

**S-337473**

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*Sarah Oppenheimer: S-337473*  
Wexner Center for the Arts  
The Ohio State University  
February 4–April 16, 2017.

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Think of architecture as a “switch”—as a device that binds and separates, opens and closes, that modulates and articulates movement, that transforms and distorts space and perception and moreover is itself transformed through movement. In short, think of an intervention that fundamentally challenges the conception of architecture as a solid and durable construction, proposing instead a conception of architecture as a controlled and controllable environment. That is the thesis of Sarah Oppenheimer’s S-337473, the “switch” she proposed at the Wexner Center for the Arts. But unlike the museum that houses the work, this challenge should not, however, be understood solely as a critical (and rhetorical) investigation of the language of classical architecture and a questioning of its premises—namely the subject and its viewpoint; the grid and its rationality; the institution and its monumentality. While Oppenheimer’s intervention certainly builds on this work, its impulse is not so much avant-gardist—determined to distance itself from the perceived burden of the past (and in the process deprive itself also of its potential)—as it is concerned, much more generally, to unveil the possibilities of architecture: of the building and its spaces as well as its microtechnologies, such as rotating glass panels and walls, or architectural elements such as doors, screens, ramps, or columns. If this leads to the questioning of a series of conventions—object/subject, form/function, ornament/structure, reality/fiction, static/dynamic, etc.—Oppenheimer’s approach is based less on a challenge to existing practice than on an uncompromising engagement of its performative potential.

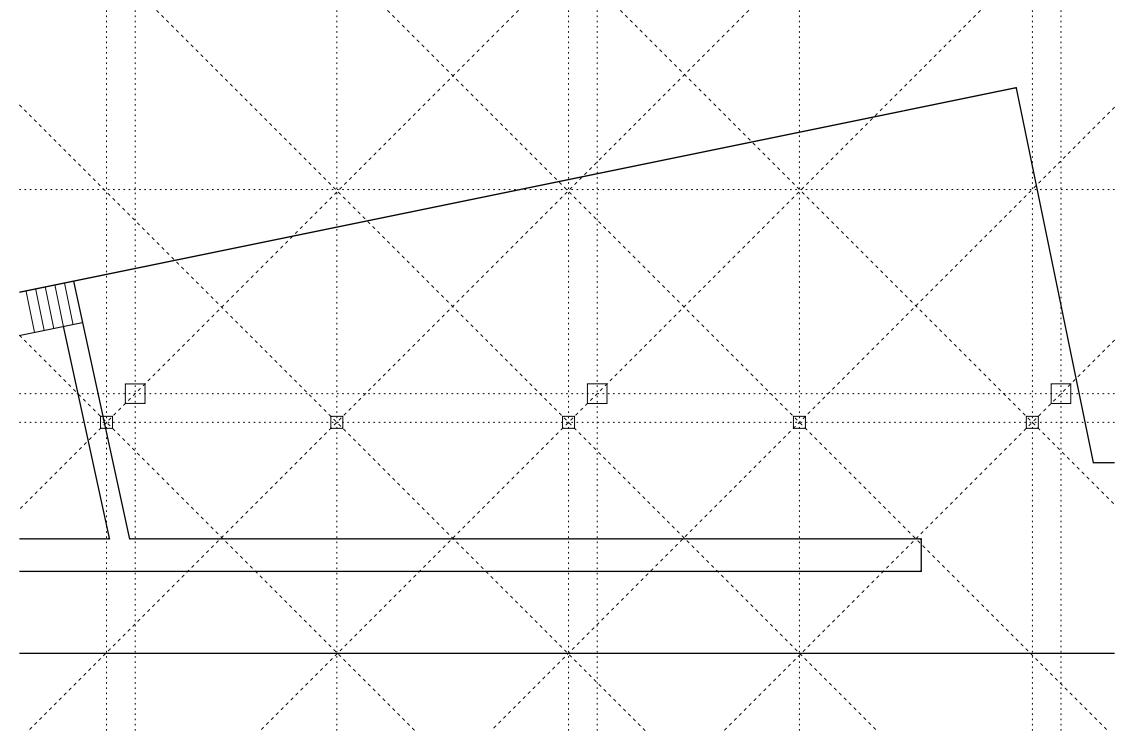
Originally performance referred to the act of carrying out and completing a task.<sup>1</sup> By analogy, in the field of technology, the term denoted the results obtained by a machine. And it was in this narrow sense that it was adopted in construction. In effect, the term performance is closely tied to the new technologies and processes of rationalization developed in the postwar period,<sup>2</sup> its scope extending, during the 1990s, to encompass also the procedures related to digital fabrication.<sup>3</sup> In architecture the term performance therefore refers, in the first instance and with reference to its technical origin, to the efficiency of a building or its components.

