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PARALLAX – WORKING WITH DOUBTS 2009

# WORKING WITH DOUBT

"Convictions are more dangerous enemies of truth than lies." —Nietzsche

Absolute zero temperature, the hypothetical point at which a substance would have no molecular motion, is -459.72 degrees Fahrenheit. The "absolute zero" temperature in physics can be said to correspond to absolute music—music that has no program and does not try to tell a story or describe a scene. We have reached a marvelous moment in architecture in which determinant developments can occur from any discipline. Architecture, no longer limited to beginning in architecture, can be inspired by music, poetry, sculpture, or scientific phenomena—hundreds, thousands of beginnings. If an idea is realized, related to a specific site and circumstance, its differential combinations should connect to the organic nonlinear and the infinite.

An absolute exists in the specific. Site, geometry, program, circumstance, and materials are forged into spaces by an idea. A unique site and circumstance requires a specific idea, a "limited concept." More than just a verbally expressed idea, a limited concept sets a manifold relation. It refers to a nonhegemonic, local stability. It is semihierarchical. A limited concept states an ideal. An ideal aspiration in architecture is not eclectic. In the mind, an ideal is seen; it is a kind of perfection. It is closer to "classical" art than eclecticism. However, a limited concept thrives on going forward into the unknown, embracing doubt.

A concept can be in some cases mathematically precise. Mathematicians follow four laws in approaching a problem. They express it verbally, numerically, algebraically, and visually. Likewise, architecture has a verbal concept, numeric size and proportion, algebraic integration of structure and material dynamics (and heat and cooling dynamics), and form. These four aspects forge an integrated connection for each site and program.

Mathematical codes dominate an absolute aim in today's Human Genome Project. They dominate the description of the double helix of DNA and yet James Watson and Francis Crick admit that a dream—the ultimate in subjectivity—was central to the discovery of DNA's structure. The subjective-objective transformations in the actions of life are not predetermined in genetic givens; we move, adopt, and live in new ways. In order to live and act we make errors, corrections, and correlations in an active advance; that is, we work with doubt.

The power of working with doubt or suspending disbelief is fundamental for creative thought in science and in architecture. Today the absolute is displaced by the relative and by the interactive. Instead of stable systems, we work with dynamic systems. Instead of simple and clear programs, we engage diverse and contingent programs. We work with, instead of precision and exactness, intermittent crossbred methods and combinative systems. The dynamic and interactive are qualities of contemporary architecture that set it apart from the clarity of the classic and the functional purity of the modern. Today we long for an absolute architecture after decades of ameliorating historicism. We desire an architecture that is integral rather than empirical, that has depth rather than breadth; we desire an architecture that will inspire the soul.

Working with doubt can yield an intrinsic affirmation of human choice that gives presence to an idea. Without intrinsicalness, there is no architecture. (Building construction continues regardless of the lack of architecture.) Architecture is for the bold in spirit; it rises to a pledge of inspired space out of a crowd of shrugging shoulders. A fusion of changing functions finds its flow within the open volume of an emphatic testimony, so that architecture today can in and of itself shape and inspire new feelings.

Yesterday's efforts to develop a technology for our needs have given way to an avalanche of new technologies and the challenge of incorporating them. Technology-guided function slips easily into technocratic architecture. Discoveries in science require a new relation to architecture, not a renewal of monastic rationality or deterministic thinking. A nonconformist openness explores new potentials while embracing archaic wisdom. Incongruous methods conduct explorations that are critical of science and yet that utilize ultramodern techniques, creating supercharged doubt.

We should aspire to build an architecture free of taking one thing for another. Rising like blood to a slapped face, architecture is not generic; its passion is set ricocheting through the generic, causing a positive chain reaction of embracing feeling. Architecture challenges the generic and, in an intense realization, forms become specific.

Generalized, repeated, speculative constructions of rent-collecting maximization spring up continuously across the continent. Indifference to quality of life is the norm. Banality in excess yields a negativity, which has become apocalyptic in today's society. Faultless eyes watch social terrorism in the brittle world of suburban high schools. A fashionable (cynical) acceptance of commercial forces is opportunistic and unconvincing. Negative capability is the capacity to take in all that is problematic, and in the face of uncertainties, create. We need sincere architects with negative capability and the imagination to forge a catalyst for change.

