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Romi Moller | Directed Research

Contents

Romi Moller
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Building Oddities applies techniques of **defamiliarization** borrowed from art practices to **reimagine** three architectural **landmarks** which survived the Great Chicago Fire. Alterations to the existing structures reveal their **unique histories** and speculate on **new futures**.

1 - Defamiliarization

This exploration of defamiliarization stems from my personal interest in transforming something familiar into something unfamiliar. Defamiliarizing an object forms tension between an object and its qualities. This tension begins to provoke an aesthetic experience that allows one to see the object for the first time, differently. Once an object is defamiliarized, it becomes estranged. Estrangement is a quality that we attribute to the aesthetics that are challenging the real. Estrangement lies at the center of human experience, both in art and in life. It refers to how the familiar is made strange, perceptible, disturbing, as if never before encountered. Estrangement originated as a form of literary and poetic theory within Russian formalism in 1917 and was elaborated through the work of Viktor Borisovich Shklovsky.

Estrangement can be found anywhere, yet I chose to explore this phenomenon through artists and their art. I selected artworks that I find explore different forms of estrangement through using techniques of defamiliarization. After creating this catalog of artworks, I explored the artists and tried to understand their approach and how it can be categorized in the different strategies of estrangement.

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Estrangement can be approached and reached through strategies such as **counter figuration**, **material instability**, **hybrid articulation**, and **para-fictional scenarios**.

Counter figuration refers to the approach of collaging or manipulating the qualities of an object. Through this action, the qualities of the object begin to change visually. Counter figuration allows the object you are experiencing to have a unique form using what is already there, just by reconfiguration.

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Erwin Wurm is an Austrian artist whose purpose and effect of his work changes overtime. Erwin Wurm uses absurdity to comment on Western attitudes towards commodities, food, ethics, and philosophy. Wurm uses techniques of defamiliarization in his sculpture to completely alter the object's form. In the case of his work, counter figuration plays a big role in how the objects are reformed. In his pieces titled "Fat Car" and "Fat House" Wurm transforms the objects through inflating or expanding them, creating a completely new version of the initial object.

"Fat House" - Erwin Wurm

Origional

Origional

"Fat Car" - Erwin Wurm

Before Defamiliarized

Defamiliarized

Fat House in between non fat houses

Fat Car driven on express way

Material instability is an approach of estrangement where the object becomes defamiliarized once its materiality becomes "unstable".

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In **Meret Oppenheim's** 1936 fur covered teacup, titled "Le Déjeuner en Fourrure", one can still recognize that the object is a teacup, yet the quality of the object becomes unfamiliar. Oppenheim stresses the physicality of Object. She reinforces the way we can readily imagine the feeling of fur while drinking from the cup, and using the saucer spoon. The frisson one experiences when the cup is unexpectedly wrapped in fur is based on our familiarity with both. The fur requires us to extend our sensory experiences to fully appreciate the work. The object insists that we imagine what sipping warm tea from this cup feels like. It makes us imagine how the bristles would feel upon our lips.

"Le Déjeuner en Fourrure" - Meret Oppenheim

Origional

Defamiliarized

Hot tea poured into a fuzzy mug

Tom Sachs is an American, New York City based, contemporary artist. Tom Sachs remixes and spits the object back out again, so that the results are transformed. Sachs emphasizes that all the steps that lead up to the end result are always on display. This means that all seams, joints, and screws are left exposed. The process is part of the object. Nothing is erased, sanded away, or rendered invisible. Sachs takes recognizable objects and transforms them through exposing unseen materials or parts.

Daniel Arsham's work plays with the concept of future history and functional archaeology. He presents preserved versions of contemporary objects and architecture. He creates and crystalizes ambiguous in-between spaces. Arsham takes familiar objects and, again, defamiliarizes them through playing with their material limits.
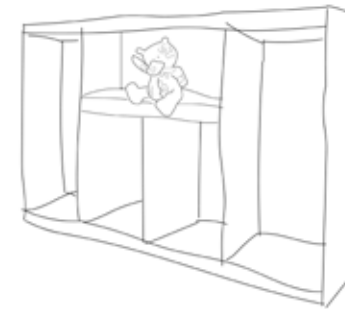
"Cracked Bear" - Daniel Arsham

Origional   Defamiliarized

"Nuggets" - Tom Sachs

Origional   Defamiliarized   Wrinkly, wooden Barbie in Barbie packaging

Destroyed teddy bear on shelf

Hybrid articulation within estrangement is a strange combination of materials, patterns, forms, and programs that don't belong together but have the opportunity to work together. This combination of two or more things becomes something "other".

