Anymore

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The Offense of Wandering

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The contradiction between the two discourses is patently obvious—that is, the contradiction between the words of the writers of the certificate conferred by the AIA (words that show every sign of having been carefully weighed) and those of the reader, who takes exception to them in anticipation. The certificate makes implicit reference solely to the works—monumental sculptures of more or less huge dimensions—that well-known architects such as Gordon Bunshaft, E.M. Pei, and more recently, I. M. Pei, have questioned with the expectation that works like those were to be considered in the exercise of the art of architecture—these the absence or lack of so much of an "architectural culture" as of a clear notion of what the conception of these two words, culture and architecture, connotes, and what the implications of that conception are. What place does architecture occupy in what one might call the culture of our time? Under what species might one consider architecture as symptomatic of the state of that culture and its aims? If indeed there are aims, which would be architecture’s own? What relationship between the concepts of architecture and the aesthetic must we expect in the exercise of the art of architecture? And, more profoundly, more secretly, what limit, considered fundamental, can one discover between the very concept of culture and that of architecture? I will address my remarks to this last question. Allow me to introduce it via the detour of an anecdote that for me possesses the quality of a moral fable. In June 1962, during its annual meeting in Honolulu, the American Institute of Architects awarded the painter Jean Dubuffet a medal accompanied by a certificate with the following inscription:

Dubuffet did not make the trip to Honolulu to receive his medal. However, six months earlier, in a letter dated 22 December 1961, he wrote to Robert Loomis for the honor the AIA had conferred on him in the following terms: "I am especially moved to receive from the Institute the award mentioned in your letter, and I am truly happy that American architects have chosen in this way to demonstrate the interest they have in my work. I do believe, it is true, that my works points in a direction that can inspire architecture to explore rich possibilities, possibilities whereby we would begin to see new structures from which symmetry, rectilinear elements, and right angles would be excluded."
of the word. Beyond its obvious terminology, the formulation that architecture is architecture also abandoned the idea that architecture is constructed. The question concerns us here—that of "architectural culture" in its ideological as well as institutional aspects—is essentially tied to the difference, indeed to the conceptual split, that exists between the verb construct and the verb construct, between art and technique.

In his writings on cinema, Roland Barthes was not afraid to assert that the dream of every critic was to be able to define an art by its technique. This was, he was paralleled by those linguists who laid claim to abstracting the condition of meaning so as to study language by its strictly technical, not to say constructive, aspects—in anticipation of recognizing an order that, in being presented as functional and therefore susceptible to entering into resonance with other morphological forms (mathematical, musical, etc.), can then take its place in the semantic order. So one could say a fiction of architecture. Responding to this issue, I find myself recalling something I wrote more than twenty years ago as part of a research project, collectively undertaken, on the function of the sign in modern architecture; it was a period in France that was dominated by the readings of Manfredo Tafur and the journal Opinions. I refer to a text that for obscure reasons was never circulated but that, despite being somewhat dated, still has relevance today.

Architecture, then, is not simply a matter of supplement; a supplement of rigor (according to the dictionary), a supplement of meaning (with all the risks of failure we know these days), a supplement of beauty (architects are among the last people in the world not to be afraid of the word) — beyond that, it could flatter itself to have discovered a construction, as the functionalist aesthetic would have it. Schelling's definition of architecture as the "metaphor of construction" does not necessarily imply that the proper meaning of architecture, left alone its truth, is to be found in construction—note that Gothic architecture and its linear model of a constructive system possess in their details none of the rigor of the working drawing. But a whole aspect of architecture also derives from the category of the visual and the modern and the exterior envelope of Dubuffet's Tower acts as a mausoleum, whose figures deny in dissimulation the constructive apparatus of modernity. A design, let us say in passing, that itself represents a challenge to the traditional norms of construction—be it the supression of supporting walls replaced by suspended panels, the out-of-line floor plans, or the truly revolutionary constructive role subsequently assigned to pressed glass, etc.—is in effect, all those things that are new part of the logic of modern architecture. This, however, should not lead one to underestimate the work of deconstruction from which the vulgar derived. As Deirdra insists, contrary to appearances, deconstruction is not an architectural metaphor: Architecture, then, is not simply a matter of supplement; a supplement of rigor (according to the dictionary), a supplement of meaning (with all the risks of failure we know these days), a supplement of beauty (architects are among the last people in the world not to be afraid of the word). Beyond that, it could flatter itself to have discovered a construction, as the functionalist aesthetic would have it. Schelling's definition of architecture as the "metaphor of construction" does not necessarily imply that the proper meaning of architecture, left alone its truth, is to be found in construction—note that Gothic architecture and its linear model of a constructive system possess in their details none of the rigor of the working drawing. But a whole aspect of architecture also derives from the category of the visual and the modern and the exterior envelope of Dubuffet's Tower acts as a mausoleum, whose figures deny in dissimulation the constructive apparatus of modernity. A design, let us say in passing, that itself represents a challenge to the traditional norms of construction—be it the supression of supporting walls replaced by suspended panels, the out-of-line floor plans, or the truly revolutionary constructive role subsequently assigned to pressed glass, etc.—is in effect, all those things that are new part of the logic of modern architecture. This, however, should not lead one to underestimate the work of deconstruction from which the vulgar derived. As Deirdra insists, contrary to appearances, deconstruction is not an architectural metaphor: It is a matter, then, of culture and of thought: — if such things exist. The architecture we call modern did more than just instigate this project. It also precipitated a break with the principle of discontinuity, which construction had until then supported the principle of the two (even as a metaphor). The notion that a continuous whole—unthinkable until the invention of precast concrete —with the parallel demise of the distinction between the vertical and the horizontal, upon which what Berndt had the point of the project ("the" project) had been grounded. To say nothing of the montage de buildings—gardens and crossbeams, which Viollet-le-Duc's dictionary says nothing about, since they correspond to a level of structural articulation inferior to the formal and semantic units identified in the Espèce's (column, base, capital, arc, vault, etc.) — the equivalents, in language, of what would be the level of articulation of phonemes in relation, semantically, to that of words.

