

Aesthetics as a Form of Politics

The limits of criticality

A lot of Western (great) criticism, like the thoughts of Foucault or the Kritische Theorie of Frankfurt School, draws the research (and its readers) away from experience and pushes them toward the side of deconstruction or criticality. The problem with the correct ideas of criticality is that they conform to dominant meanings or established passwords; that they are always ideas that verify something, even if this something is yet to come. Trapped in “winner loses” Fredric Jameson notes that the more Foucault wins by portraying society as corrupt the more he loses in developing alternatives. Raymond Williams says that “however dominant a social system may be, the very meaning of its domination involves a limitation or selection of the activities it covers, so that by definition it cannot exhaust all social experience, which therefore always potentially contains space for alternative intentions which are not yet articulated as a social institution or even project.”ⁱ What seems guarded against in this approach from Williams (or for instance also from Gramsci) is immediacy, the unknown, that untreated bolus of direct experience, experiences that cannot be reflected as a whole. The very act of doing entails a commitment to appearing in, making a contribution to, or in various other ways forming and affecting the future. So freedom is not something you have to establish outside reality – by being critical towards society – but only by and through alternative practice experiments within a given situation. In the light of this, instead of critical architecture, the term projective has been put forward by several authors in America and myself in Europe.

Critical Architecture

Criticality in architecture rests like critical theory on a self-affirming system of theoretical and ideological convictions: “Look at me! I’m critical! Read me!” Criticality in architecture proceeds from a preconceived legibility.ⁱⁱ It is an architecture that brooks no alternative interpretations. Unless the critical theory and vision are legible in the object, the object fails. One form of critical architecture—exemplified by the work of Peter Eisenman, Daniel Libeskind, and Diller + Scofidio,—offers comments within architectural/social discourse and avoids looking for any alternatives in reality. The Frank House by Eisenman, for example, forces the couple living in it to think about the psychology of their cohabitation by placing a slot in the floor between their beds.

Any retreat into the autonomy of architecture, trying to save society from its vulgar influences, locking it up in the spheres of the academia, the museum or the margin (region) is not what the projective advocates. The advice of the philosopher Theodor Adorno’s that, if the everyday world is corrupt, that there is only one thing that aesthetic experience can do: to distance itself from reality so as to guarantee a pure aesthetic promise, is something which the projective experiences as claustrophobic. For the critical architecture of Eisenman the social

function of architecture consists in having no function, as Adorno would say – such a negation of reality was meant to arouse resistance and rebellion in the political field. Such an approach is seen by the projective as sado-masochistic, because a critical architect in a perverse manner enjoys the impossibility of the real, instead of trying to project a better world.

Projective Practices

In contrast to the criticality of deconstruction, I am interested in “projective practices” which aim to engage realities found in specific local contexts. Instead of hanging ideological prejudices on built form, (derived from knowing the future to come or from negative critique against reification (Verdinglichung)) the architectural project must be rendered capable of functioning interactively. It thereby undermines representation. Representation is by definition monological, it is the fixed creation of a subject. Presentation, like play, is dialogical, it opens up and involves the playing off of one another of playmates. Emancipation does not come about through an ideal dialogue but through an aesthetic creation – as in jazz improvisation, for example. It does not happen through any transcendental aesthetic subjectivity, not again by representation as in criticality, but by presentation, to be understood as 'performance'. With a projective practice the distancing of critical theory is replaced by a curatorial attitude. By systematically researching reality as found with the help of diagrams and other analytical measures, all kinds of latent beauties, forces, and unknown possibilities can be brought to the surface.ⁱⁱⁱ Estrangement then must not be thought of as something to overcome, but as a position from within which new horizons can open.

Although the urban, capitalist, and modern everyday is pushing towards increased homogeneity in daily life, the irreconcilable disjunctions born in a postindustrial city full of anachronistic interstices make it impossible to think of modernization as only negative. Critical practices reject and react unobtrusively to the positive things that have been achieved in contemporary society, such as the vitality of much popular culture, including its hedonism, luxury, and laughter. Michel de Certeau's work confirmed the impossibility of a full colonization of everyday life by late capitalism and stressed that potential alternatives are always available, since individuals and institutions arrange resources and choose methods through particular creative arrangements.