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Paul McCarthy is an American contemporary artist working across media in performance, sculpture, and film. Inspired by American popular culture, lewd sexual innuendo, and the work of Joseph Beuys, McCarthy constructs complicated critiques of consumerism and art. McCarthy's work expresses that nothing is fully disguised, yet it's pushed to the point where you begin to distrust what part of which intersected figure you are looking at. Again, the quality that attributes to the idea of challenging what is real.

"White Snow" - Paul McCarthy

Origional

"Balloon Dog" - Paul McCarthy

Origional

Defamiliarized

Defamiliarized

Warped White Snow in Snow White scenery

Huge balloon dog in play room

Para-fictional scenarios can be used when challenging the real. This scenario is similar to counter figuration, however, in this case, one would be experimenting with photography. This approach tricks the human eye into thinking that something is there when, in reality, the object has been collaged with the goal to challenge the real.

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Filip Dujardin is a fine art and architectural photographer based in Belgium. He approaches his work through a series of fictional structures created using a digital collaging technique from photographs of real buildings in and around Ghent, Belgium. Some of his architectural creations are structurally impossible or implausible. Using the para-fictional scenario as an approach of estrangement, Filip Dujardin causes one to think really hard about what is real and what isn't.

Through collecting, analyzing, and categorizing these artists and their art within the strategies of estrangement, it is hard not to compare their characteristics and effects. This comparison explores the effect of the object after it has been manipulated and asks whether the object is formed or deformed and whether it is familiar or unfamiliar.

For example, Meret Oppenheim's "Le Déjeuner en Fourrure" explores material instability and therefore is deformed. Even though the teaset is deformed, it is still familiar and legible. "Balloon Dog" by Paul McCarthy explores hybrid articulation. The object is scaled up and the material is different, yet the object is formed and still familiar. "White Snow" by Paul McCarthy explores hybrid articulation through taking a familiar object and transforming it completely. This object is therefore deformed and unfamiliar.

Lastly, the "Chicago Model" by Andrew Kovacs is an example of counter figuration. Kovacs is an example of counter figuration. Kovacs takes multiple familiar objects and repurposes them to create an unfamiliar object. The individual parts of the whole are formed yet are unfamiliar.

Through questioning what is real through analyzing the aesthetics of transformed buildings and objects, one can really begin to understand how people react and interact with the estranged.
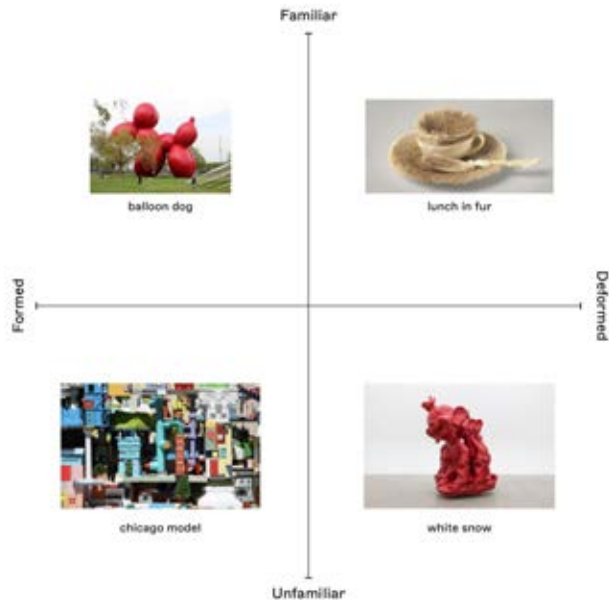
2 - Art Practices

A lot of the referenced artists experiment with familiar things and transform them into something other.

Whether or not there is a meaning behind this transformation, each artist explores a different strategy that impacts the way the viewer sees their work.