It is no coincidence that the concept of efficiency—introduced in the 19th century as a means of measuring and thereby optimizing industrial production<sup>4</sup>—should at the same time have found its architectural counterpart in the *machine à habiter*, a term that describes an architecture that no longer merely serves as shelter, but is understood as a device that facilitates the activities of its users.<sup>5</sup>

Regardless of its precise function and its various nuances—mechanical with Le Corbusier, environmental with critic Reyner Banham, electronic with Bill Gates, or aesthetic with architect Kazuo Shinohara—what characterizes the machine for living in is the fact that it makes explicit the different dimensions of living, in its social, environmental, or constructive, as well as aesthetic (the machine for stirring emotions) sense.<sup>6</sup> It is in this double sense that the “switch” needs to be understood. As its name suggests, it is distinguished not only by the fact that it is a technical object that is transformed through its own movement —“on/off”—but also by its capacity to reveal the characteristics of its environment. At the Wexner Center, Oppenheimer’s work not only pivots along its own diagonal axis but also articulates the ambiguous exhibition space, creating a lintel-like threshold between two distinct spaces when open, underlining the boundary between them when closed.

However, the performance of the “switch” relates not only to the way it fulfills a specific program in a precise manner, but also to its role in determining and forming both uses and users: in this sense it is anthropomorphic. Indeed, every machine is anthropomorphic, not just because it has been developed by human beings and replaces some of their activities, but also, and primarily, because it imposes particular modes of seeing and doing on those who use it:<sup>7</sup> the window that frames the view of the onlooker, the doors that determine the procession through a space, the glazed panel that opens or bars passage.

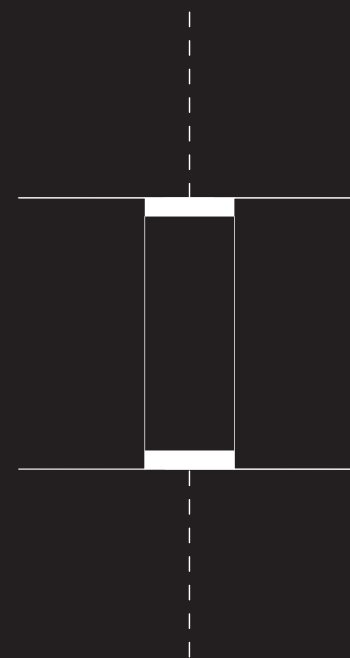
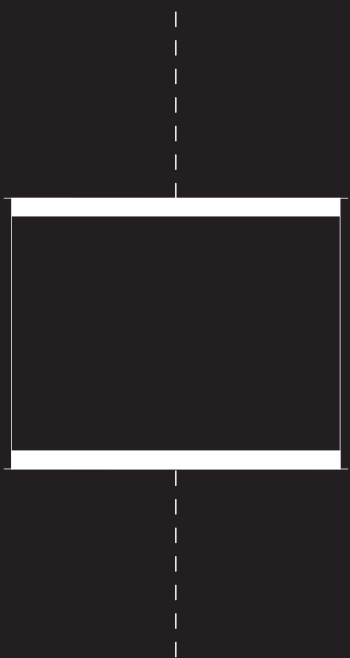
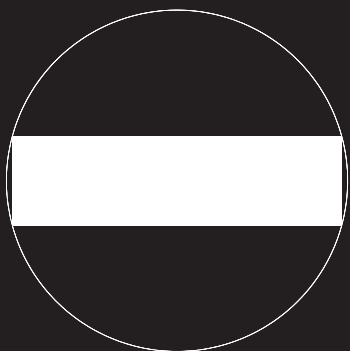
If the “switch” can be viewed in anthropomorphic terms, then the body of the user can be thought of as inscribed within the plan of the machine. Consequently, the division of roles between performer and performed, between object and subject, is not so much socially constructed as it is a reality. Human and machine form a unit that seems to overcome their opposition.<sup>8</sup> In this way, the traditional proposition that architecture is in the first instance a formal, and thus representational, problem yields to a conception of architecture as action between the user and the building. Such a reading embraces the idea of architecture as a material intervention that gives rise to interferences, responses, and interpretations.<sup>9</sup> However, as much as architecture is transformed by the changing interactions of the users who open or close the “switch,” so the users themselves are affected by the various experiences that are proposed. Subject and object then become agents who participate together in a joint performance.

