

BOOK REVIEW



Fantastic Architecture

Edited by Dick Higgins and Wolf Vostell
200 pages, 120 B&W images
Published by Something Else Press,
New York, 1970. Facsimile English
edition published by Primary
Information, Brooklyn, 2015.
\$28.

A New Polymorphous Reality: Higgins' and Vostell's Fantastic Architecture

By Paige K. Johnston

F*antastic Architecture* is a playground, a tripped-out thought experiment freed of hypothesis and conclusion. Between its covers, architecture is unconstrained by logistical, material or financial limitations, residing instead in the realm of ideas.

The book begins with an explosion: the endpapers (front and back) present a halftone photograph of a mushroom cloud, labeled, with droll unnecessary didacticism, “nuclear explosion.” The image is a metaphor for what the editors—Fluxus artists Dick Higgins and Wolf Vostell—intended to do to the architectural status quo in the late 1960s: blow it up. In Vostell’s introductory manifesto, which, in its placement before both the title page and front matter “blows up” the architecture of the book itself, he laments that man is languishing in a world of repressive architecture where “everything is forbidden.”¹ Unleashing an arsenal of exclamation points, he declares, “only the realization of utopias will make man happy and release him from his frustrations!”²

What follows is a compendium of nearly 70 radical architectural projects by 36 contributors from the United States, Western Europe and Japan. The projects range from paper architecture to land art, essays and instruction pieces, underscoring Vostell’s declaration that “Action is architecture! Everything is architecture!”³ In his introduction, Higgins suggests that artists have a unique ability to see things in the world without being bound to any particular framework. In other words, the problem with architecture is architects and the system that supports them.⁴

Fantastic Architecture, first published in 1969 in German under the title *Pop Architektur*, was released in English by Something Else Press the following year. Primary Information released this facsimile edition, hardbound with fabric covers and a glossy jacket, in 2015. The projects are presented as if in a scrapbook, reproducing photographs, typewritten descriptions, telegrams, hand-written notes, drawings and early computer print-outs. Printed on heavy stock, the images bleed to the edge and often occupy the full spread; the orientation of both texts and images shifts unpredictably from horizontal to vertical. This disorientation caused by these formal discontinuities heightens the individual personality of each project, making for a particularly physical reading experience as the reader turns the book this way and that.

These artists thought big—cutting the earth in half (Stefan Wewerka), blowing up the earth with 12,000 nuclear bombs in order to send it zooming into outer space (Raoul Hausmann), cross-country conveyor belts (Geoff Hendricks), giant balls (Claes Oldenburg), giant scissors (Oldenburg), giant irons (Vostell), giant train cars (Hans Hollein). In *Plan for building a new city of Vienna* (1968), Gerhard Rühm proposes four buildings, each in the shape of a letter—W I E N—collectively spelling the city name. The buildings would be “completely sealed off from the outside . . . so that the inhabitants are not troubled by having to go out,” suggesting that everything man needs to sustain life could be found within: one building for city administration, one for meditation, one for “the sex lives of the inhabitants” and one for the elderly and invalids.⁵ Other projects manifest the gigantic through a relationship to time. For example, Ben Vautier’s handwritten *Architecture Project 1963* (1963) succinctly

proposes: “Don’t throw anything away for 70 years. Keep it. Live with it. Put it in your room house, appartement or garden.”⁶

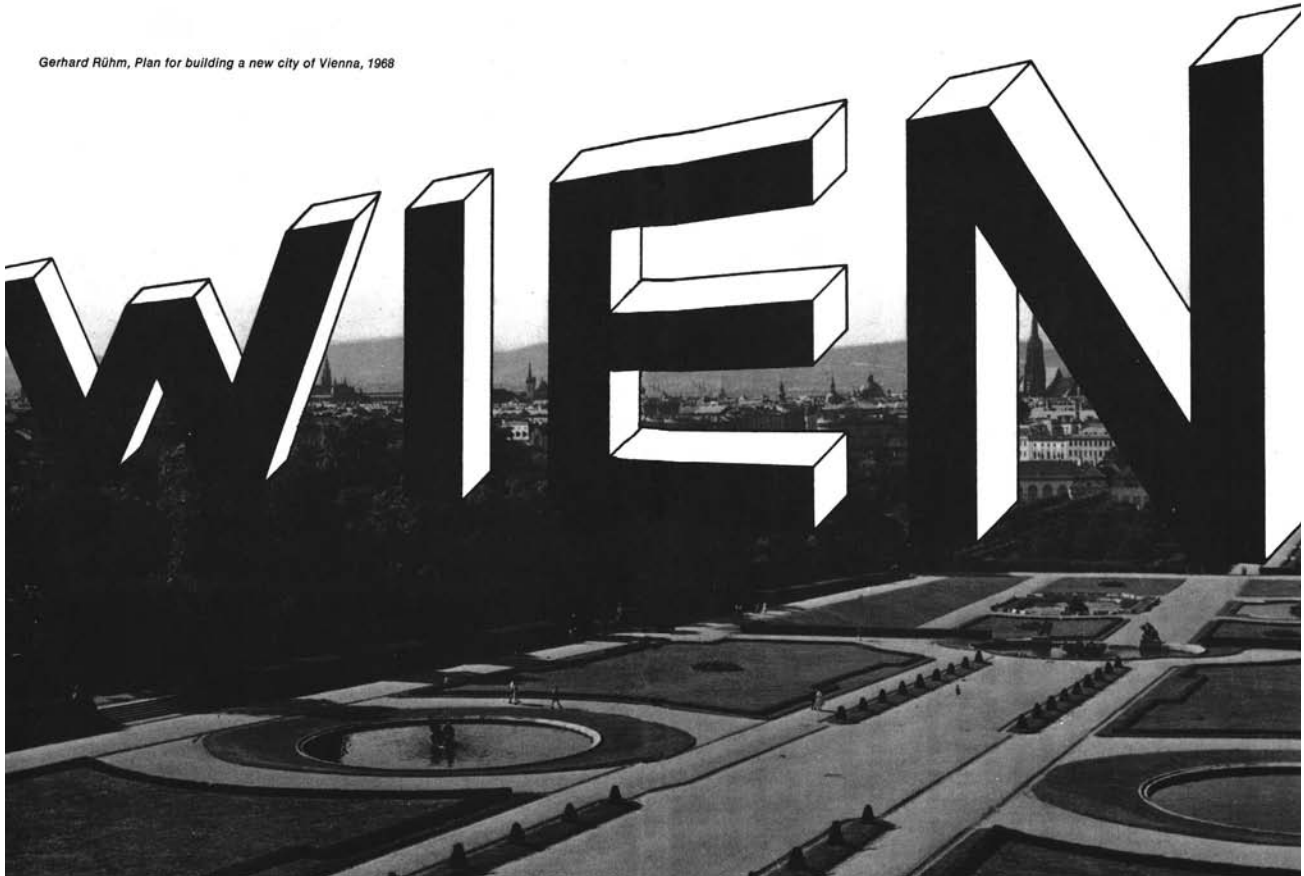
Alongside such visionary project proposals—unrealized and unrealizable—the book also includes documentation of extant land art works such as Michael Heizer’s *Dissipate* (1968); as Vostell points out, what unites all of them is a desire to disturb the familiar.⁷