Rather than a fixed and systematic background, a dynamic and relative world of change forces displacements. The hoped-for stable and unified theory in physics has given way to theories based on constantly changing parameters. Physicists speak of the universe as having a number of different possible phases comparable to different phases of matter. Allowing different possibilities in architecture requires opening up thought, comparable to new science—working with doubt. To doubt the validity of our ingrained opinions, ideals and views that we so hotly defend takes courage and endurance. What is our central paradox? A joy in doubt in the deepest sense of being.

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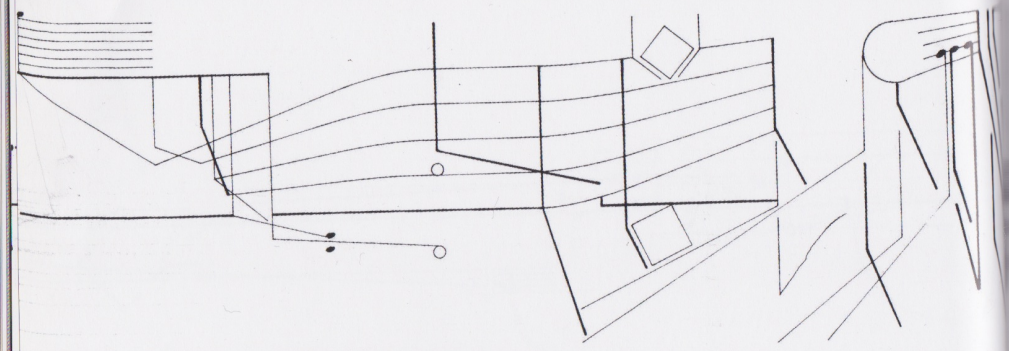
Following: Absolute notation/indeterminate notation, first by John Cage, then by Cornelius Cardew, whose unfettered approach embraced the radical openness of indeterminacy.



# DURATION

## (THE NOT YET MEETS THE ALREADY GONE)

"I simply think that water is the image of time, and every New Year's Eve, in some pagan fashion, I try to find myself near water... preferably an ocean... to watch the emergence of a new helping, a new cupful of time from it."

—Joseph Brodsky, *Watermark*

Henri Bergson argued in his book *Matter and Memory* (1911) that we cannot speak of time, we can only speak of duration. Duration, a fluid, flowing time, is intertwined with an experience of being where past, present, and future merge. If one extreme of time is the experiential time of individual being, the other extreme is the abstract, anonymous, measured time of science. As we strike a balance between these dynamic extremes, we are enmeshed in changing paradigms. Bergson's critique of chronometric theories of time argued for psychological time as duration—an argument in which time equals space.

