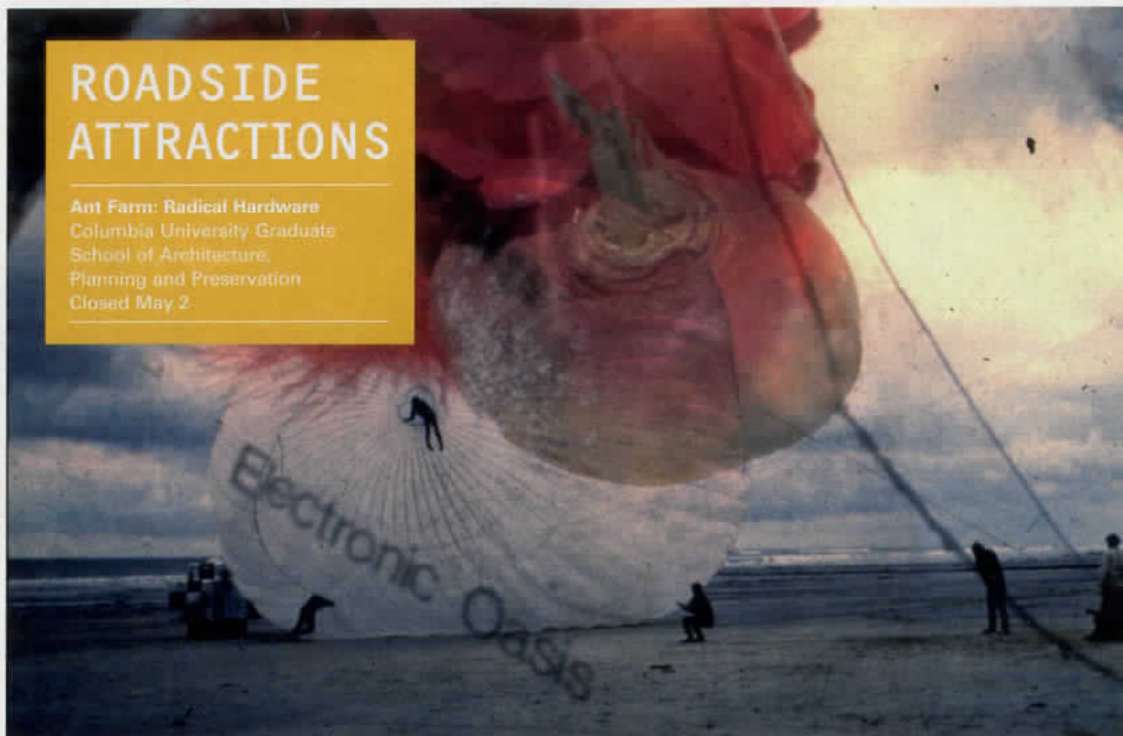


ROADSIDE
ATTRACTIONS

Ant Farm: Radical Hardware
Columbia University Graduate
School of Architecture,
Planning and Preservation
Closed May 2



COURTESY BAM/IFA

Ant Farm is perhaps best known in popular memory for *Cadillac Ranch* (1974) and *Media Burn* (1975)—works that involved partly submerging up-ended Cadillacs in the Texan desert and driving a car through a pyramid of flaming television sets. The casual observer can certainly be forgiven, then, for failing to immediately discern that these were architects at work on architecture.

Ant Farm: Radical Hardware at Columbia's Arthur Ross Gallery, is an admirable work of scholarship and provided a fascinating account of the germinating process of a seminal but often poorly understood

architectural presence. The exhibition set its focus between 1969 and 1971, Ant Farm's earliest years together, well before the group executed the now famous *Cadillac Ranch* and *Media Burn*. Co-curated by Felicity D. Scott and Mark Wasiuta, associate adjunct professor at Columbia and its director of exhibitions, the show revealed the deeply architectural nature of their work.

Ant Farm's three founding members trained as architects: Doug Michels at Yale, Chip Lord at Tulane, and Curtis Schreier, who became involved in 1969, at RISD. Even the most cursory walk through the gallery plainly revealed the pres-

ence of an architect's hand, with sophisticated drawings, diagrams, and methods of representation, all executed with élan. One of the curators' greatest achievements was to demonstrate that Ant Farm's projects were not simply inherently architectural, but that they were telling harbingers of the discipline's future directions.

This was a moment, after all, when the ideological objectives of modernism were under question, when the dawn of postmodernism was nearing. It was a time when, in places like Italy, architectural firms were working out ideas for a continuous, universalizing space.

In the classic Ant Farm project *Electronic Oasis* (1969), parachutes became kinetic sculptures.

Archizoom, for instance, had its No-Stop City, and Superstudio its *Continuous Monument*, both falling precisely within this exhibition's time frame. Linked conceptually if not ideologically to projects such as these was Ant Farm's *Truckstop Network*.

They conceived this 1971 project in the manner of early 1970s avant-gardist space—that of a vast network. But unlike its globally homogeneous Italian contemporaries, its existence was fundamentally rooted in location, with its system of interstate highways, truckstops, and roadside attractions—and the car culture these enabled and promoted—capturing something distinctly American. Launching their project forward, well beyond its time, Ant Farm clairvoyantly conceived media as intrinsically embedded within this architecture. They drove through this space, after all, in their so-called Media Van, a Chevrolet that they outfitted not only with design flourishes appropriate to 1971 but also with equipment to record and broadcast their movings-about. When Sony released its Portapak, the first portable video recorder, in 1967, Ant Farm quickly incorporated this new technology into their practice. In this way, they made a clearing for firms such as Diller + Scofidio to later experiment with media as a patently architectural element.

The exhibition, which was divided

into six thematic sections, devoted one of these to *Truckstop Network*, showing images, plans, maps, and notes. The curators also included six monitors, along with one projector, showing some of the footage from these voyages. Other categories included the *Electronic Oasis*, *Real@ity*, *The House of the Century*, *Bio-tech Future*, and *Linear Media*. Each of these showed an architecture of supreme resistance, linked to broad networks. Throughout it, a remarkably rich trove of archival materials recounted a prodigiously creative and productive process.

The exhibition formed part of GSAPP's Living Archives program, which aims not only to treat content in an investigative manner but also takes the act of curating itself as a pedagogical endeavor, understanding archives as a fluid system devoted as much to the future as they are to the past. Scott and Wasiuta used curatorial interventions sparingly, giving full voice to the material itself. One of the program's central tenets is to enrich the body of work in the research process, and, in that pursuit, the team restored several early videotapes that could be seen in the exhibition. Scott has also recently completed a book, *Ant Farm*, to be published by Actar this month. Full of archival materials, the book, like the exhibition, is visually stunning, but it also provides a solid theoretical and historical framework for Ant Farm's body of work.

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