Passion for the real

We have to understand that the projective is not something new. Benjamin for instance already speaks¹ about the fact that criticism must change and the model for this change is the advertisement or, simply, anything that creates a "perceived contact with things." Like advertising, or in other words the space of the street, this new approach beyond critique must touch and fascinate readers: because they are touched by it, blown away by it, or simply

"warmed by the subject," people desire it. In a more theoretical sense, Benjamin tells us that the new approach, like advertising, should affect the reader with visceral projections of "fragmented" intensity, which circumvent any form of contemplation. This intensity is something like a "burst of energy," which affects the very life of the subject.

Populism

What is good about the projective is that it through its engagement with the real, wants to be popular, hopes to communicate with the public at large. A 'projective practice' does not want to stand at the sideline but right in the midst of mass culture, where we locate and negotiate our live possibilities. Instead of looking for truth in architecture or running the risk that it paralyzes itself the more she knows about how corrupt society is, practicing a kind of pitiescience, the projective experiments with reality. Instead of surrendering to the market, projective practices respect and reorganize the diverse economies, ecologies, information systems and social groups. Complicity is the only option for architecture, and we should not regret it. Making your hands dirty—operating in reality, trying to transform the real—is the only route you have as a practitioner when you are asked to organize the real, you have to translate ideas in brick and mortar. Instead of assailing reality with a priori positions, total utopias or resistance as critical architecture does, projective practices analyse the facts and, in the process of creation, take micro decisions capable of transforming a project in very concrete and specific ways. The touchstone here is not a vision of, but a passion for reality. The intelligence a project is able to embody in negotiation with reality is what matters.

A 'projective practice' opts for direct involvement; it seeks contact with the user and prefers easy rather than difficult forms of communication. It feels at home in the popular world of advertising and subcultures. Dogmas, established values and pompous stories are alien to it; it is open to sundry readings, as long as there is a rampant play of interpretations and debate. Although the American protagonists of the debate don't mention it as such, the projective is in fact a return to populism. For most of us the popular has a negative connotation. Populism is depicted as anti-elite, cheap, irrational, folkloristic and dangerously superficial. But what we share as group is of essential importance for every society. Whatever political system you choose, a democracy or dictatorship, they all have to deal with a certain idea of the collective, how that could be a leading principle for the city. The question is not: Is populism bad or good (it's in all of us) but what kind of political logic of the public do we construct in our projects? This question is often not addressed by the American Projective. When we locate and try to create freedom within our society this shouldn't mean that our goal is to *be* popular in box-office terms. No, instead *being* popular in the crudely quantitative terms of "ratings" I think, we have to *become* popular, that is, to create a new public for a new architecture linked to modes of social life. Instead of condemning Branding—like the inquisition of the critical academy would do—a projective architect would use the Bilbao effect to arrive at a liberating museum (something Frank Gehry is not doing in Bilbao). So not the objects or icons in themselves—the matter-of-facts—but what kind of concerns and demands are expressed

through them, is what should count in a projective practice.

Projective architecture also stands for a return to the discipline, for a pragmatic and technical approach that takes account of the interdisciplinary influences that play a role in the realization of a project.

Late-capitalism has become Deleuzian

Various critiques of the work of Deleuze mention the fact that celebrating infinite differences does not guarantee liberation. Contemporary capitalism has bid farewell to totalising standardisation; digital capitalism has itself become Deleuzian. The carnival-like quality of daily life now ensures high profits through the permanent revolution of its own order. Instead of differentiating between what is or is not important, we are saddled with a plurality of lifestyles (Ikea Populism²) coexisting happily and comfortably.

In embracing heterogeneity and the infinite relationships that an intelligent system can generate – afraid of choosing a wrong direction, as Modernism, Communism and Maoism did at the time – fewer and fewer designers are daring to put one particular antagonism or guiding alternative above another. There is a danger that searching for difference or inciting the unpredictable is made into an absolute, with the potentiality of difference being interpreted as a fetish.

This critique seems to be equally applicable to that of the American supporters of ‘projective practices’. They too run the risk of producing nothing but advanced entertainment (entertainment for the creative class), precisely because they do not declare themselves openly for or against anything. The dilemma is that the once so progressive potential of the Deleuzian rhizome, the idea of heterogeneity does not at all make people free in late-capitalism but makes them actually dependent on the economically-correct rhizomatic system.

The problem with both ‘criticality in architecture’ and the American definition of the ‘projective practice’ is that both – each with its own aesthetics and method, – generate in the end consensus and hence in fact operate a-politically.