The artists that are referenced in this chapter are some of the biggest influences for this project.

Each artist approaches a familiar object and transforms it in unique, unexpected ways.

Some make sense, and others don't make sense at all.

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Rachel Whiteread

Her work makes the **invisible visible**

More often than not, Whiteread's casts are of **negative space**, or the space between, under, or otherwise around things.

The space that surrounds and defines an object is what we see in her sculptures.

While her work appears minimal, her sculptures are filled with **emotion**, **memory**, and the **macabre**.

Whitread's sculptures always have **deeper stories** to tell.

They capture the negative spaces around us, or use **familiar materials** in **unexpected ways**. Or they might trick us into thinking they're something they're not.

Erwin Wurm

The purpose and effect of Erwin Wurm's work changes overtime.

Wurm uses **absurdity** to comment on Western attitudes towards commodities, **food**, **ethics**, and **philosophy**.

Initially, the objects were made purely for Wurm's own interest in working with **sculpture**.

Changing **masses** and **volume** in relation to the changing **content**.

Daily life in relation to sculpture.

Erwin Wurm

"**We** change in volume" "We are **sculptural work**"
Overtime, Wurm's work became a social component.

Loves to make work that **makes people see** their daily life **differently**.

Do Ho Suh

Works primarily in sculpture, installation, and drawing.

Suh is well known for **re-creating architectural structures** and **objects** using fabric in what the artist describes as an "act of memorialization."

Suh's work focuses on the different ways **architecture mediates** the **experience** of space. Architecture has been a key reference for the artist since the mid-1990s.

His **blurring** of the line between sculpture and architecture often renders architectural structures portable through **material change**.

He recreated his childhood home using polyester and silk.

Paul McCarthy

"Spinoff" = a **series or a body of work** that will **stem** off of an original piece and have its own autonomy.

Retelling / reinterpreting the story of Snow White from the lens of Paul McCarthy.

Paul, himself, acted as if he were Walt Disney and Paul at the same time.

The wooden sculptures of this project are **playing with our expectations** in an incredibly elaborate way.

We see them as **physical entities**. But we can very easily describe them as **monsters**.

Abstraction is crucial in Paul McCarthy's work

Abstracted from a **narrative**

Object? Abstraction? Representation?

His work has a strong connection to Hollywood as he is incredibly interested yet disgusted by the power, money exploitation of people seen in many of the narratives.

Engaging in a **challenge** of the commodification of culture. McCarthy is reminding us to **engage** and to be more **aware** of humanity.

Tom Sachs

Tom Sachs **remixes** and **spits the object back out again**, so that the results are **transformed**.

All the **steps** that led up to the **end result** are always on display.

On a practical level, this means that all **seams**, **joints**, **screws** or for that matter anything holding stuff together, like foamcore and plywood, are left exposed.

Nothing is erased, sanded away, or rendered invisible.

Nothing Sachs makes is ever finished.

Process exists in everything.

Sculptures, sneakers, movies, paintings – it's all the same.

Loves his phone, loves his computer, but the perfection and flawlessness doesn't show a human was there in the process of making the product

Human **individuality** is a human's benefit over a computer's.

Our natural impulses as human beings to show our **flaws** must be **amplified**.

Meret Oppenheim

The fur requires us to **extend our sensory experiences** to fully **appreciate** the work.

The object insists we **imagine** what sipping warm tea from this cup feels like, how the bristles would **feel** upon our lips.

Meret Oppenheim stresses the **physicality** of **Object**.

She reinforces the way we can **readily imagine** the **feeling** of the fur while drinking from the cup, and using the saucer and spoon.

The **frisson** we experience when the cup is unexpectedly **wrapped** in fur is based on our familiarity with both

Ai Weiwei

Ai Weiwei uses art as a means of **confronting** the sociopolitical system in China.

His recurrent **manipulations** of Chinese cultural artifacts **juxtapose the materiality** and tradition of the country's imperial history with symbols of the current phase of its modernization.

Despite being prohibited from traveling outside of China or engaging in public speech, Ai continues to create works that **openly criticize** the Chinese Communist leadership and advocate democracy and freedom of expression.

