

The Death and Life of American Architecture Atelier Spatial America Rises from the Ashes of Special America



BY MARK GURARIE

THE CONTEXT AGAINST THE TEXT

Between the years of 2008 and 2015, Special America existed at the intersection of art and provocation, blending media to anarchically interrogate the meaning of poetry and language in the increasingly commercialized, digitized, paralyzed worlds we inhabit. As Claire Donato and Jeff T. Johnson, whose performances were Special America, might have told you, it was “an exercise in and exorcism of American Exceptionalism.” In April of this year, Boog City caught up with Special America in the cloud in order to conduct what was provisionally termed “A Not Particularly Linear Interview with Special America.” We talked about Mondays, print, the capability (or lack thereof) of speech among other topics, but what emerged in the interview was the declaration that Special America had run its course.

In the time since, as Special America crossed itself out, a new iteration of the project did emerge from the ashes of the original: Atelier Spatial America. It is, as described in “Atelier Spatial America Prongs (ASAP): A Manifesto” “an experiment in reordering the body that once was Special America as much as it is an experiment in radical pedagogy,” and therein “to perform the role of architect-designers” by collaborating with students and colleagues in “reimagining the role of architecture and design.” In keeping with the anti-hierarchical nature of its predecessor, Donato and Johnson affirm that their lack of expertise in architecture is exactly what gives them authority to practice what they call Speculative Archeological Design; they look to celebrate, archive, and remix “unrealizable projects” and impossible designs and present them in the pedagogical manner of the art class critique. In doing so their aim is to “[l]iberate architecture from the death drive of discipline!”

As such, here you will find the cobbled together remains of two interviews: one from April with Special America, and another, with Atelier Spatial America, from late May.

AN EXERCISE IN AND EXORCISM OF SPECIAL AMERICA

Boog City: Say Special America, is an America still possible? Is an American still possible in poetry?

Special America: We are all Americans, Mark. Say Special America! We are, all of us, becoming-American, and therefore will have been Special American. As for what is possible, or still possible, in poetry I do not know, I do not know. An America, now that seems unlikely. But a House of An American Activities is certainly on its way!

You’ve made a film, so this question is “industry” related: how many chapbooks does it take to get to the center of Oakland? One word or too few?

By Oakland you mean the Oakland-Brooklyn Status Update, yes? The OBSU is more than an industry, it is a science. And a state of minus. Many chapbooks. The many few word junction. We made a film but cannot watch it, ashamed as we are of our almost complete egoism. Thus Special Amerancholy took hold.

And so what do we make of print? Medium screwed, completely haywire, or soon to be renewed? How many Americans does the so-called “average horse” have in the market?



We make colonies of print. As becoming-Americans, the salient majority of Special Americans were to have moved beyond the confines of tree-based publishing schemata, but the paperwork was lost at the orifice, and all we got was this damned T-top. A horse is a course and the medium squirms under massage, because Special America prefers not to be touched.

Is there any pertinent information about Special America you’d like to include?

Hmm, well, Special America might no longer exist, or might not have been existent. So we’d like to pass that along. The good Maria Damon said we might be cracking a chrysalis, and we like the sound of that, but we’re tired of the old affects, the dawg and po-knee shorts, the oily visage. And what emerges from said chrysalis: butterfly or dragon? Maybe next we’ll tour the history of Special America from the perfect past as we recoup the future perfect. Stay tuned for lectures on the relative history of a precarious anti-concept, our good and toasted Special America! Coming and going soon!

IF NOT BY DESIGN: AN INTERVIEW WITH ATELIER SPATIAL AMERICA

Boog City: What could be less American than failure? What could be more? Can you talk a little about Atelier Spatial America’s relationship to failure?

Atelier Spatial America: Atelier Spatial America is born of failure—or rather, it is reborn of failure, since it inherits (and mutates) Special America’s inherent concern with failure. Besides being the collapsed structure—the failed project—from which Atelier Spatial America is born, one might say Special America was always also a performance of failure—of the failure of American exceptionalism, the failure of what we called community-driven exceptionalism, the failure to be self-aware even in self-absorption. The two of us are not exempt from any of these failures, and Special America

performances alluded to our own personal and interpersonal failures: our struggle as a new couple living together in Providence, R.I. at the peak of the 2008 recession; our frustrations with adjunct labor and the Poetry Industrial Complex; the temptation to self-mythologize and update our bios and CVs; feelings of inadequacy as poets, aesthetes, and activists; the ongoing performance of melancholy and abjection inherent in being artists. We often say Special America is (or was!) our most autobiographical work. Just as integral was our participation in any community we drew into Special America—chiefly the digital writing community and the NYC poetry community.

If Special America performed failure as triumphalism, it took its toll on us as performers. Toward the end of the project, we were preoccupied with how emotionally and physiologically drained Special America’s slick and unctuous affects made us feel. Writing and rehearsing Special America stopped being fun, and too often we embodied the inherent conflicts and contradictions of the project to the point where that animosity became part of our relationship. Following performances, we woke up drained and depressed, and felt anxious about the hostilities (and potential harms) bred by the project. In Atelier Spatial America, this concern with failure becomes explicit and even foundational, and this could be a more outward-looking approach that does not require us to be swallowed by our own array of affective registers. That approach was fun but exhausting. The mask threatened to stick; pieces of our faces have still not grown back. As Timothy Morton says in Hyperobjects (in one of his all-too-rare concise formulations), “Your face is a map of everything that happened to it.” To be clear, this does not mean we seek a safer project—we want to create a riskier proposition by seeking a path from radicality to revolution. We are still discovering what this might look like.

