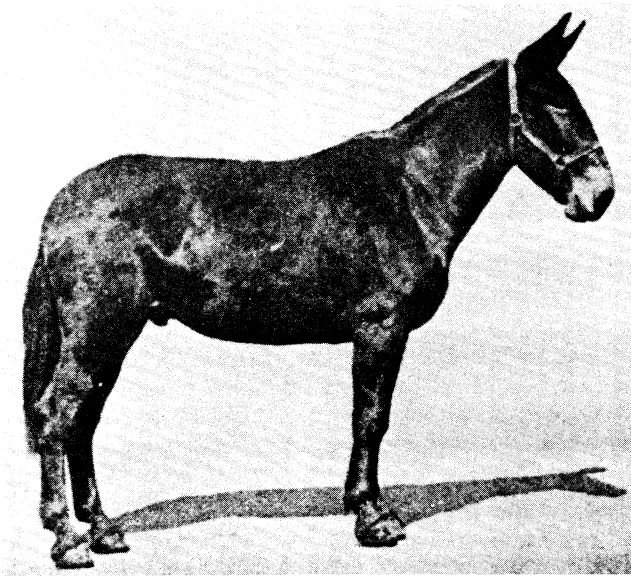


Gehry, Onan and the Mule: Possibilities of Non-Reproduction

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Frank O. Gehry and his architecture have caused questions; questions of intention, of authority, and of subjectivity. Perhaps most provocatively, the normative process of architectural criticism—defining an *oeuvre* for the architect—has been left somewhat bewildered by the prospects of Gehry's place in history. Is he historically mannerist? Is he expressionistically modernist? Is he de- or pre-constructivist? The fluidity with which his work crosses these boundaries, sometimes within the same building, suggests a subjectivity in its reception, that is to say that his work can not be "known" in the same manner as other architectures. At issue is some question of perception and process; to what do we appeal in realizing the nature of this work?

It may be that to do so—to try to "know" the value and significance of Gehry's efforts—is to ask the wrong question. Since such a "critical" path seems thwarted by the very architecture we witness, there is reason to suspect that its meaning lies outside of these traditional boundaries of knowing.

Perhaps this warrants the consideration of a theory of non-

reproduction; a theory which would deny a systematic view of Gehry's architecture through criticism, explain its lack of stylistic replication, and substitute a new hierarchy of authority in regards to its place in the world. Such a possibility is grounded in a comparison with the two systems the work seems to depose: historiography and modernism. Both these ideologic methods rely on processes of reproduction to which Gehry appears to have developed resistance, demonstrated by analogies to the biblical frustrater "Onan," and the uselessly infertile "Mule."

The possibility of Onan (whose brother's wife he was to impregnate by the Lord's command, but who refused to consummate the sex act by "spilling his seed on the ground") is one of frustration, one of incompleteness. Gehry's representative "Onan" qualities are found in his early projects focusing on processes and elements: among these, the Familian House, his own well-known house, and the Norton House. These buildings exist in a sort of limbo, which allows them to be seen as products of construction—materials and evidence of assemblage—but are not yet finalized towards what appears to be normal architectural form. They seem to suggest inevitable completion, yet remain outside the systems by which that kind of form would be judged and categorized.

The corresponding possibility of the Mule (the infertile cross between the horse and donkey) is one of deformation, of creative abilities outside the systematic methods of production, through the very corruption of these systems. Gehry's "Mule" analogies are those of his generally later works, like the expressionism of the Winton Guest House, the fantastic disorder of the Weisman Art Museum, and the pure sculptural deformation of the "white" architectures of the Vitra Museum, the Disney Concert Hall, and the Bilbao Guggenheim Museum. These buildings manifest themselves as hybrids of a system, uselessly modified as a product of all parentage.

In light of these ideas of non-reproduction, the consequences of Gehry's architecture become quite profound. By comparisons to the regular methods of architectural realization (production and reproduction) and its knowing (perception and criticism), the work suggests a fundamental realignment of the architect, the critic, and the public; the things

which have historically defined engagement with architecture, and through which Gehry has provided other possibilities.