Andrew Kovacs

His project called Archive of Affinities is never ending and seeks, searches out, and scans each architectural image - good, bad, and ugly.

This collection of **useless architecture** with overwhelming architectural qualities is arranged in multiple ways to become a crucible for making architecture from architecture.

Kovacs' design studio, Office Kovacs, works on projects at **all scales** from books, exhibitions, temporary installations, interiors, homes, speculative architectural proposals and public architecture competitions.

Daniel Arsham

He creates and crystallizes ambiguous **in-between spaces** or **situations**, and further stages what he refers to as future **relics** of the present.

Arsham's work plays with the concept of **future** history and **fictional** archaeology.

He presents fossilized versions of contemporary **objects** and **architecture**.

Amanda Williams

Amanda Williams is a visual artist who trained as an architect. Williams' creative practice employs color as a way to **draw attention to** the complexities of race, place, and value in cities.

The landscapes in which she operates on are the visual residue of **invisible policies**.

Williams' installations, paintings, and works on paper seek to **inspire new ways** of looking at the **familiar** and, in the process, raise questions about the state of urban space and citizenship in America.

Ron Mueck

Mueck's manipulations of sculptural scale are often **dramatic**, and his figures are either large or reduced drastically to strengthen the metaphor between the **artist's material presentation** of a personality and the psychic life the **viewer imagines for the figure**.

Viewers ultimately find themselves in intimate moments where their own personalities and experiences align themselves to his sculpture.

Mueck's sculptures respond to the minute details of the human body, playing with **scale** to produce engrossing visual images.

Mueck spends a long time, sometimes more than a year, creating each sculpture.

His subject matter is deeply private, and is often concerned with **people's unspoken thoughts and feelings**.

Louise Nevelson

Although she was fascinated with the **living quality of wood**, in the 1960s she added plastics and formica to her repertoire of media, and in the 1970s, she began to create **monumentally scaled** pieces in aluminum and steel.

Nevelson's sculptures are about **myth** and **mystery**. Although she took motifs from the world around her, she stated that she identified with ideas "more than with nature."

Filip Dujardin

Humor, **absurdity**, notions of **construction**, and ideas of **beauty** and **intelligence**.

In his work, Dujardin explores architecture as a form of **sculpture** in time and space.

He takes a remarkable approach to working with architecture's **typical typologies** and **archetypes**.

Dujardin transforms the **ordinary** into the **exceptional** through just minor **alterations**.

Impossible reality.

Architectural photography is about showing but also about not showing.

A picture can be clear but can also **suggest something that is not there**.

Digital collage as a tool to make comments on architectural history / traditions.

At first glance, Dujardin's photographs of buildings seem almost ordinary, though highly modern, only revealing their **structural implausibility** upon close examination.

He ignores the laws of physics, defying gravity, and material, to create exquisite architectural compositions.