It is rather troubling – that in the American discourse on architecture – once European ideas cross the ocean – often the political dimension draws in the Atlantic Ocean. We have seen it with the Modern Movement and the International Style exhibition, how the ideas of Aldo Rossi in America lost their political origin, and now, how many Dutch practices figure in the theory of the American projective without ever discussing its political implications. I don’t want to insinuate that America is a-political, on the contrary, but there seems to be a tradition– or dominant discourse – in which the language of architecture is theorized without discussing or even seeing its political, societal implications. The problem of the American

² See also my article “Ikea Populism and the idea of the city”, “Amsterdam architecture 2003-2006”, Arcam Pocket, 2006.

projective is that it defines itself to much from what it does not want to be. Somol and Whiting have chosen the wrong enemy so to speak. When you choose Eisenman and his idea of criticality in architecture as your main opponent (killing your father), you unconsciously overlook the political dimension of architecture. Afterall Peter Eisenman, Philip Johnson and Colin Rowe erased the political in American architecture by focusing on the formal language of architecture only already before the protagonist of the American Projective. And with Eisenman as their enemy of choice, Somol and Whiting stay all too easily biased by this American a-political (autonomous) approach. I would say forget your enemies, no Freudian entanglements please, but fulfill the promise of the projective on your own terms.

Fresh Conservatism

In many projective practices, such as in architecture, art, music, and film we see that they embrace the concept of heterogeneity. These heterogeneous constructions often do not escape what I once described as ‘fresh conservatism’³. They construct conflicts full of contradictions that bring about a lot of heterogeneous combinations that are, as Jacques Rancière⁴ has observed, in the end a-political. Rancière distinguishes four typologies of this construction of heterogeneity in contemporary arts, which also applies for the architectural practice. For example, one way of bringing together heterogeneous elements as antagonistic elements is the joke. Yet another way would be a collection, whereby all the parts exist next to each other with no hierarchical distinction, as in the book FARMAX or the Dutch pavillion in Hannover. Or the way that some recent artworks try to engage a heterogeneous public to communicate with each other through active participation, as for example with the D-Tower by NOX, without the initiator having to take the responsibility of choosing a position. And, as a fourth aspect of ‘fresh conservatism’, the use of mystery not with a confrontational effect but as a familiar strangeness or affirmative analogy, like the Schaulager Museum in Basel designed by Herzog & De Meuron, a prototypical house as drawn by a child. Of course in different ways, in all these examples, we can discover attention to complex beauty, while heterogeneous elements are unnecessarily combined into an antagonism.

According to Rancière, these four heterogeneous ways of working create a new form of consensus. Every collective situation is objectified and therefore no longer makes a difference, no secrets are unlocked or new possibilities opened, neither it lends itself to a polemic about our controversial reality. We have lost sight of the fact that a system replete with heterogeneity can also raise certain urgent matters without consensus, without already wanting or being able to provide the ultimate answer. The coexistence of juxtapositions – fascination and aversion, emptiness and love, freedom and consumption – can also be a starting point for the establishment of new connections. It is not a question of the things themselves (the form) but of what happens between and through these things.

³ ‘Fresh Conservatism, Landscapes of normality’, in: Quaderns Re-active, nr 219, Barcelona 1998.

⁴ Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics, The distribution of the sensible*, Continuum, New York, 2004.

Return of Politics

Aesthetics as a form of politics

This way of thinking also underlines Rem Koolhaas' Casa-da-Música in Porto. This building is characterized by a spatial typology full of "neighbourliness". This example shows that you have to design in terms of plans and sections, that form and programme, elevation and interior, route (infrastructure) and volume, material and colour, seeing and feeling, rationality and subjectivity, representation and presentation, experience and object, the specific situation and universal principles, should not be conceived separately. What this architecture revolves around is not the object itself but the entirety of relations.

In the design methodology of Koolhaas, autonomy is not an aim in itself, as in 'critical' architecture, but a method of dislocating commonplace clichés without the need to destroy them. Everything in this architecture strikes one as familiar, but at the same time everything is completely different. The term that Bertold Brecht used for this procedure in his concept of 'Epic Theatre' was 'Umfunktionierung': the deployment of autonomy here creates a free space of exchange between what is and what is possible. And this is what I like to call a progressive projective practice. If we weave together the everyday and what is possible through a certain absurd or bizarre mediation through the autonomy of architecture we can no longer speak of a consensus; instead there arises a high degree of what we can call 'dissensus', or disagreement within the system. In the plans and elevations of the concert hall in Porto we can imagine both the dialogues of individual interpretation occurring in space while the plane of consistency in the concert hall creates a more collective notion of a public.