A DEFINITION OF THE SITUATION: HISTORIOGRAPHY, MODERNISM AND THE AUTHORITY OF THEIR REPRODUCTION

Architectural reproduction is integrally bound up in its method of historic realization. As history is defined as the process of knowing past events—through the incremental comparison of things through time—so, too, are these systems of architectural knowing dependent upon history. It is this concept of dependency which defines the activity of history and architectural knowing as a reproductive system: “from base A and its relationship to B and C has arisen D.” This is of course a non-ending linear process, where soon enough B, C, and D are creating others, E, F, and G, through their own associations and contradictions. Ultimately, the linear project of history and its evolutionary aspects empower the final *authority of the historical “object,”* that is, “A” and “B” and “C” become communicative, significant, and charged with messages through their selection as representatives of history.

This empowerment of the object through the reproduction of history was questioned by the advent of modernism, which began a process of inversion; the authority of the object began to be transferred to that of the system which produced it. Manfredo Tafuri reads Walter Benjamin as being clear in this regard, that as modernist practice engaged the logic of technological systems, such practice emerged with “all the characteristics of a *mass medium*, the expressive range that was once the prerogative of the single artistic [object] flows directly into the productive process, charging it [instead] with independent meaning and independent communicative values.”¹ In contradistinction to historiographic method, this mass medium presented itself as a *procedure* rather than an *object*, and as such contained within itself everything necessary for its own evolution. Flush with the conviction of newness and no longer dependent on the relationships between things, modernist practice was capable of something never before seen: spontaneous generation. This radical possibility made the new system of reproduction as singular as the old one had been, and inevitably modernism usurped the authoritarian features of the historiographic model; that is, it itself becomes a symbolic system. “What before was the absolute repository of communicative values—the single product with all its ‘authority as thing’—is now emptied of meaning and lies outside the process” of this new form of reproduction.”² Now outside the object, empowerment comes from the *authority of the modernist system.*

DENIGRATION OF THE AUTHORITY OF REPRODUCTION

Gehry’s work is particular in its choice about accepting neither the historiographic nor modernist versions of repro-

duction. This decision seems to rest on a willful denigration of the process of authority, and the possibilities of finding a new and different source of legitimacy. The subjective nature of the reception of Gehry’s architecture already suggests that this alternative practice is at work, because of the fact that criticism fails to bring it into either the linearity of the historiographic model or the system of the modernist one. So too is the appearance of no pretenders to Gehry’s architectural language; in some manner the manifestation of his particular brand of space seems ultimately resistive to replication.

The issue Gehry seems to project is one of *non-reproduction*; that somehow the effect of the architecture seems to repudiate the authority of these systematic forms of reproduction, as well as repel advances towards formal replication. But the question of legitimacy still remains: where does the ability to pursue such an agenda arise? If it is outside of both the reproductive capacities of historiography and modernism, to what power does it appeal, if any at all?

A helpful model for the identification of this authority could come from E. H. Gombrich’s discussion of the “action painter,” a nomenclature useful in comparison to Gehry’s equally active architecture and his method of engaging perceptions. Gombrich presents that

“the action painter, wants to achieve an identification of the beholder with his Platonic frenzy of creation, or rather with his creation of Platonic frenzy. It is quite consistent that these painters must counteract all semblance of familiar objects or even patterns of space. But few of them appear to realize that they can drive in to the desired identification only those who know how to apply the various traditional consistency tests and thereby discover the absence of any meaning except the highly ambiguous meaning of traces. If this game has a function in our society, it may be that it helps us to ‘humanize’ the intricate and ugly shapes with which industrial civilization surrounds us. We even learn to see twisted wires or complex machinery as the *product of human action*. We are *trained in a new visual classification*. The deserts of city and factory are turned into tangle-woods. Making results in matching.”³

This “action” idea of creating a new visual classification counteracts all possibility of the historic practice of categorizing things. Appealing to human perception directly, this type of work repudiates the old authority of the systematic forms of reproduction and in the process makes the rest of the world’s common and unintentional existence legitimate *by itself and through its own logic*. As Gombrich says, these things become seen as a “product of human action;” a function which frees society to become conscious of its environment. The “action” work—be it painting or architecture—is legitimized by this profound act of reconnecting form and humankind. Phoenix-like, society itself rises to meet the world and take it rightful position as critical authority.

ONAN, THE MULE, AUTHORITY, AND SUBJECTIVITY

If Gehry's non-reproductive architecture engages the divestiture of authority—from both objects (in the historical sense) and system (in the modernist sense)—then the replacement of this authority is of critical importance, critical both in the sense of immediacy as well as that of criticism.