Position Artist

The approach of positioning the artist on a scale stems from the **frustration** one experiences when trying to understand a piece of artwork.
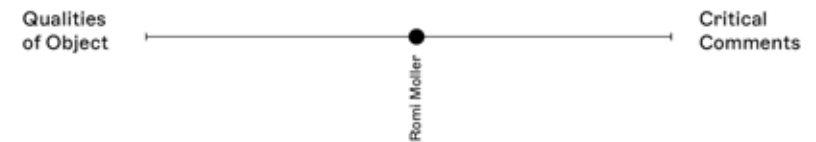
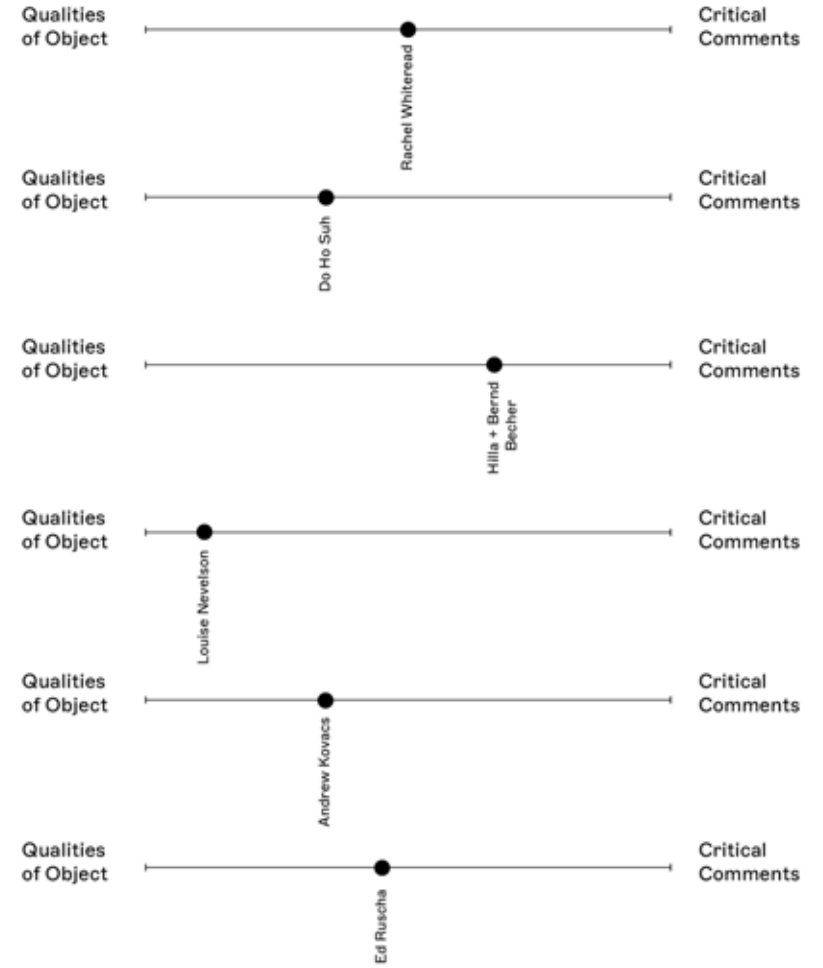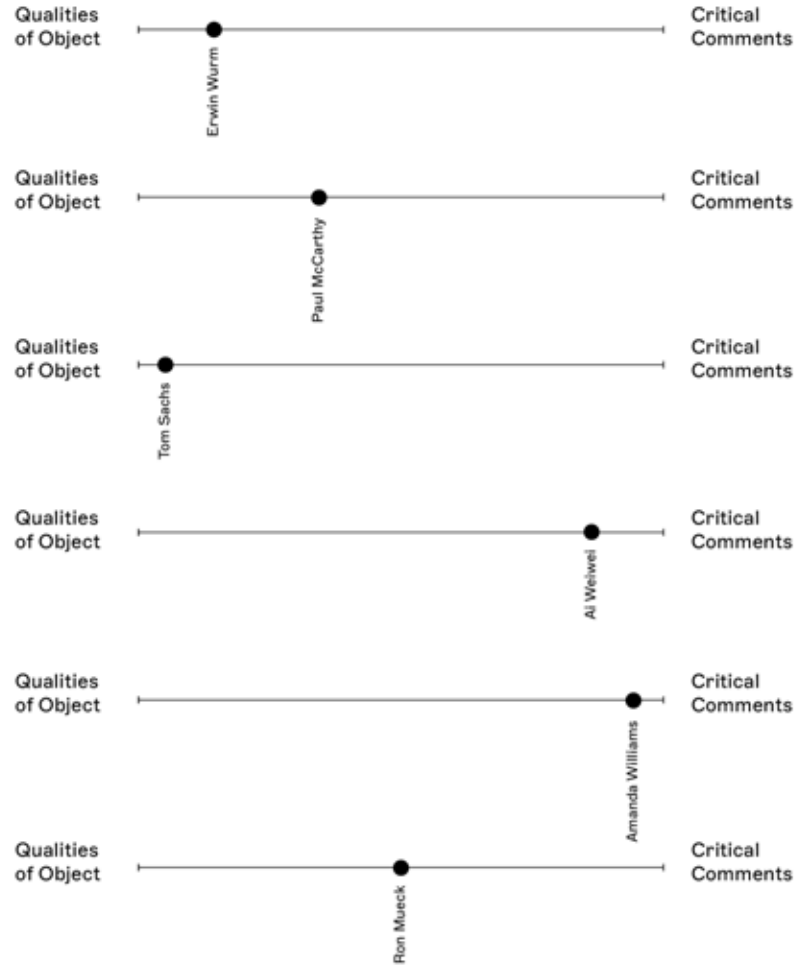"What does this really mean?"
"What is the deeper meaning behind this?"
"What was the artist thinking when they were creating this?"
"What did the artist want the viewer to be thinking when viewing the piece of art?"