A form capable of thinking

Architecture cannot, of course, conduct parliamentary politics. Spatial constellations can deliver no advice on how to vote or convey messages about social and political problems. Architecture is political precisely because of the distance it takes from these functions. Architecture can also be political in the way in which, as a space-time sensorium, it organises being together or apart, and the way it defines outside or inside. Architecture is political in the manner in which it makes reality visible by means of its own aesthetic syntax, and gives it a direction. Architecture influences the sensorium of being, feeling, hearing and speaking that determines the atmosphere and experience of a spatial constellation.

This aesthetics as a form of politics is realized in a continuous process of transgressing borders, as applied by Brecht in his Epic Theatre. The montage of antitheses breaks up the spectator's emotional perception, thereby enabling him to fulfill, in a detached, self-reflective way, a process of what Brecht calls "permanent and joyfull education". These joyfull encounters lead in their turn to a conflict between heterogeneous elements, thus causing rupture in our perception and revealing secret connections and urgent possibilities pertaining to everyday reality. And that is also what happens in architecture where aesthetics as a form of politics is an order of 'dissensus', opening avenues for what normally stays suppressed in our

everyday reality. And this autonomous strength of this concept provokes a ‘dialogical transformation’, or, as Godard typified it, “a form capable of thinking”⁵.

In Koolhaas’ Casa-da-Música and also Seattle library consensus is avoided at many levels. The dialogical transformations of Koolhaas’ buildings do something different: while sundry interpretations are possible, collide with each other, come to terms with or oppose one another, there is also an investment in what you could call a communal and public direction. Instead of falling apart in an endless cacophony of voices, both buildings reinvent the collective. Both the library in Seattle and the Casa-da-Música invest in the creation of a collective space. In both buildings the complex route through the space is held together by a strong urban form and an internal collective space: in the library it’s the large communal hall with its many belvederes and in the Casa-da-Música it’s a question of the communal concert hall, the square on which the meteorite has landed and the view of the city. Instead of representing the king or the people, these buildings contribute to the invention of a people.

Koolhaas’ Casa-da-Música and library in Seattle offers exemplary starting points for further developing this other political route in architecture. In my opinion, these buildings derive their sensibility from the field of tension evoked by the autonomous in direct contact with the everyday environment. Whereas ‘critical’ and post-critical projective architecture generate consensus, Koolhaas is trying to create a positive ‘dissensus’ in his buildings, on the basis of an unsolvable conflict. In this sense his buildings are never finished while having a progressive direction.

At times, the practice of Rem Koolhaas (although he refuses to talk about it) seems to experiment with new notions of democracy in space. This kind of practice uses the permanent “crisis” of late capitalism as a source of inspiration. A progressive projective practice, as I would call it, is characterized by an indefinable detachment that continually places the program and with it the organization of society in a state of “crisis”. It never reaches a conclusion but instead provokes a never-ending subjective interpretation and inhabitation by combining the real with the idea of what Immanuel Wallerstein calls Utopistics. Utopistics is not referring to a progressivism that already knows what is to come, but is pleading for a science that seriously assesses liberating historical alternatives—what best possible path for a far (and uncertain) future can be followed. Reassessing Utopistic examples—which proved successful in creating freedom in the past—can help in the creation of new situations of freedom. Such an approach can be found in the OMA’s Seattle library, which to a large extent reworks the public library of Hans Sharoun in Berlin. When utopistics are combined with projective practices, we come close to what I am after.

⁵ Jean-Luc Godard in “Cinema, The Archeology of Film and the memory of a Century”, interview between Jean-Luc Godard and Youssef Ishaghpour, New York, 2005.

ⁱ Interview “Politics and letters” with *New Left Review*, 1979.

ⁱⁱ Various observations on criticism versus the projective are set out by Somol and Whiting in “Notes around the Doppler Effect and Other Moods of Modernisms.”

ⁱⁱⁱ All data regarding location, program, use, and infrastructure as well as the economy, politics, art, fashion, the media, the everyday, technology, typology, and materials that might conceivably help to advance a specific “found” reality are documented in diagrammatic form, especially charts and graphs. Of course, ideology is implicit in the science of measurement and the way the hidden qualities of reality are communicated. Most projective practices are, however, not aware of this ideological dimension. In addition they are ideologically “smooth” because the veil of fashion and style hides the many contradictions through the deployment of the design. For more information on the ideological dimension of contemporary Dutch architecture see my article “Fresh Conservatism: Landscapes of Normality”.