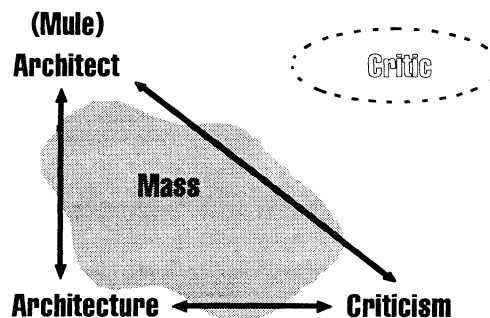
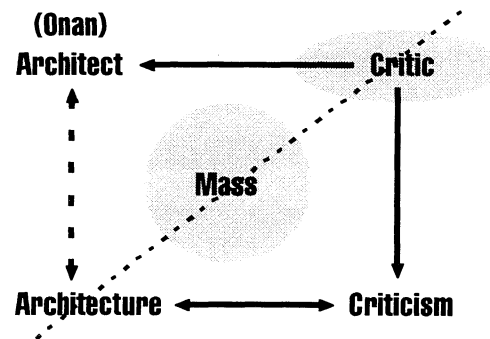
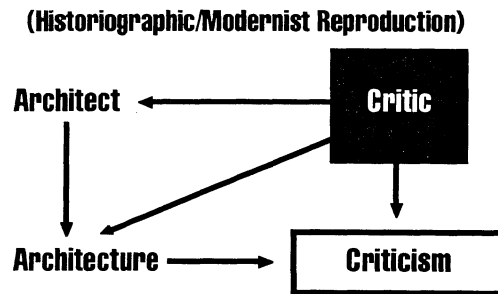
The repositioning of critical authority back into human society, back into the world, is a different theoretical posture than either history and modernism. Both these systems of reproductive authority are based on the ideal, a kind of conceptual clarity where the generalized inhibits the concrete or real from emerging. The notion of the authentic experience of the world is not one of *reproduction*, but instead one of *reception*, or more narrowly *perception*. This necessarily entails the empowerment of not one idea or ideal, but a multiplicity of them. In fact, it is this very possibility of ultimate subjectivity which arises as the authority of humankind; the "whole" or the "mass."

How might this occur? Walter Benjamin explained the process of engaging art as being manifest in two ways. There was the process by which the subject "concentrates before a work of art [and] is absorbed by it," which he proposed was an experience purely of history. In contradistinction to this method, there is the "distracted mass [that] absorbs the work of art." He furthered this new authority of the distracted mass by saying—quite famously for architectural theorists—that this "is most obvious with regard to buildings. Architecture has always represented the prototype of a work of art the reception of which is consummated by a *collectivity in a state of distraction*." The laws of its reception are most instructive."⁴

Such a reception, the distracted notice, the habit-ual knowing, could be described as "non-sense" reception, or perhaps cleverly for this discussion, "non-sex." This human distraction is a manifestation of the sideways glance, of the metonymic relationship of habit, and not one of linearity or systematic reproduction (and thus actually is one of non-sex). This distracted absorption is bound neither by historiography nor modernism, but is instead a function of perception; of the genetics of human subjectivity. Legitimacy is thus defined by the *authority of the distracted mass*. Moreover, this authority is retained by the general (note Gombrich's assertion of the "product of human action," or the city, the society) and denied to the specific (art, architecture). Authority is then transmitted by the general, and no longer a legitimizing aspect of the "objectifying" or "systematizing" projects of history and modernism.

This dramatic political change appears to radically undermine the historic notions of authority and its organization of relationships between the critic, architecture, and society. The issues within this argument could be seen in a mapping of the constituent parts.

Historiographic/Modernist Reproduction: This process, the one that we would recognize as normative, begins when



the Critic "names" the Architect who makes the Architecture, a function which in turn creates the necessity of criticism. The Critic produces critique and "brands" the architecture. Through judgment of formal comparison and systematic logic, Architecture and Architect are consumed by the Critic in the process of keeping evaluative powers over and above them. Everything in the end results in the production of meaning through the reproduction of the object in the historiographic sense and the system in the modernist one. Each is borne of the Critic and concludes in criticism. The distracted Mass is outside the process, and enjoys nothing except the "objective" results of the criticism.