After spending some time researching these artists, I recognized that many create purely for an **aesthetic pursuit** that focuses on the qualities of the object. While others create to promote a **lasting effect**; one that produces **critical comments**.

Placing these artists on a scale helps one understand which artist's work has the most impactful effect on the viewer. In most cases, it's the artist that finds themselves in the middle.
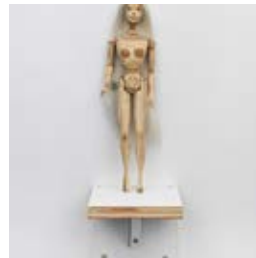
Qualities of Object   •———————————————•   Critical Comments

Romi Moller

Qualities of Object — ●——————————————— Critical Comments

Erwin Wurm

Qualities of Object —————●————————————— Critical Comments

Paul McCarthy

Qualities of Object ●————————————————— Critical Comments

Tom Sachs

Qualities of Object ———————————————●— Critical Comments

Ai Weiwei

Qualities of Object —————————————————● Critical Comments

Amanda Williams

Qualities of Object ——————————●———————— Critical Comments

Ron Mueck

Qualities of Object ———————————————●— Critical Comments

Rachel Whiteread

Qualities of Object ————●————————————— Critical Comments

Do Ho Suh

Qualities of Object ———————————————●— Critical Comments

Hilla + Bernd Becher

Qualities of Object ——●———————————————— Critical Comments

Louise Nevelson

Qualities of Object ————————●————————— Critical Comments

Andrew Kovacs

Qualities of Object —————————●———————— Critical Comments

Ed Ruscha

Counter Figuration

Refers to the approach of **collaging** or **manipulating** the qualities of an object.

Material Instability

Where the object becomes defamiliar-ized once its **materiality** becomes **"unstable"**.

Hybrid Articulation

Materials, patterns, forms, and programs that **don't belong together** but have the **opportunity to work together**.

Scale

Material

Form

context

Frame

Mirror Mirror

Cover

Paint

Reveal

Wrap

Inflate

Copy
Copy

Recontextualize

Ghost

Blur

Erase

Warp

mAsH uP

Erugifnocer

Add+Add

Stretch

Counter Figuration

Refers to the approach of **collaging** or **manipulating** the qualities of an object.

Erugifnocer

Copy
Copy

Frame

ɿoɿɿiM Mirror

Recontextualize

mAsH uP

Material Instability

Where the object becomes defamiliarized once its **materiality** becomes **"unstable"**.

ɿoɿɿiM Mirror

Reveal

Add+Add

Erase

Copy
Copy

Ghost

Hybrid Articulation

Materials, patterns, forms, and programs that **don't belong together** but have the **opportunity to work together**.

Cover

Wrap

Add+Add

Blur

3 - The Great Chicago Fire

The Great Chicago Fire started on **October 8th**, 1871. This fire burned until **October 10th**, 1871. The fire burned thousands of acres, killed hundreds of people, and caused damage worth millions of dollars.

The cause of the fire remains a unknown. From the O'Leary barn, located on the city's southwest side, the fire spread into the heart of Chicago's business district.

Rain put out the fire around a day later. By then, the fire burned an area 4 miles long and 1 mile wide. The fire destroyed 17,450 buildings and 73 miles of street. 100,000 people were left homeless by the fire. While only 120 bodies were recovered, it is believed that 300 people died.

Buildings often had a single layer of fireproof material on the exterior, hiding the wooden structure under. The Water Tower building was one of those buildings.