Walter Benjamin did not fail to see in the precarious expression of architectural modernity that iron construction represented the first instance of the principle of montage— in a way that was neither metaphorical nor rhetorical, but strictly mechanical. "Never before has history spoken," he reads in the notes for his Arcades Project, "did the scale of the 'very small' assume, at minimal quantity. These scales imposed themselves in technical and architectural construction long before literature took root as a construct. It is not the case that the scale of the very small would necessarily be without a function. The montage as a principle took quite another turn with iron: thus Marx, whom Benjamin quotes, writes, 'We would require considerable practical experience and a more advanced science in order for form to arrive at the point where it is completely determined by mechanical principles, and as such completely emancipated from the traditional form of the tool, itself inspired by the human body.' To which Benjamin adds, 'In this sense, in architecture, for example, the load and the supports are also traditional forms integrated into the human body. But the principle of montage does not correspond simply to a new precept of construction as much as it does to one of form, emancipated in theory from every kind of archetypomorphy and every kind of organization. As its corollary it appeals to the possibility of de-montage— not to be confused with deconstruction. Not that de-architecture lacks theoretical, to say nothing of deconstructive, instances, which suggests that a building is an object obeying a transitory principle, when in fact it demonstrates that it was built to last. For example, a church was inserted into the land concession act related to the construction of the Crystal Palace that stipulated its demolishing after the closing of the 1851 London Exhibition (to the post construction of the London public park). More extreme examples were those buildings that lacked foundations, quickly erected in their locations, as in the manner of the houses of Jean Provence, or even a structure dropped onto the ground by helicopter, as with the geodesic domes of Buckminster Fuller. The fact that architecture has come to the point of even considering the idea of a foundation is something that we should not accept without consequence, especially in what passes for "architectural culture." An architecture that will live in the image of the model can only spell a utopia that continuous evils— unthinkable until the invention of precast concrete —with the parallel demise of the distinction between the vertical and the horizontal, upon which what Berndt had the point of the project ("the" project) had been grounded. To say nothing of the montage de buildings—gardens and crossbeams, which Viollet-le-Duc's dictionary says nothing about, since they correspond to a level of structural articulation inferior to the formal and semantic units identified in the Espèce's (column, base, capital, arc, vault, etc.) — the equivalents, in language, of what would be the level of articulation of phonemes in relation, semantically, to that of words. architecture that will live in the image of the model can only spell a utopia that continuous evils— unthinkable until the invention of precast concrete —with the parallel demise of the distinction between the vertical and the horizontal, upon which what Berndt had the point of the project ("the" project) had been grounded. To say nothing of the montage de buildings—gardens and crossbeams, which Viollet-le-Duc's dictionary says nothing about, since they correspond to a level of structural articulation inferior to the formal and semantic units identified in the Espèce's (column, base, capital, arc, vault, etc.) — the equivalents, in language, of what would be the level of articulation of phonemes in relation, semantically, to that of words.

2 Ibid., 241.
4 "The time has come for architects to respond to questions— notably the question of restoring to architecture its character of art, forgotten or 100 years ago. Art, and what that notion connotes of caprice and invention, the architecture of our time is disintegrating— completely devoid of imagination, dependent, on worldly considerations of economics and on the least effort, relying strictly on the recalcitrant, on such a poor invention as the prefabricated box," Letter to Marcel Castro, 12 January 1969, in Prospettive 3:297, note 5.
7 Ibid., 22.
9 Ibid., op. cit., 517.
10 "The question of what it is that projects in front or in advance in the project (projection, program, prescription, promise, prediction) of everything that belongs in the architectural process, to the movement of throwing, or of being thrown (Jacques, Jacobean). Horizontally or vertically: foundations for the erection of an edifice that always moves toward the sky — there where, in a certain sense of mimesis, there was nothing," Ibid., 514.
12 Ibid., 172.
13 Ibid., 183.
14 From Tower with Figures, Dubuffet continued to say that the work was not conceived "with a view to furnishing a lodging in the form actually in use in our homes," but "as an occasional home for retirement and never residence." Prospettive 3:336.

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