However through its authority, the distracted Mass becomes integral to the process, indeed absorbs the process into itself. This function of the Mass, so long repressed by the process of the Critic, is fundamentally a realignment of authority. Evolution of these relationships provoke essential change in the nature of architecture and how it is made manifest. Here Gehry's work can be seen for its political effects beyond simple formal invention: the ground around the architecture is remade. Two new relationships—based in undoing the historiographic form (Onan) and the modernist one (the Mule)—can be mapped.

The Non-Reproduction of Onan: Here, Onan is told by the Critic—who is congenitally unable to go outside the historiographic model—to “fertilize” Architecture; to make it, to produce it, via the authority of the historic object, but Onan won't consummate the act. The Critic, in his inability to force the copulation, floats as a determinate to convey the demand on Onan but becomes nearly extraneous. The Mass, brought into the process by virtue of its authority, sets up a polarity between the Architecture and the Critic, as it sees them nearest in ideal to the fading historical situation of objectivity which it replaces (the thing and its conveyor of meaning).

The Non-Reproduction of the Mule: In this final situation, all historical relationships have been realigned. The Mass and the omnidirectional process around it becomes the new center, a recognition of its authority. The product of the Architect, or Mule, evolves as a hybrid of the constituent pieces, and becomes an integral part of a new process. The Architect is connected directly to criticism through the subjectivity of the distracted Mass, and the Critic, unnecessary to the conditions, is set free. No polarity is required, because the simple flow of action is nearest in ideal to the modernist system which it replaces (the endless production of things and their appropriateness as manifestations of the system).

COMPARATIVE PRACTICE: SUBJECTIVITY IN AN OBJECTIVE WORLD

What do we make of these new possibilities? To the extent to which ideas of the distracted mass and the dissolution of the critic are possible or probable, the combination of “non-sex” reception and its ultimate subjectivity creates a vacuum of tangible criticism—or “historiographic” criticism—as it regards Gehry's work. We have already seen the integral possibilities of such subjectivity; its opportunity to reflect the authority of past reproductive practices onto the reception of the distracted mass. But what then becomes of “criticism?” What of the process of valuation and worth?

There is a well-known thought that those things which remain unknown the longest appear most likely to be “art.”⁵ This potential suggests not only the ineffectiveness of contemporaneous criticism in the face of significant work, but reinforces the human necessity to “perceive” such things through time. In essence, the Mass displaces the Critic not

by new theories or judgments, but by the value of its length of experience with the thing.

If this is the process left capable of “objectifying” the work and its meaning, if there does exist some inherent societal subjectivity of both creation and interpretation, then this can become a method of making broader connections with other works from other times, most of which have suffered from their own brand of subjectivity in an objective world.

Onan

Gehry's abilities as Onan are seen where he engages the elements of historical method yet remains outside its linear project. By denying the historical inevitability of “completeness”—the demand that elements follow patterns outside the logic of themselves—this kind of architecture frustrates criticism by not agreeing to its method. Gehry's examples of this work exist in a state of impending completion, and speak directly about the fantasy of construction and the components which make it possible, forever frustrating the thing from becoming historiographic form.

Gehry has not been alone in this attempt. Abstract Expressionism is perhaps most obvious in this regard. As a comparison with Gehry's own Onan work, Willem de Kooning represents a “becoming” example of shaking off the modernist lessons of Cubism and discovering the ele-



Fig. 1. Willem de Kooning. *Woman I*. 1950–52. Oil on canvas. The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

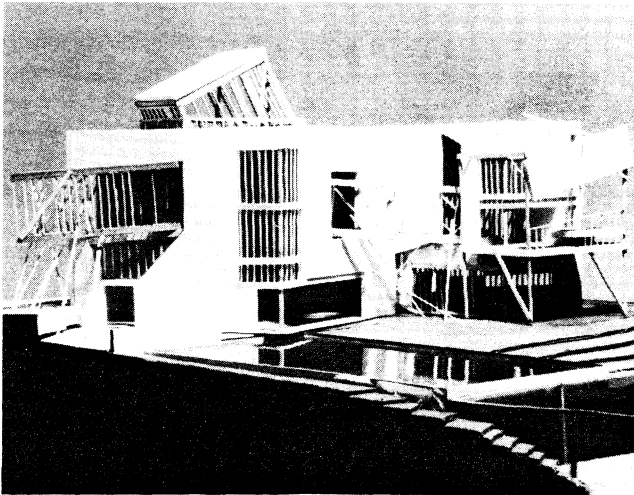


Fig. 2. Frank O. Gehry and Associates. *Familian House*, Santa Monica, CA. 1978.

ments of paint and painting and their particular possibilities outside of the formal. Sandler describes that de Kooning was “reared in [Cubism] and could not deny its insistence on flatness and firm pictorial structure, at the same time [he was desiring] a form that was more ambiguous, dynamic, and evocative of his own impulsive creative action.”⁶ Yet de Kooning felt compelled to base this exploration of the physicality of painting within a content which held identifiable connections with past practice. His well-known “women” series is clear in that regard; the paintings posed questions against the historic notion of female imagery, in fact required this history for the work to have any potency. De Kooning created a middle ground between subjectivity and history by fundamentally placing his work between the two.

