily enough I have spent most of today in Los Angeles – at SCI-ARC, massaging the projects of young architects who are themselves massaging the formal possibilities of MAYA – having been themselves massaged by Hernan Diaz Alonso, one of the fruitiest of today's digital architects.

Although Gabi Schillig's work has not passed through this particular set, the timing of an invitation to write about it forces me to consider it in a broader context than at the moment when, nine months ago, I saw it demonstrated in Frankfurt.

Her training is architectural, yet she responds in a choreographic manner. Her training is in the digital and procedural, yet it is creatively wayward and vivid. Her training is directed towards the constructed, yet she exudes the Romantic (whether or not she would admit to this).

So when I look at the SCI-ARC kids I wonder what they would do with a Schillig among them – or maybe teaching them? The possibility is that they would be scared to follow her path and play so waywardly with the geometries, the surface, the body and the body's idiosyncrasies all at the same time – as she does. And wouldn't the SCI-ARC teachers, too, find her example gently threatening? They are devoted to the discovery of a process-motivated mode of transformation, whereas Gabi Schillig weaves a certain seductive unpredictability into the sequences (I will not call them processes) that lead to what we see and what we get.

I don't know her work well enough to presume the actual degree of control or predictability that exists to underscore the sequences of her clothed/wrapped/performed pieces. My hunch is that 60 to 80 percent is predictable, but then...? But then it is a matter of Schillig herself interpreting or interposing her will and instinct into the proceedings.

Here it gets quite interesting. The freshness that struck me in Frankfurt was of the same order of freshness as when, all those years before, I saw William Forsythe's *Artifice* performed by his Frankfurt Ballet for the first time. In both cases the wit of the moment contained a knowingness that was clearly constructed, but not constrained by its construction. Both times I was envious of the experience of the lead-up. As a teacher-designer/designer-teacher, I enjoy nothing more than the sequence of push-and-pull that leads from a proposition, edged on by a series of hunches, tweaked by a series of critiques-cum-coaxings and then topped up by a series of lucky breaks. A game played by teacher and student at the best level.

I imagine what it must have been like to teach her and watch her wriggle out of the architectural endgame and turn it into a bodily end game? There is of course a considerable intelligence at work that is not making the whole thing into some loose "performance-art" gambit. Indeed, the careful and predictive sequencing has to do with an analysis of situations and resources. Quite definitely in the tradition of good architecture.

It would be fascinating to ask her fellow students what it was like to have a colleague who was not hell-bent on applying the training of Ben van Berkel and Johan Bettum to the making of sheds, urban complexes or folded street liners (my suspicion is, by the way, that she can probably do such things perfectly well if required). When did she start crawling along the floor? When did she start applying the parametric sequences to this small world of felt? When did she start to intensify the physical boundaries of the investigation to such an extent that the study had real inventive power? And Schillig herself? She seems very sane, very well organized. Quite focused. Yet so many graduate students in the digital field are content to receive a "package" of trained tricks and then return home able to fit comfortably into the commercial building world with some pretty, new, seductive undulating surfaces on offer.

Gabi Schillig must puzzle such colleagues.

My own hunch is that the real architectural investigators will be much more interested in her work than the rest for, on consideration, it begins to suggest clues of another architecture. A responsive architecture, where her body-work and the conditions of its folds suggest a real, tectonic field.