# Skin deep

Joshua Comaroff

Boedi Widjaja's *Black—Hut* is a complex meditation on *bios* and *techne*, on body and building, on nature and artifice. The artist, working as a dialectician, treats these not as opposed terms, but as elements to be related in a series of experimental syntheses. His installation at LASALLE's Institute of Contemporary Arts Singapore becomes the site for this exploration, relating the *bios/techne* duality via a cycle of references: building–body, grid–body, and, finally, building–dwelling. These relations are activated both by the form of the hut—as an historically freighted figure of 'primitive' building—and the process of its making.

The installation is most simply described as one space superimposed upon another. The artist introduces four new walls that intersect the Earl Lu Gallery, appearing to slip in and out of its existing perimeter. This new rectangle is not uniform along its length. As a spatial enclosure, it varies from skeletal metal framing to a solid surface coated in dark concrete render. Widjaja's four walls counter the free-form geometry of the existing gallery plan—which he finds 'disorienting' and 'insubstantial'—with a sober, rectilinear form. The position of the hut is carefully rationalized, distributed around a notional centre point that is equidistant from three existing columns. At this centre point is a parabolic speaker, which plays a sound piece created for the work.

The installation is a quiet, dark eminence—a sort of *ka'aba* at the centre of what Widjaja calls his 'internal architectures'. It is an object around which a series of biographical–experiential structures are related, where buildings and selves stand in a process of co-creation. Widjaja believes that these structures can be 'unpacked', can be 'mapped'. *Black—Hut*, then, stands as an analogue to the famous hut on the frontispiece of the abbé Marc-Antoine Laugier's *Essai sur l'architecture* (1753): an explorative outpost, the first shelter in an expansive psychic wilderness.

## BODY AND BUILDING, BIOS AND GRID

*Black—Hut* began with something like a vision.

The figure of Le Corbusier appeared to Boedi Widjaja in a dream. The great architect was lying on a forensic table in a space resembling a cave, which—by the contradictory logic of the oneiric—had a 'clinical quality'. Corb's fingers were inserted into his own face, which wore a passive expression. The scene lacked any sense of horror; the exposed tissue had the objectified aspect of an anatomical model. His hands moved, pulling those distinctive features into new permutations. At the same time, elevations of buildings from the Corbusian oeuvre, shown on a screen above, shifted into corresponding states of rearrangement. While the architect appeared partially plasticized, his buildings had a 'fleshy' appearance. In this moment of self-fashioning, face and façade, flesh and concrete, mirrored one another—albeit inexactly. Widjaja recalls that he has never had another dream as detailed or realistic. He describes it as 'having watched an art film, while standing on the edge of the set'.

The dream left the artist with a sense of lingering awe, and a desire to respond with some form of architectural work. While its subject was a carnivalesque (and perhaps mildly obscene) version of the autopsy, Widjaja remembers that the experience was one of calm revelation. But this 'revelation' was clearly neither fixed nor factual. Where the forensic grows from a matrix of empirical certainty, in which a 'truth' of the body can be exposed, Widjaja's vision grows from an assumption of possibility and indeterminacy. The body does not lie still and expose its secrets, but rather rearranges itself—and its worldly reflection, architecture—in a way that allows no fixed dispensation or understanding. The corpse is a kind of *corps exquis.*

This fantastical, conjectural mirroring of building and body channels one of architecture's hoariest myths: the building as biometrically determinate object. The body has long been cited as the primary model for a building—whether in whole or part. Vitruvius located the origin of 'correct' proportion in an analogue of head, torso, and legs. This was true of the column, as much as of the façade as a composition. This idea likewise appeared in classical anecdotes linking sculpture and architecture. Caryatids, for example, were thought to have originated as a reminder of the women of Karyes, a Spartan town that sided with the Persians against the Greeks. The biometric tradition survives into modernity, through variants of functionalism. Today, the anatomical determination survives under the sign of ergonomics or bio-mimesis; in Le Corbusier's moment, it was the Modulor system of proportions.

Widjaja revisits this conceptual history. But unlike the classicists—or contemporary ergonomists who would see their work as biologically rooted and beyond history or ideology—he pursues the inherent ambiguities of the building/body relationship. This is appropriate, perhaps, given the origin of the work: Le Corbusier's auto-autopsy, with its cinematic hints of Peter Greenaway and David Cronenberg.

Hence Widjaja's choice of the 'hut'—perhaps the most freighted of architectural typologies. This invocation positions the work directly within the discourse of origins, and of naturalism. It is precisely the hut that appears as the most immediate, pre-vernacular building. It stands, in literature and in architectural theory, as the central figure of pseudo-historical myths of origin. The most famous case is the 'primitive hut' of the abbé Marc-Antoine Laugier, with its image of the hut as a simple pediment barely abstracted from a grove of trees. The hut is often shown in this way, as but one step removed from nature (our own and that which surrounds us). In reality, it has often been a complex, latter-day concoction; as with Laugier, the hut is designed retroactively to naturalize a contemporary design theory or practice.

Widjaja's own hut, while a container of conceptual instabilities, is most certainly positioned in construction's present day. Its light-gauge steel framing is an industrial product, used chiefly for the partitions of office interiors. These surfaces make no pretence of historical gravity, instead being borrowed from the language of expedient modernism—of the absorption of internationalist utopias by the marketplace.