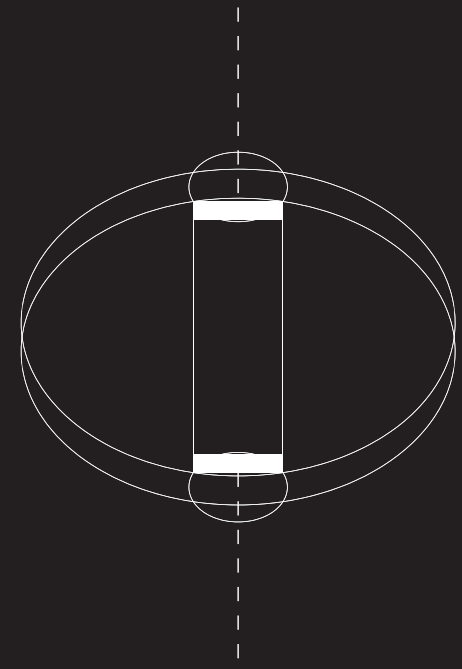
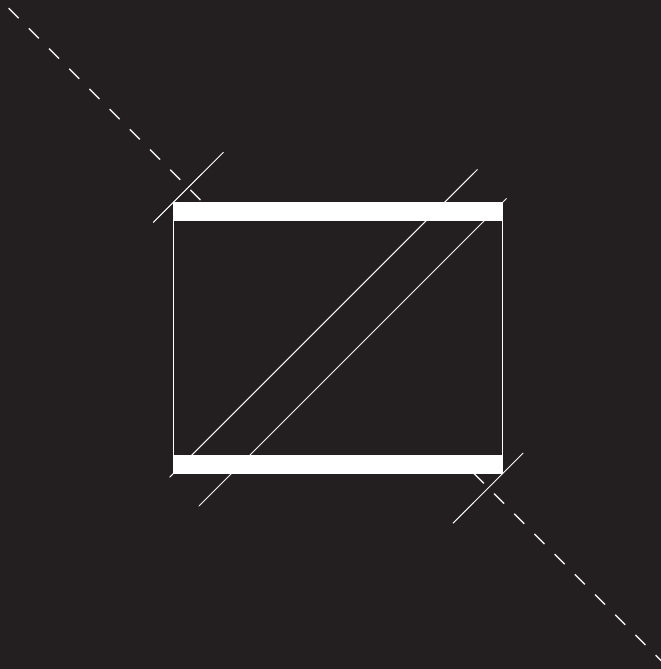
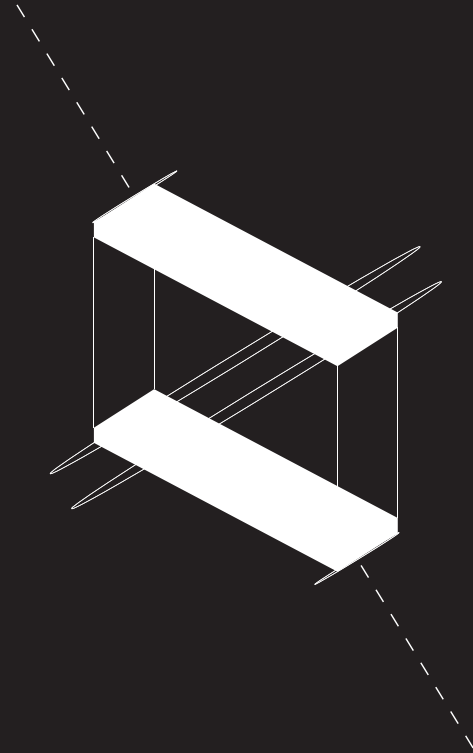
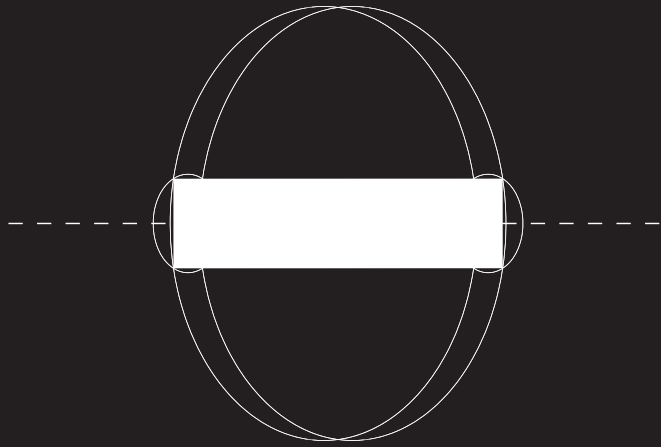