There was a disconnect between how seriously we took Special America and how seriously other people took it. And to a great extent, we are responsible for that disconnect, based as it is on the limitations of our presentation and performance.

What does a poet or architect know about the future of architecture or poetry or both? Only as much as we are willing to imagine together—which requires us to think beyond the given to what might be possible under different conditions.

Nevertheless, we were fortunate enough to be nudged along by a number of individuals (e.g., John Cayley, Andrew Klobucar, Sharla Sava, Danniell Schoonebeek, Emily Skillings, Talan Memmott, Juana Hodari, Todd Anderson, Maria Damon, Nick Monfort, Flourish Klink, Chris Funkhouser, Alan Sondheim, Stephanie Boluk, Patrick LeMieux, Mark Marino, Rob Wittig, Jim Bizzocchi, Eric Snodgrass, Jake Kennedy, Kevin

McPherson Eckhoff, and others) who helped us push and think along with the project. At its most effective, Special America drew people in. What made us realize Special America is dead was people’s willingness and ability to follow the architectural imperative (at Granoff Auditorium, the primal scene between Special America and Atelier Spatial America) to sit back and watch our final performance.

Skipping forward to Atelier Spatial America, the embrace of failure as foundational doesn’t get us off the hook—we still have to reflect on our own participation in oppressive practices. We’re both instructors of Architecture Writing at Pratt Institute, and we’re fortunate to teach (together!) at a place that values our art and wants us to challenge but also encourage our students’ thinking. But it’s still too easy to think of them as our students, and to reinforce power relations that can’t help but repress students’ ability to reshape the future. Any pedagogy relies too much on the past—in an architecture program, students may speculate about future design, but we habitually refer them back to precedent and existing conditions. How can we help students see a future that is different from the catastrophic, bankrupt, unimaginative one we’ve failed to avert? That’s a question students can help us answer.

Is the architect dead in American poetry? Is the poet dead in American architecture?

Neither of us is formally trained in architecture or design, and this lack of formal training is integral to Atelier Spatial America. As we state in our manifesto, “[this] is to our great advantage in reimagining the role of architecture and design.” Here and in our project, we speak from our particular perspectives as writers (and as writers with particular perspectives, particular poetics) who teach writing to architecture students and read architecture books and blogs.

As architecture writing instructors, we talk with students about the ways architecture provides metaphors and reference points for the arts, and writing in particular—especially poetry and poetics, which are the foundation for our writing practices. We also explore the ways poetics (not just prosody and formal considerations, but poetry in the world, and the relation between ethics and aesthetics) informs architecture and design. We find the exchange particularly invigorating, because students know more about architecture than we do, and we have more experience with poetry and poetics than they do. In order for architecture and poetics to speak to one another in a more substantial way (beyond metaphorical relation), we have to combine our relative expertise, but we also have to question the grounds of our expertise. What does a poet or architect know about the future of architecture or poetry or both? Only as much as we are willing to imagine together—which requires us to think beyond the given to what might be possible under different conditions. And if we want different conditions—for example, those more amenable to a just and joyful world—we have to create those conditions. Poets and architects might have a hand in designing such a world, but only if we work (and play!) together and think beyond the world we have now. Poets and architects are not dead to one another, but we might need to rebuild ourselves in preparation for a better world.

We are thinking now about the Zen Buddhist concept of *shoshin*, or beginner’s mind—that space where even advanced practitioners cultivate an attitude of openness and not-knowing, a healthy skepticism related to self and world. Shunryū Suzuki says, “In the beginner’s mind there are many possibilities, in the expert’s mind there are few.” As we develop Atelier Spatial America, and get a better sense of what it is and how it works, we hope the ethos of beginner’s mind attends our practice.

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Yakovlev’s Under the Sea



BY KEVIN WALTER

Neptune Court
Anton Yakovlev
Operating System

Anton Yakovlev’s *Neptune Court*, the poet’s first chapbook, is a collection that’s fixated on memory and location, on love and loss. Despite the formal consistency employed throughout, each vivacious poem has the power to transport you to a uniquely strange universe wherein you might see “a sickly zebra/ drive a motorboat across the East River,” or perhaps you might be careening “toward the Field of Wild Turkeys/ where your heart used to race so often,” but you’ll never feel like you’re taking a detour. In these poems, which are classically lyrical and unabashedly sentimental, we are reminded that “[w]e’re all born in strange worlds” which we only make stranger by simply existing within them, imbuing them with our idiosyncratic perceptions like “[t]he rain on the roof of the bus stop/ [that] sounds like an ice cream truck.” There is a generosity in the sincerity that permeates this collection: as the author guides us through each cinematographic terrain, he populates his worlds with heartfelt and relatable characters. And, refreshingly, there’s not a moment of snark to be seen. Yakovlev is equal parts genuine, grave, and bemused (much like Death, who appears “wearing mittens over his heart”). Many of the poems explore the various losses endured by these characters, and sorrowful reminders pop up unexpectedly: “I saw your shape on the hood of my pickup truck,/ traced in rock-hard snow.” So, too, does a supernatural force—“God peeks in through the sunroof” but, of course, does not sit in the front seat along with the speaker. He might not be able to handle the unnerving, but innervating, energy of this strange universe and the beauty which Yakovlev resolutely champions.



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