

THOMAS DANE GALLERY

Draxler, Helmut. 'Helmut Draxler on Amie Siegel's *The Architects*', *Artforum*, Vol.54, No.2, October 2015.

ARTFORUM

Helmut Draxler on Amie Siegel's *The Architects*



Amie Siegel, *The Architects*, 2014, HD video, color, sound, 30 minutes. Installation view. Photo: Miguel de Guzman.

DESPITE ITS TITLE, *The Architects* (2014) is not about architects. Certainly there are architects to be seen, mostly sitting, silently absorbed at their computers, sometimes chatting or tinkering with models. But artist Amie Siegel shows little interest in their personalities, pursuits, or motivations; the film registers people as objects, as merely one component of the complex social and economic machinery that produces our built environment today.

Altogether, the film shows ten architecture offices in New York. Each has been filmed in a similar way, with a series of parallel tracking shots, and the footage has been edited into one montage lasting almost exactly thirty minutes. The slowly moving camera reveals repeated variations on the modern open-plan workplace: more or less the same desks, computers, and shelves cluttered with books and files, with occasional minute variations in minor details like chairs or lamps. From time to time, hard hats show up as signifiers of the more practical dimension of the work done here. Drawings and renderings pinned on the walls, along with the architectural models scattered across tables and desks, offer visions of buildings and cities to come, echoing views out of the office windows, which open onto the real midtown skyline. Outside and inside seem to merge, suggesting that the model, the office, and the city beyond are different expressions of the same ambition. Yet the workplace remains the nodal point of these relations, becoming the real object of the film and a model of another sort, referring to the symbolic relations between the rigorously functional visual impression offered by these offices and the absence of any artistic, economic, or political dimension therein. Even the process of collective decision-making, briefly referenced in a shot of a group meeting, is subsumed within the overarching narrative of a seemingly objective and autonomous mode of production.

3 & 11 DUKE STREET, ST JAMES'S, LONDON SW1Y 6BN

TEL: +44 (0)20 7925 2505 FAX: +44 (0)20 7925 2506 info@thomasdanegallery.com

THOMAS DANE GALLERY

Office architecture and the way it shapes social relations is not the only subject of *The Architects*; the work is an equally incisive interrogation of film. Two sequences in the middle of the piece, for example, indicate a high degree of self-awareness: one in which the camera briefly imitates the back-and-forth movement of a 3-D printer and another in which the camera stops behind a photographer's tripod as he is in the process of photographing an architectural model. Both moments recall structural filmmaking of the 1960s and '70s, which emphasized the relationship between the content depicted on-screen and the material and formal givens of the medium. Obviously, Siegel's film is not a purely structural work (though, like many of her other works to date, it could be considered within that tradition—*The Sleepers*, 1999, for example, is a kind of inversion of *The Architects* in which a fixed camera looks voyeuristically into the homes in modernist high-rises). There are other historical references as well, namely to Godard, to Hitchcock, but also to the traditional realism of narrative cinema. Yet the work is not a documentary, either, and ultimately its portrayal of architecture is complex and multilayered, ambiguous—neither an enraged attack on modern architecture like Godard's *2 or 3 Things I Know About Her* (1967) nor an affirmative comedy in the style of Billy Wilder's *The Apartment* (1960).

But far more than a purely cinematic reflexivity is at stake here. Today, film itself is produced under circumstances very similar to those documented in *The Architects*. Modes of production in the digital age seem to converge, increasingly turning the office, instead of the classical artist's studio, into the dominant model for cultural production. Indeed, the film's exhibition at the Storefront for Art and Architecture in New York this past spring added another dimension to this resonance between film and architectural space, labor and cultural production. The windows of the long and narrow gallery were (mostly) closed, and the film was projected toward the street, across the short side of room. This arrangement forced visitors to traverse the entire space before being able to see the film, their bodies tracing a path similar to the one Siegel's camera took through the ten offices, thereby performing another sort of tracking shot.

Perhaps it would be more accurate, then, to describe Siegel's film as poststructural, as a medium that has become aware not only of itself but of its relation to other artistic, cultural, economic, and political spheres. In focusing on the relations between film and architecture, office and exhibition, art and architecture, labor and production, it does not perform a direct critique of institutions. It does imply, however, a certain reflective distance, and in relating its representational content to its medium and to the context of its installation, the work probes not merely the modes of its own production, but also its conditions and relations. At the end of the film, it is getting dark outside. The architect's workday seems to come to a close at the same moment that the movie does for the visitor. A false relation is established, implying that the act of viewing is just another form of production. But eight hours are not a full day, and the end of the film is surely not the end of the architects' labor. In the experience of the installation, another time frame thus emerges, referring to things both unforeseen and yet to come.

Helmut Draxler is a writer based in Berlin and a professor of art theory at the University for Applied Arts in Vienna.

<https://www.artforum.com/print/201508/amie-siegel-s-the-architects-54966>