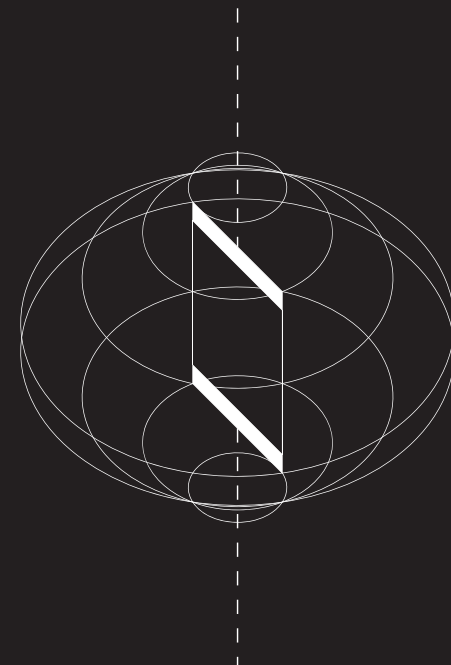
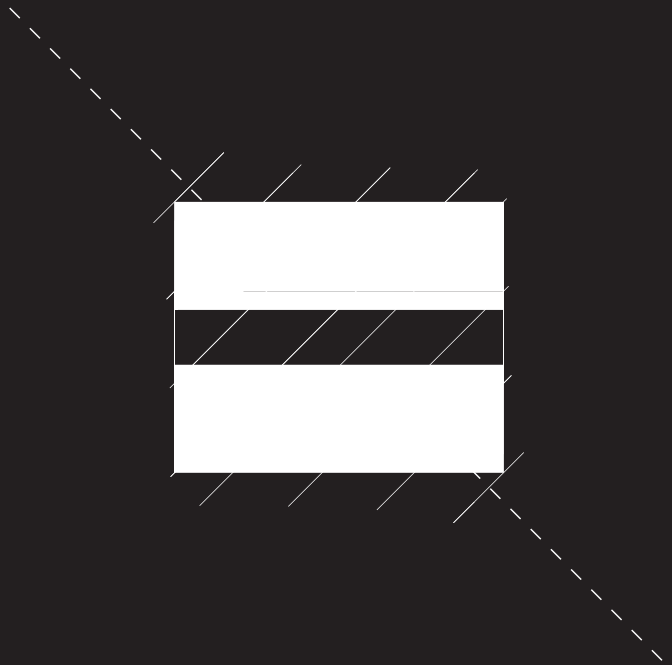
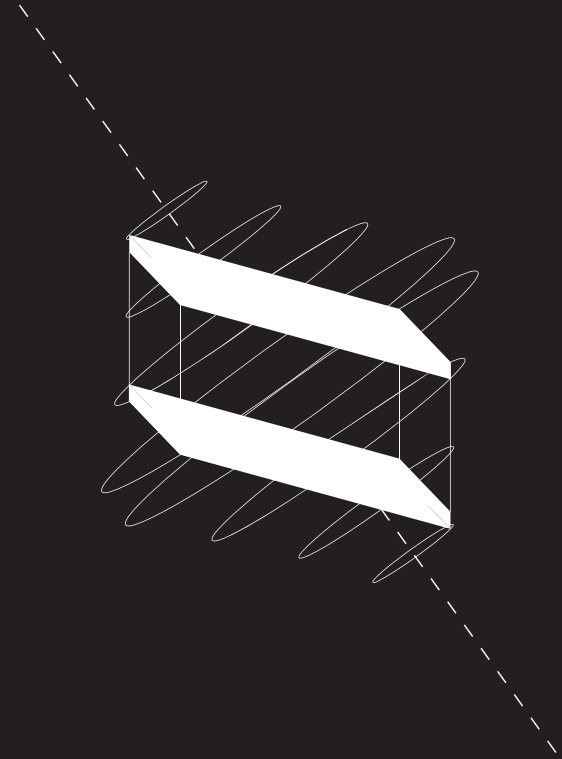
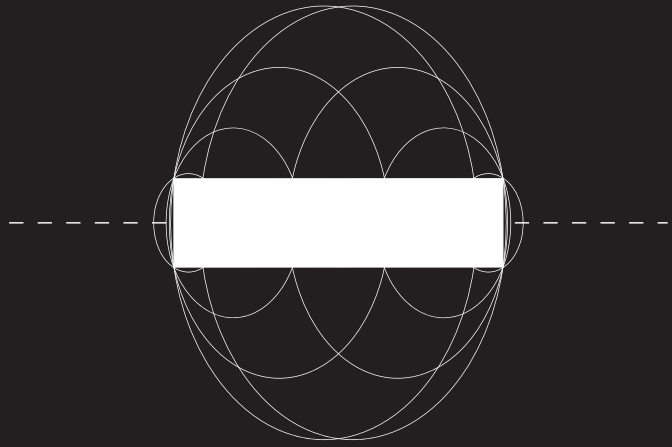
ABOVE  
Artist’s diagram of existing  
Wexner Center for the Arts architecture  
and underlying 45-degree grid.