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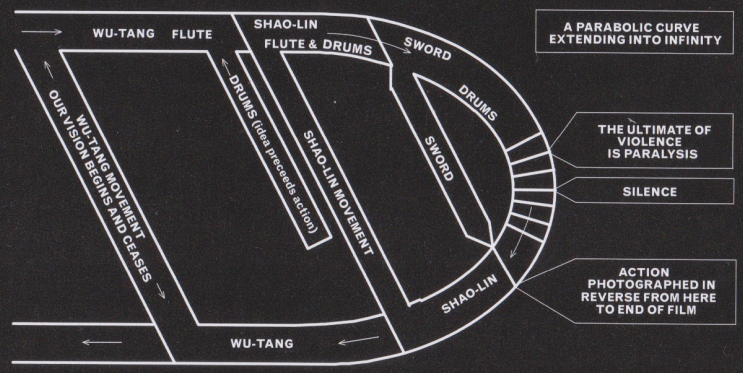
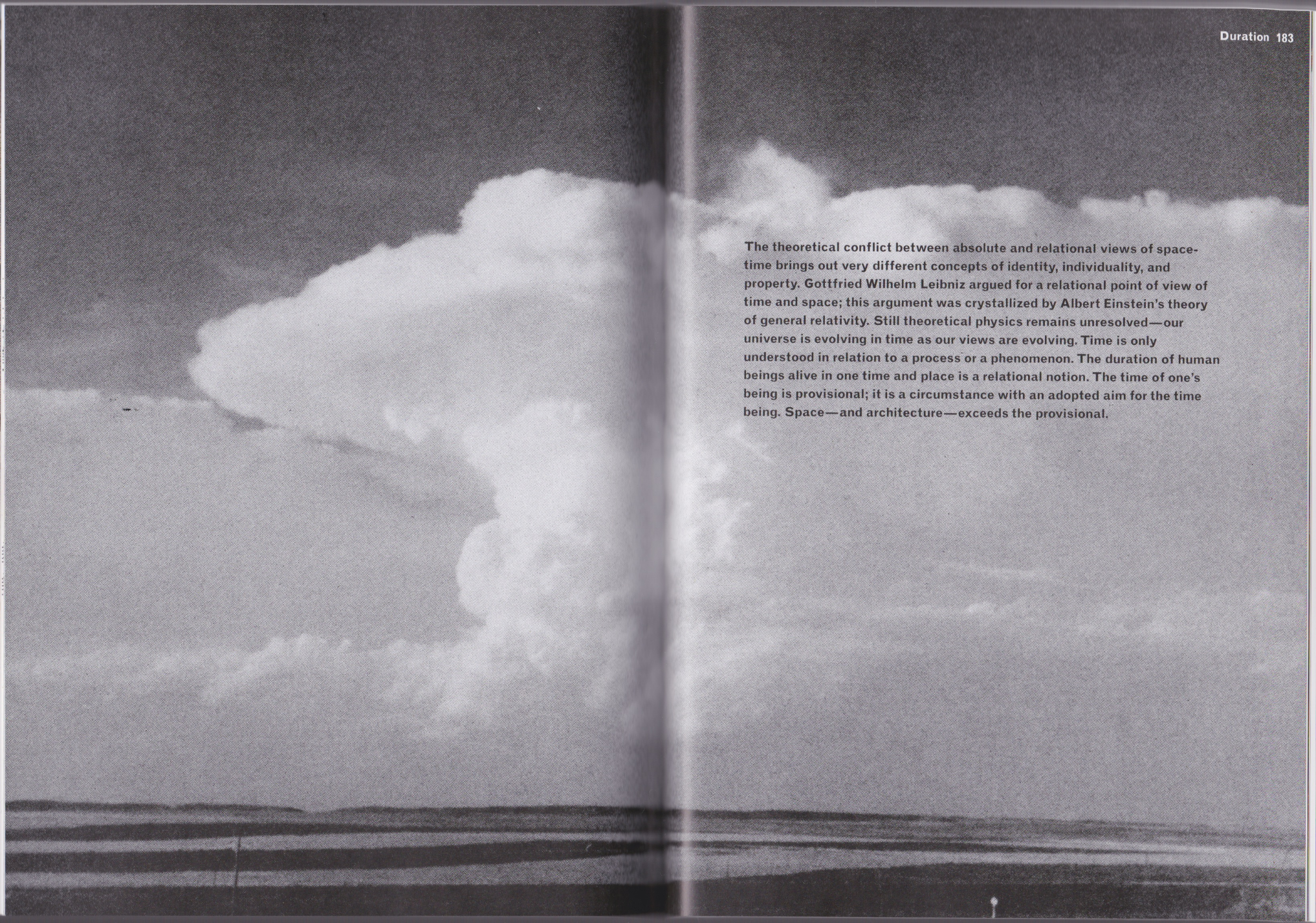
Time/action diagram for Maya Deren's 1948 film *Meditation on Violence*. Two parabolic arcs describe three types of Chinese boxing in a single continuous movement. The last portion of the film is printed in reverse motion.





The theoretical conflict between absolute and relational views of space-time brings out very different concepts of identity, individuality, and property. Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz argued for a relational point of view of time and space; this argument was crystallized by Albert Einstein's theory of general relativity. Still theoretical physics remains unresolved—our universe is evolving in time as our views are evolving. Time is only understood in relation to a process or a phenomenon. The duration of human beings alive in one time and place is a relational notion. The time of one's being is provisional; it is a circumstance with an adopted aim for the time being. Space—and architecture—exceeds the provisional.

## CORRELATIONAL PROGRAMMING

Modern life is characterized by programmatic fluctuation: turbulent shifts in demographics, changes in the desires of restless populations, and the alternation of local and regional political wings. The initial program brief of even a single building is typically shaken up and reorganized during the planning process. When a portion of the program is taken away, new programs are invented to occupy the building envelope.