We could compare de Kooning’s process with a project like Gehry’s *Familian House*. This architecture begins by experimenting with elemental materiality while at the same time reacting to idealized formal composition. The house reads as much “coming apart” as it does “becoming.” Mark Wigley describes this process:

“The walls are placed under sufficient stress that gashes open up: the pure white modernist skin tears, and peels off, exposing an unexpectedly contorted timber frame. Pure form is interrogated in a way that reveals its twisted and splintered structure.”⁷

What we see is an awareness of the “making” of the house against its more normative “knowing;” elements of structure and materiality are exposed in contrast to an intellectualized whole, a historically recognizable form.

Marcel Duchamp is another classic “Onan” character, perhaps more so than anyone, even Gehry. Duchamp’s appropriation of the commonplace in pieces like *Door: 11, rue Larrey* or the infamous *Fountain* was a direct assault on the historiographic notions of authorship and linearity. His efforts defied the critical status quo, and when he found no

other way of creating without lapsing into “art,” he stopped producing. Duchamp was the Onan *par excellence*, refusing to yield to the demands of the art critics, in fact coercing them into believing that he was producing something worthy of the authority they had at their disposal.

This shell game of authenticity can be seen in Gehry’s work as well, notably the *Norton House* in Venice, California. A collection of formal “quotes” from many diverse sources, he appropriates them *in toto* and fits them within the

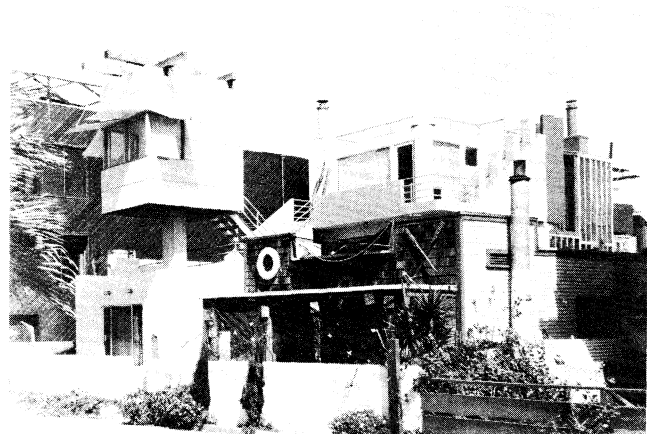


Fig. 3. Frank O. Gehry and Associates. *Norton House*, Venice, CA. 1983–84.