$200 million in **damage**

300 **fatalities**

17,450 **buildings destroyed**

100,000 **people left homeless**

"Started by"

Milk Thieves

Spontaneous combustion

The O'Learys' Cow

Fueled by

Months without rain

Strong SW wind

Wooden buildings, streets, and sidewalks

Stopped by

Rainfall

Lake Michigan

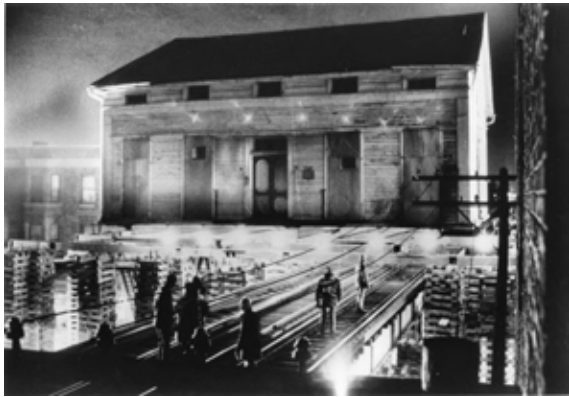Stretches of unbuilt lots

Only a few structures survived

4 - Process

Through exploring the **effects of estrangement** in addition to researching the Great Chicago Fire, my interest in defamiliarization is **contextualized**. Through assigning an estrangement technique to Clarke House, The Water Tower, and Bellinger House, each building's story will be told through an **expression of transformed and defamiliarized designs**.

The process of this transformation involves an understanding of how each building survived the fire, the impact it had on the city of Chicago, and how each building stands today as a landmark which is supposed to represent the resilience of the City of Chicago.

Each building is transformed carefully to reveal each survival story. The goal is to allow the viewer to **learn** and **remember** - just by viewing and experiencing the **three sculptures**.

Counter Figuration

Refers to the approach of **collaging** or **manipulating** the qualities of an object.

Material Instability

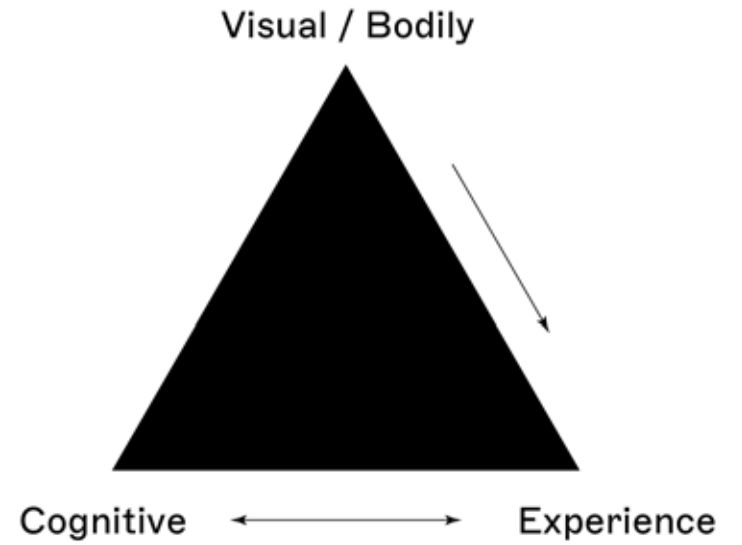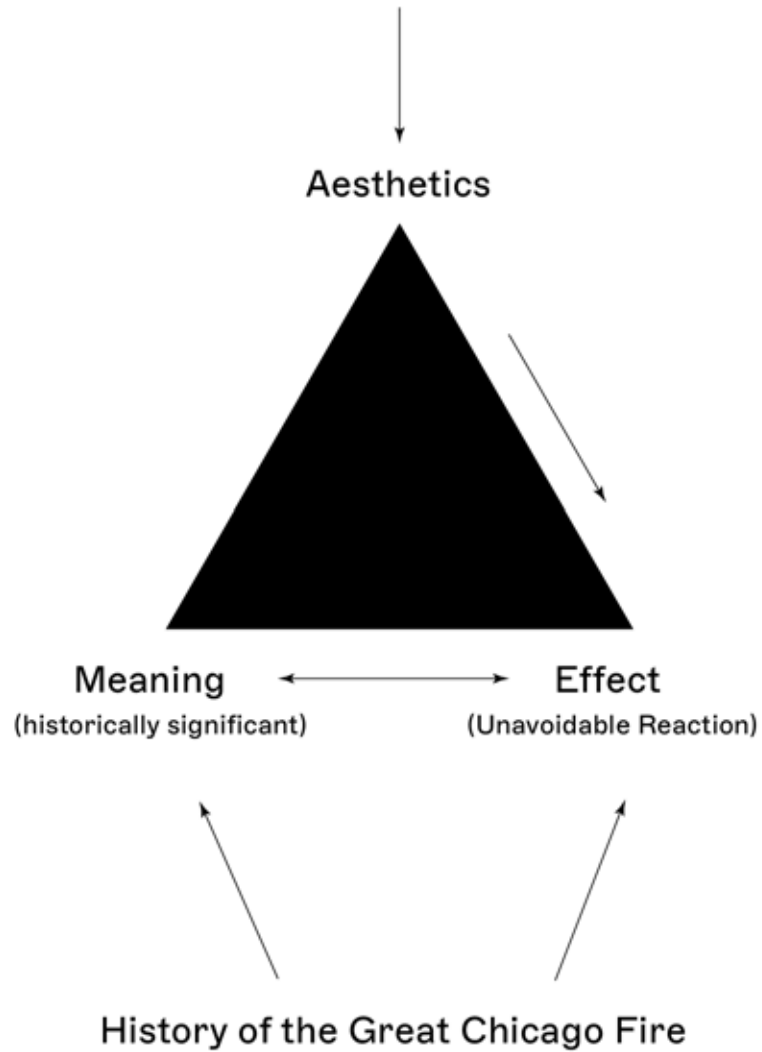Where the object becomes defamiliar-ized once its **materiality** becomes **"un-stable"**.