The disquietude of programmatic fluctuation can be taken as an advantage. Is programmatic indeterminacy a disaster for any architect who aspires to a relationship of form to function? Will the profusion of the articulated-skin approach prevail simply as a solution for internal indeterminacy?

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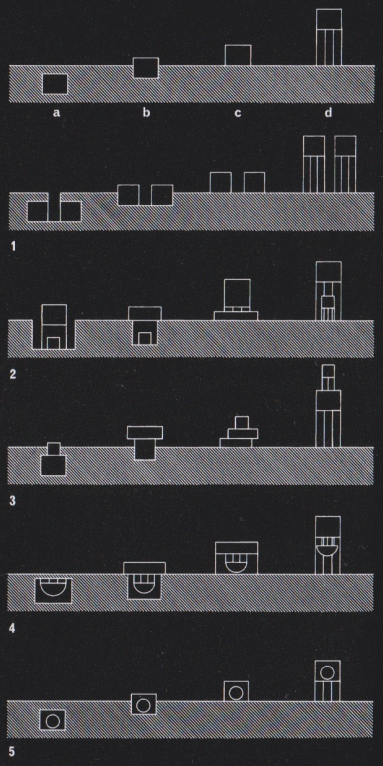
Chi-Chi has a bath against her will.

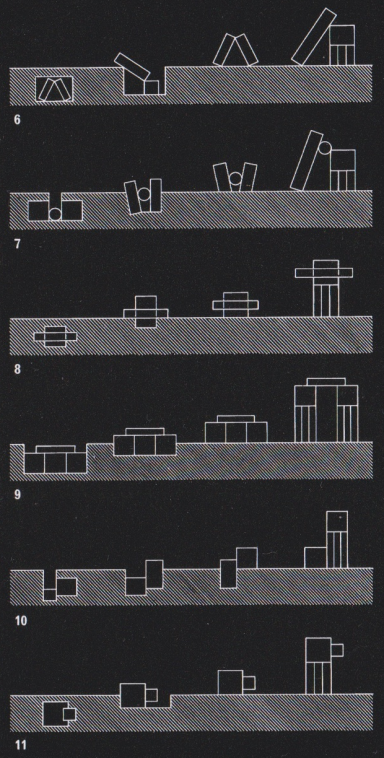
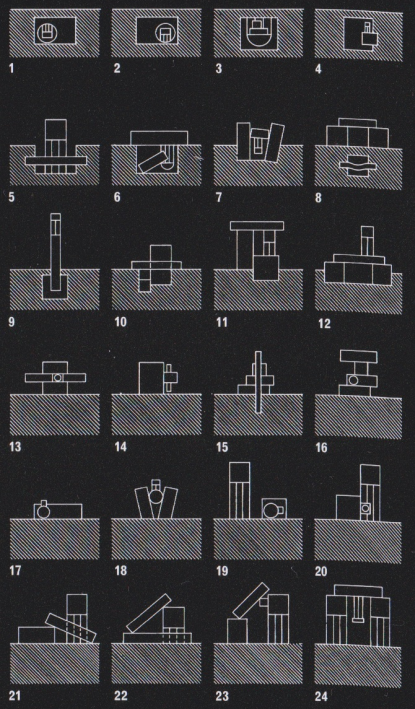
**Correlational charts:**
A table of links and correlations beginning with the four conditions of architecture:
A. Under the ground
B. In the ground
C. On the ground
D. Over the ground

**Primary Relations:**
1. Near
2. Over
3. Atop
4. Under
5. Within
6. Against
7. Between
8. Through
9. Across
10. Beside
11. From

**Complex Relations:**
1. Under within a within (below)
2. Over within a within (below)
3. Atop an under (below)
4. Atop a from (below)
5. Over a through (in)
6. Against an under (in)
7. Under a between (in)
8. Across (on) over a through (under)
9. Atop a vertical through (in)
10. Through a beside (in)
11. Across an atop beside (on)
12. Atop an across (in)
13. Within a through (on)
14. Through a from (on)
15. Through atop (on)
16. Within atop (on)
17. From a within through (on)
18. Atop a between (on)
19. Above near from a within (on)
20. Within a from beside (above)
21. Over an against (on)
22. Against an over (above)
23. Across against a from (above)
24. Under an across (above)

## Primary Relations




## Complex Relations