It is upon this series of panels, however, that Widjaja re-engages the naturalistic history of the hut in an extraordinary way. The interior-

facing surfaces have been coated in an unusual concrete render, integrally coloured and mixed with salt crystals. The render is the product of an experimental method of application. Concrete was applied in progressive coats and trowelled for smooth and rough finishes, as opposed to horizontal 'lifts' or slabs shaped by formwork. Where traditional casting produces a volumetric muscularity—celebrated in Corb's own work—Widjaja has gone to great lengths to create tissual layers, which cover the panels like skin. The dissolution of salt crystals within the mixtures leaves a fine pattern of pores. When smooth, the finish appears more architectural; when rough, it begins to resemble an integument, or a hide. The slim character of the backing panels underscores this effect, heightening the viewer's awareness of the concrete as a laminar element.

The rigorous, rectilinear composition of *Black—Hut*, its overtly technical assembly of frame and infill, plays against this dermal surface that would seem to originate from an alien material logic. Changes in concrete, from rough to polished, appear to mediate this radical difference, albeit only momentarily. As with the vision of Le Corbusier on the table, the organic and the technical seem poised within an odd, complementary labour of making.

Clearly, there is an intentional interplay between *bios* and *techne* in this juxtaposition of materiality. The examination of this duality goes further, however, in the artist's exploration of formal logics—in particular, the experimental conflation of organic and rational. As mentioned, the plan of the hut has been superimposed as a rationalization of the Earl Lu Gallery's oblique geometry, using the existing columns to find a centroid. Its walls have then been finished in a sort of concrete epidermis, which dramatizes an organic material placed upon a rectilinear substrate. The basic language of the installation, then, would seem to follow logically from the original vision: a shifting correspondence between the tissues of a human face and the elevations of a modernist architecture.

This theme, the distortion of bodies on grids (and vice versa) reappears one more time, when the visitor reaches the centre of the hut. Here, a parabolic speaker plays a composition that has been created specifically for the work. This sound piece is not immediately comprehensible. It is perceptible as the product of an analogue instrument: a string, perhaps, or a vibrating surface. However, the original sounds have clearly been manipulated to lose some of their integrity—they slur and dilate in the manner of George Harrison's reversed guitar in The Beatles' 'Tomorrow never knows'.

The instrument is the metallophone of an Indonesian gamelan. Widjaja has digitally manipulated the sound, quantizing the notes into a slow, regular pulse. The traditional timing of this ensemble, which appears to expand and contract against conventional tempo, has been rationalized. Widjaja describes this operation as 'taking a body—for example a skeleton, and reshaping it so that all of the bones are distributed on a grid'. The sound loop depicts the outcome, the physical logic of an organic music being distorted by the requirements of an imposed, alien system.

This operation, like the form of the hut and its cladding, is neither about perfection nor distortion—Widjaja seems to reject both of these historical antecedents in the relation of bodies to buildings. Rather, superposition creates a space of inquiry, and a mode of play. Different forms of organic composition, and their incomplete adaptation to the productive logic of the technical, express a shifting dialectic of terms, a search for the architectures of the personal.





The meeting of *bios* and *techne* occurs once more in *Black—Hut*. This involves a second important architectural referent: the artist's childhood home, in Solo (Surakarta). The latter operates as a counterweight, perhaps, to the work's invocation of the modern tradition. Widjaja recounts that his thoughts have often turned to this building after his dream of Le Corbusier. The memories recurred with a fresh urgency in recent months, as the house has been put up for sale and will likely be demolished by the next owner.

Like many environments of our early years, the Solo house was formative. Widjaja, following Gaston Bachelard, states that one 'cannot really leave the childhood home'. We carry it within us, as a basic archetype—a spatialization of ourselves. The house has functioned, thus, as a kind of mental map; it was also integrally related to Widjaja's identity as member of a Chinese Indonesian family. Its absent presence serves as a structure for both mind and personhood.

In this sense, the work can be read more personally, beyond a general exploration of the relations between building and body. It may also be understood as a sounding of the relationship between Widjaja and his own personal architecture. The work, itself, does not attempt—as in the case of artist Do Ho Suh, or others—to replicate formally the childhood home. Rather, it merely notes its importance. The Solo house registers as a spectral presence, as that enclosure which, like the body, precedes all others. Its character is both carnal and technical; it can, in fact, exist only as a meld of both.

This is, at the same time, a nod to another spectral eminence: Martin Heidegger, and the influence of the essay 'Building dwelling thinking' on Boedi Widjaja. The hut, in its role as a rhetorical architecture—as something both more and less than a building—engages a broad set of social practices that contribute to an idea of dwelling. Following Heidegger, *Black—Hut* proposes a building that exceeds 'construction', narrowly defined. It is one of a number of peri-architectural practices that contribute to a space of being in the world, and serve to integrate mankind with its terrestrial and spiritual context.

This raises profound questions about the act of building; about the zone where the human and the dwelling cannot be disambiguated, where a commerce between the structuring conventions of bodies and architecture takes place. At the same time, Widjaja is staking a claim for the role of art as a building practice, as a site for thinking about dwelling. The artist emphasizes dwelling-making as a kind of forensic practice. Architecture, as a physical thing, is a 'fleshly' undertaking. As a way of thinking, it remains ever within us—a technology of the self.

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