Hybrid Articulation

Materials, patterns, forms, and programs that **don't belong together** but have the **opportunity to work together**.

Clarke House

Bellinger House
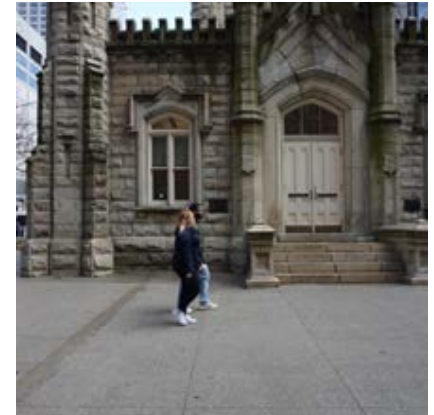
Water Tower

Techniques of Defamiliarization

Aesthetics

Meaning
(historically significant)

Effect
(Unavoidable Reaction)

History of the Great Chicago Fire

Visual / Bodily

Cognitive

Experience

Clarke House

Clarke House is Chicago's oldest house. Clarke House has moved to different locations, twice, and was renovated to suit the occupier's needs, multiple times.

The house was deconstructed through the removal of multiple elements and transported on a moving truck.

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Taking from the strategy of counter figuration, this house is designed to reveal the sensation of temporality. The house is redesigned through revealing structural elements from the interior, and scattering elements to be added. Designing this house in a state of frozen construction reveals the impermanence and resilience of the house.

Deconstructed and transported, multiple times

Bellinger House

Bellinger House, located in Lincoln Park, has a unique survival story. The house's owner at the time, police officer, Richard Bellinger, heard about the fire heading North and immediately took action.

Richard Bellinger allegedly covered his house using wet cloths and wooden planks removed from the sidewalks of the same street.

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The translated design of this house, using the strategy of material instability, uses the existing cladding of the house and covers it entirely. This technique hides multiple elements of the house — creating a blurry effect.

Covered and wrapped to **protect** and preserve

Water Tower

Located in the Magnificent Mile, on Michigan avenue, the Chicago Water Tower served as the city's pumping station during the time of the fire. The Water Tower failed the city of Chicago through acting as a false facade.

The exterior facade of the structure remained intact after the fire, yet the interior pipes malfunctioned, and water could not be pumped out to the city.

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Referencing this idea of a false facade and using techniques borrowed from the strategy of hybrid articulation, the tower expands, extends, and changes materiality.

This action allows for the viewer to see into the tower, creating a sense of curiosity to see beyond the exterior shell.

Failed to protect the city through acting as a **false facade**

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building