FOLLOWING SPREADS  
Rotation studies, 2016  
Digital video (stills), black-and-white,  
silent, 15 seconds  
pp. 26–27: On-grain rotation  
pp. 28–29: Bias rotation (S-337473)  
pp. 30–31: Double-bias rotation  
(S-281913)

In this light, the “switch” is no longer simply an object, but can be considered a nonhuman subject, which in its turn shapes the environment around it. The movement of the “switch” makes this particularly clear. The existing orthogonal order of the museum’s two primary grids and their relation to the wider territory of the Ohio State campus and the city of Columbus is now supplemented, not just by the 45-degree order of the grid overlaid by the artist and its relation to the geometry of the museum, but also by the kinetic order of the glass element and its relation to the mechanical pivot that rotates along a diagonal axis, also at 45 degrees. In the process, the concept of a uniform and unified environment, bringing together mechanical device and architecture, architecture and user, museum and territory, overlaps with different “perceptual worlds” that define singular environments, perhaps as distinct both in time and in space as those perceived by different organisms.<sup>10</sup> The performance therefore does not revolve solely around a unique and constant relationship between the “switch” and the human being. An additional agent now needs to be taken into account, for the performance encompasses not only the exchanges between artifact and human being, but also their respective interactions with the various environments in which they are immersed: whether these are spatial or temporal, or else economic or institutional.