Peppered throughout the volume are 14 short texts by Higgins and Vostell, headed “Captions” and printed on tracing paper (Mylar in the facsimile). Historically, architects used tracing papers to produce, amend and layer their drawings, and the editors surely used it to make this reference. But where the utility of translucent paper lay in the connections that could be made between layered drawings, Higgins and Vostell use it to print text, which creates visual noise that disrupts the legibility of the texts as well as what lies on the page behind. Unlike captions in a newspaper, which sit obediently beneath photographs to clarify things, these captions sometimes physically disrupt and obscure their subjects: the spread reproducing *Dissipate* is bisected by Caption 7, a gesture that cuts into the photograph in much the way that *Dissipate* cuts into the landscape of the Black Rock Desert.

Loosely topical, these captions cover a range of subjects such as “change, renewal, metamorphosis,” “ecology,” “compression” and “cost,” providing avenues for understanding projects whose purpose may at first be opaque, as well as drawing out links between them. Written in a consistent voice, both professorial and poetic, the captions are most engaging when they ask questions of the reader and of the projects. “Why propose a stair leading nowhere?” the first caption inquires, in response to Hausmann’s “*How about a city with only rumpus rooms?*”⁸ The book is a conversation between the editors and the projects, between the projects themselves, and between the book and the reader.

Before the nuclear explosion that closes the volume, Higgins and Vostell drop a penultimate bomb. In a concluding caption, which appears unexpectedly after the author photos and final credits, they observe that “not one of the projects in this entire book [deals] primarily with the problems of race or of nationality, the two great questions of our time . . .

Gerhard Rühm, *Plan for building a new city of Vienna, 1968*



Gerhard Rühm, *Plan for building a new city of Vienna* (1968), reproduced from Dick Higgins and Wolf Vostell (ed.), *Fantastic Architecture* (New York: Something Else Press, 1970 and Brooklyn: Primary Information, 2015).

are these questions being avoided?”⁹ *Fantastic Architecture* was born at the end of one of the most tumultuous decades in United States history, and yet beyond lampooning consumer culture the projects do little to address the issues roiling the world around them. For the editors to assemble this book only to end it by posing their own critique of what they have just presented pivots the conversation further in the direction of the reader, now implicated in the need to pursue questions yet unanswered.

But after five decades of similarly critical, satirical, political artworks, the consumption and luxury critiqued by the artists in *Fantastic Architecture* have ballooned into a full-blown throw-away society. Questions of race and geopolitics remain urgent, as evidenced by refugee crises, recent efforts by state lawmakers to undermine voting rights (reversing Civil Rights gains from the 1960s), and the continued brutalization of African-Americans by police. Turning a discipline on its head, as Higgins and Vostell were

went to do, may be a lively and essential endeavor, but in turning their final question to the merits of their own endeavor, perhaps the editors were acknowledging that fundamental societal change requires more than provocative proposals: it takes action. ■

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Notes:

1. Dick Higgins and Wolf Vostell, eds., *Fantastic Architecture* (Barton, VT: Something Else Press, 1970; facsimile edition, New York City: Primary Information, 2015), Vostell introductory section. (No page numbers).
2. *Ibid.*
3. *Ibid.*
4. *Ibid.*, Higgins introduction.
5. *Ibid.*, Gerhard Rühm submission.
6. *Ibid.*, following Caption 13.
7. *Ibid.*, Vostell introduction.
8. *Ibid.*, Caption 13.
9. *Ibid.*, Caption 14.