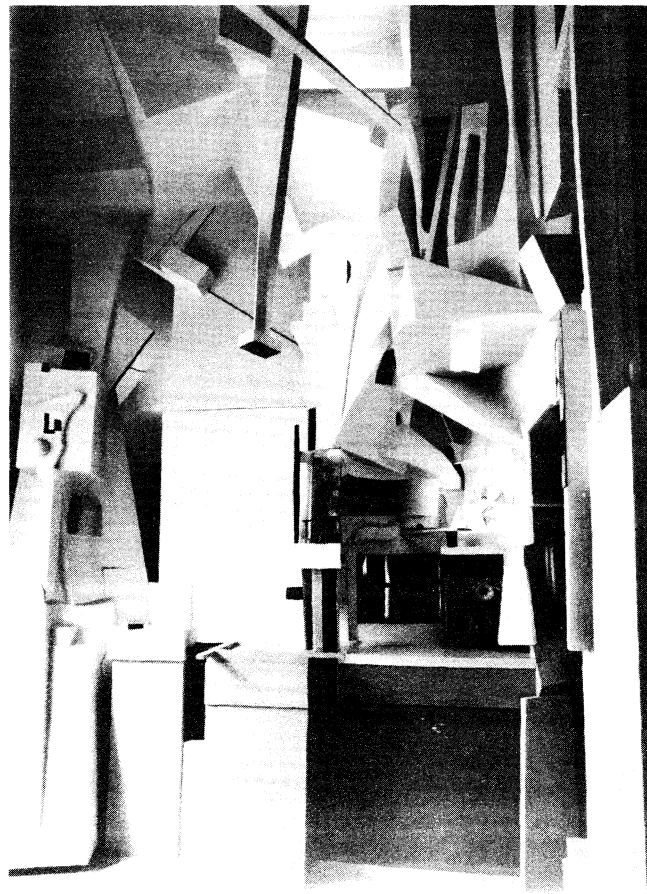


Fig. 4. Kurt Schwitters. *Merzbau Hannover*. 1914.

narrow beachfront lot. In the spirit of Duchamp's "readymades," off-the-shelf items like pre-fab fireplaces are mixed with proto-Japanese log gateways in such a way that accident becomes confused with intention. Explaining this appropriation, Gehry says the complex context of Venice absorbs anything you put in it in "about thirty seconds,"⁸ a notion which reinforces the possibility of critical authority coming from the world rather than being imposed on it. It would appear that Gehry's strategy in the Norton house is ultimately a historic impossibility: the design of architecture with its effects already in place.

The Mule

The possibilities of the Mule are also sympathetically found in past practice. The mule is about the hybrid, the congenitally deformed act which is part and parcel of all its forebears, but because of its specificity cannot be reproduced.

Much like Gehry, Kurt Schwitters began his artistic output through processes which were more about frustrating historical development than superseding it. Schwitters' long work with collage—a method overt in its intentions against high art, yet connected intimately to it—has a sympathy with Gehry's early fascination for exposing construction. Eventually, however, both began to explore possibilities outside of their own disciplines' historic conventions.

Specifically, Schwitters displays tactics of the Mule in work which continually changes expression, denying the value of a "specific" design.⁹ His *Merzbau* worked this way. Begun as a small sculptural experiment, it grew to eventually envelop the house that it was preying upon. Dependent upon the deformation of residential space, the *Merzbau* worked its spatial invention by taking the normative condition of habitation and bending it, exceeding it, so that something radically new became possible. This process was, for Schwitters, essentially unending. What is interesting to consider is how unique this architecture was compared to the formalism of his other art, an invention perhaps bound by the fact that this work was so very temporal; time was a fundamental aspect to the *Merzbau* creation.

Gehry is of course well-known for the issue of time in his work. Many of his projects have gone through amazing design evolutions, whether it be by client directive (the Winton Guest House) or as a consequence of budget (Disney Concert Hall). This "drawing out" of the design process enables latent possibilities within the work to appear, ultimately guided by the deep understanding that time allows. Without fail, this process creates design which is manifest as a cross between every aspect of the problem; a slave to none but a child to all.

The Weisman Museum of Art at the University of Minnesota is a good example of this design evolution. Initially a rather dry scheme of box-like forms responding to a limited budget, the design slowly changed as the difficulty of the context was engaged. Encouraged by a wonderfully direct comment of the University President—"I don't want another brick lump"—the issues within the building itself began to



Fig. 5. Frank O. Gehry and Associates, *Weisman Art Museum*, Minneapolis, MN, 1990-93.

deform simple context reactions into complex form.¹⁰ In the end, Gehry created a grand stainless-steel canvas above a bluff of the Mississippi River, twisted and rolled into forms that belie any possible intention.

Yet the building is profoundly tied to its difficult site. By "folding" the river facade, Gehry was able to provide up and down-river views as well as preserve the spectacular panorama west toward downtown Minneapolis. Beyond this functional consideration, the facade also acknowledges its potentially gross formal inequity with the undistinguished bridge to its north. The animation of the facade then becomes logical in its effort to relate and balance the new building and the bridge (an inevitable formal comparison most architects would have simply ignored). Cut within the building's box-like shape are sculpted skylights which illuminate the gallery spaces. While they suggest the curving formalism of the river facade, they in fact act to reflect the path of sunlight in the building's northern latitude. A singular design, the Museum's incorporation of issues creates an architecture which can neither be seen for its elements nor reproduced.