While in a narrow technical sense the term performance means *efficiency*, more generally it describes the transformation of an object and its perception over time and through use. Thus in linguistics the term designates the production of sentences (including errors and lapses), as opposed to *grammar*, which studies language's form.<sup>11</sup> It is in this sense that the term was taken up in the postwar period by disciplines as diverse as theater, dance, anthropology, art history, film, and sociology.<sup>12</sup> And it is also in this sense that it can be understood in the installation at the Wexner Center. In place of a unitary conception of the object, there is now a singular one defined through the object's interaction with its specific environment. This conception may be geometric, as when Oppenheimer superimposes the grids of the Wexner Center and uncovers—and makes explicit—an additional grid, diagonal, at 45 degrees. It may be technical, as when she introduces a rotating glass element that reveals the formal rhetorics of the alienating elements of the Wexner Center: the oblique wall or hanging columns, which function as a “sign” more than support. Or it may be architectural and, thus, aesthetic, when the alienation of the subject sought by the superimposition of the geometries of the museum is no longer limited to just the building, but extends equally to its microarchitectures—its walls, revolving doors, or gleaming glass surfaces. Or it may be institutional, as when the space of the museum itself becomes the field of intervention.

This multivalent approach is expressed in the representational techniques used in Oppenheimer's project. In addition to the traditional working drawings used to depict the museum and the various spatial and structural interventions, Oppenheimer developed specific technical drawings to study the mechanical pivots—their construction as well as their operation, their geometry as well as the spatial milieu they define. Further, the plan view, which represents space as a horizontal section through the building, and the isovist, which represents the perceptual environment from a given point of view,<sup>13</sup> are joined and supported here by kinetic simulation, which allows for the representation of the environment of the rotating mechanism.

Thus, the limited and limiting conception of architecture—as a space that is fixed, solid, and determined—is expanded by a conception of architecture as an interactive environment made up of a set of elements that are indeterminate and constantly evolving. Here, the formal or geometric conception of space is replaced by a topological understanding. Furniture, panels, windows, doors, and even walls accommodate permanent transformation. Rather than a definitive and unique architecture, we have a series of events

in which human beings, architecture, and environment interact. The quality of the project is now derived not only from the architectural form, but from the interpretation and transformation of the performed space.<sup>14</sup> The significance of the object is transposed from its appearance to its relations, from the built to the program, from the planimetric to the diagrammatic. So it is no coincidence that

Oppenheimer's device for the Wexner Center is shown in a largely diagrammatic manner since—in contrast to other representational techniques, such as the plan, the section, or even the perspective, useful to depict an object—the diagram allows data to be presented in their temporal rather than spatial dimension.<sup>15</sup>

**If the “switch” can be viewed in anthropomorphic terms, then the body of the user can be thought of as inscribed within the plan of the machine.**

Like the “screens,” “windows,” or “holes” that have characterized Sarah Oppenheimer's production in recent years, the “switch” can therefore be seen not only as a different kind of architectural proposal, but as a way of describing different performative activities: observing and being seen, progressing and being diverted, moving and being moved. To understand architecture in terms of performance is therefore to privilege the activity over the product, the process over the form, the physical description of the forces acting in and on architecture over the geometric description of its appearance. This is no longer solely the domain of contemplation, but the domain of the action; no longer representation, but presentation,<sup>16</sup> since it privileges an aesthetic of the presence that transcends any temporal signification.