Perhaps the most powerful comparison of aspects of the Mule would be that of Le Corbusier's Ronchamp and Gehry's Vitra Museum. Located within an hour of each other—though separated by 36 years—these two buildings may epitomize the questions afforded by the denigration of modernist repro-

duction. Both are astonishing in their effect; Ronchamp for its fastidious pursuit outside the modernist dictum, and Vitra for its unrepentant deformation of that very dictum. Ronchamp is critically labeled a “singular work in Le Corbusier’s *oeuvre*” because it fails to straighten up to the larger body of his production (this alone sends up a red flag towards its possibilities as outside the system, when the critical community finds no compartment in which to place it).¹¹ The church is notable for its completely perceptual program of plastic space and sunlight. Corbusier was always demanding with the powers of light, but at Ronchamp appears to have allowed nature to twist and mold the building as it deemed necessary, which make it to many critics an “irrational, expressionistic aberration” compared to his other work.¹² Gehry, unlike Corbusier, faced no exaggerated purity of “style” when working on Vitra. Some have made questionable connections to other “white” work around Basel, notably the Goetheanum by Steiner and even Ronchamp,¹³ but Vitra remains a pure perceptual phenomenon, in spite of its vulnerability to comparison. Its powerful denigration of what appears to be some context of modernism—the white building—is claimed by Gehry to be simply a bow to local Swiss building custom. If so, once again the work is proved in a context outside of itself and valued through the authority of the mass and the conscious intention of human culture.

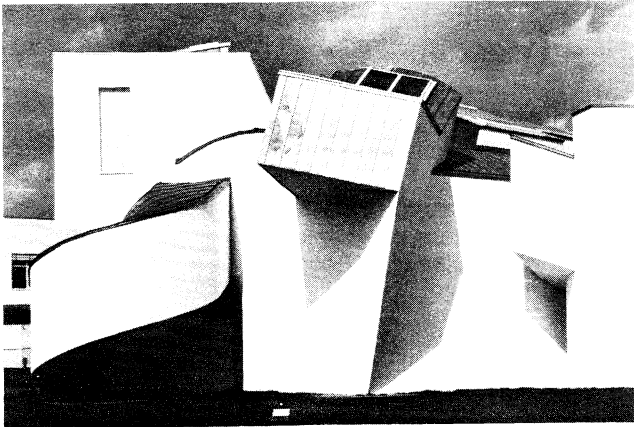


Fig. 6. Frank O. Gehry and Associates, *Vitra Design Museum*, Weil am Rhein, Germany, 1987-89.

The thoughts considered here are meant to stimulate criticism towards a new and more faithful rendering of Gehry’s possibilities. The work, as a body of great strength and intent, appears to make most sense as a question, a provocation, than as a calculated formalism—thus a rereading through the notion of non-reproduction.

Perhaps most suggestive is Gehry’s return to the presence of perception, the unconscious, and the irrational, which have more to say about the reality of building than the issues of its “knowing.” Architecture, in the end, is a complicated event; simple solutions through historic “variations on a theme” seem inconsequential in comparison to the more generous possibilities within human experience. If anything at all is provided by Gehry and his work, it is access to this truth.

NOTES

- ¹ Tafuri, Manfredo. *Theories and History of Architecture*. (New York: Harper and Row, 1976), p. 85.
- ² Tafuri, p. 85.
- ³ Gombrich, Ernst. *Art and illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation*. (London: Phaidon Press, 1960), p. 244. (author’s italics)
- ⁴ Benjamin, Walter. “Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” in *Illuminations*. (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), p. 239.
- ⁵ The author’s awareness of this thought is indebted to Christopher Risher, Jr.
- ⁶ Sandler, Irving. *The Triumph of American Painting: A History of Abstract Expressionism*. (New York: Harper and Row, 1970), p. 128.
- ⁷ Wigley, Mark and Johnson, Philip. *Deconstructivist Architecture*. (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1988), p. 22.
- ⁸ Gehry, Frank, as quoted in *The Architecture of Frank Gehry*. (New York: Rizzoli, 1986), p. 176.
- ⁹ Bletter, Rosemarie Haag in *The Architecture of Frank Gehry*. (New York: Rizzoli, 1986), p. 47.
- ¹⁰ From a presentation of the project by Frank O. Gehry, Minneapolis, MN, December 1990.
- ¹¹ Gans, Deborah. *The Le Corbusier Guide*. (Princeton: Princeton Architectural Press, 1987), p. 74.
- ¹² Gans, p. 74.
- ¹³ Viladas, Pilar. “Cranked, Curved and Cantilevered” in *Progressive Architecture*, May 1990, p. 96.