To conceive of architecture in terms of performance thus requires not to stop at a purely technical understanding of the term, but to consider it more generally as the expression of a series of actions that provoke interferences, responses, and interpretations.<sup>17</sup> These may take many forms: the transformation of architecture over time, but also the interaction between user and architecture, or between architecture and environment. But beyond this, performance is also involved in all those interactions that surpass the plan, which could be said to belong to the domain of excess<sup>18</sup>—as a surplus of meaning that is only revealed through time and beyond the different intentions inscribed in the machine.



## ENDNOTES

### INTRODUCTION

Megan Cavanaugh

1. Sarah Oppenheimer, interview by Alexander Galloway, *BOMB* 137 (Fall 2016), <http://bombmagazine.org/article/542398/sarah-oppenheimer>.

### A SWITCH

Laurent Stalder

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3. Michael Hensel and Achim Menges, eds., "Form Follows Performance: Zur Wechselwirkung von material, struktur, umwelt," special issue, *ARCH+* 188 (2008).

4. See Jacques Guillerme, "A propos du concept de rendement," in *Actes du XIIe Congrès international d'histoire des sciences, Paris, 1968*, vol. 4, (Paris: Blanchard, 1971), 82–87.

5. Georges Teyssot, *Die krankheit des domizils: Wohnen und wohnbau 1800–1930* (Braunschweig: F. Vieweg, 1989), 52.

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9. Nicholas Thomas, foreword to *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory*, by Alfred Gell (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), ix.

### OUR BEST MACHINES ARE MADE OF SUNSHINE

Alexander R. Galloway

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2. See for instance Friedrich Kittler, "Computer Graphics: A Semi-Technical Introduction," *Grey Room* 2 (Winter 2001): 30–45.

10. Jakob von Uexküll, "A Stroll through the Worlds of Animals and Men: A Picture Book of Invisible Worlds" (1934), *Semiotica* 89, no. 4 (1992), 327.

11. *Le grand Robert de la langue française*, 2nd ed.; and *Grand Larousse de la langue française*, vol. 5.

12. Philip Auslander, introduction to *Performance: Critical Concepts in Literary and Cultural Studies*, ed. Philip Auslander (London: Routledge, 2003), 1:1–24.

13. Julian Rose, "Sarah Oppenheimer in Perspective," in *Sarah Oppenheimer*, ed. Stephanie Hanor (Oakland: Mills College Art Museum, 2014), 29–56.

14. Christopher Dell, "Die performanz des raumes," in "Situativer urbanismus," special issue, *ARCH+* 183 (2007), 136–43; and Jon P Mitchell, "Performance," in *Handbook of Material Culture*, eds. Christopher Tilley et al (London: Sage Publications, 2006), 384–401.

15. Joachim Krausse, "Informationen auf einen blick," *form+zweck* 16 (1999), 4–23.

16. Henry M. Sayre, "The Object of Performance: Aesthetics in the Seventies," *The Georgia Review* 37, no. 1 (1983), 169–88.

17. Thomas, ix.

18. Grahame F. Thompson, "Approaches to 'Performance': An Analysis of Terms," *Screen* 26, no. 5 (1985), 78–90.

## DRAWINGS

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Plan view of S-337473 in the Wexner Center galleries  
World Top view

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Construction plane EW\_01:  
Southeast view of offset section, glass-and-metal elements in horizontal position

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Construction plane EW\_01:  
Southeast view of offset section, glass-and-metal elements in vertical position

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Construction plane EW\_01:  
Southeast view of section through upper and lower kinetic assembly, vertical position

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Cross section through upper kinetic assembly, hammer detail

## INSTALLATION PHOTOGRAPHY

Sarah Oppenheimer

S-337473, 2017

Metal, glass, and existing architecture

Total dimensions variable

Installation views at the Wexner Center for the Arts, 2017

All photos © Serge Hasenböhler

## COMPONENT PHOTOGRAPHY

Sarah Oppenheimer

S-281913, 2016

Aluminum, glass, and existing architecture

Total dimensions variable

On view at the Pérez Art Museum Miami, September 30, 2016–April 30, 2017

Photos courtesy Stewart Clements