The Illusion of Intensity: Commodity & Indifference

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Benevolent societies seem persistently engaged in bringing things together that are apart and taking things apart that are together, thus fostering the perpetual mobility of art...[1]

INTRODUCTION

Hegel stated that art exists in a constant state of transformation. Trapped by the absolute freedom of the creative process, the artist's imagination is exercised by indiscriminately attaching art to any chosen subject.[2] It has also been suggested that Hegel destroyed the relation between artistic form and signification.[3] "By totally internalizing the absence of signification, modern art tends to become the imaginative process of shock."[4]

Architecture also exists as Hegel explained, "in a state of infinite plasticity"[5] — embracing any topic or subject in order to develop a narrative or find validation. The variety of "issues" (i.e., philosophies, fractals, fragments, knots, fields, and swarms, as well as genders, senses, and the body) investigated by architects suggests a certain liquidity to architecture — a mediating condition in which it molds and is molded by anything it encounters. This paper proposes a possible reconciliation between the necessities of the free market "shock" image, and the desire to resist superficial commodification.

Architecture design is a process of joining and combining; words, ideas, images, and components. It is through joining that architecture becomes a mediator between the physical object and metaphysical image. Through its transitory or liquid nature architecture, "engages and detaches us at the same time by making us participate in what it presents, and yet presenting it as an aesthetic fiction." By participating in this fiction, architecture "draws its power to enlarge our vision by carrying us beyond the actual."[6] In this sense, it will be argued that architecture may be enhanced by its malleable, in-between nature which allows it to mediate amidst an inexhaustible variety of issues and markets.

MOSTRI SACRI

(Ignoring religious predisposition) something is always the product or by-product of something else. Things (concrete or conceptual) are formed from combinations of other things. Modern design has typically been described as an additive process in which the world is recreated from the world. Contemporary, fiction writer Tom Robbins uses the mockingbird to explain, he states:

Mockingbirds are the true artists of the bird kingdom. Which is to say, although they're born with a song of their own, an innate riff that happens to be one of the most versatile of all ornithological expressions, mockingbirds are not content to merely play the hand that is dealt them. Like all artists, they are out to rearrange reality. Innovative, willful, daring, not bound by the rules to which others may blindly adhere, the mockingbird collects snatches of birdsong from this tree and that field, appropriates them, places them in new and unexpected contexts, recreates the world from the world.[7]

Robbins's description of the design process is similar to Gilles Deleuze's description of the Baroque as a process of folding that distinguishes itself from invention.[8] Describing design as inherently multiplicitous, architecture production can be seen in very general terms as the combining, articulating and delimiting of internal volumes from external forces — folding, particularly of multiplicitous bodies.

Maintaining the idea of folding as a means by which architecture evolution transpires, Greg Lynn describes a biological model for the combining of geometric bodies. In the article, Multiplicitous and Inorganic Bodies, he suggests either affiliative or filiative connective systems are characteristic of multiplicitous organisms. Filiative implying, "the relations of a family, of proper parents and progeny."[9] Affiliative, by contrast, refers to systems in which disparate species are combined. Lynn provides further elaboration of the argument of filiative versus affiliative or unchanging species versus multiple, folded species:

The prejudice toward fixed orders is achieved at the cost of repressing local differences of program, structure, form, and culture. Affiliative relations, by contrast, typically exploit possible connections that occur through vicissitude. They cannot be predicted by the global systems of organization present in any single unified organism. When whole systems of geometric description and organization break down, seemingly unnatural connections between disparate elements emerge. The introduction into architecture of forms that are "protogenic," or without exact measure, presents such an opportunity.[10]

Lynn begins to relate (via chaos/complexity theory) how the "protogeometries" of open systems (geology, geography, fluid dynamics...) can be partially reduced and plotted so that the systems remain open to fluctuations or inconsistencies, yet they can be reduced enough so that their patterns and formations are loosely quantifiable. A structure, although particular, temporal, and incomplete, can be ascertained. In his affiliative model, order is possible without marginalization.

Marco Frascari has discussed the idea of architectural genesis through union or joining. Some Mostri Sacri of Italian Architecture, traces Giambattista Vico's introduction of monsters and metamorphoses as two new poetic tropes. The joining of ideas creates the "poetic monster." And the poetic monster acts as a mediator between the factual and the real. Vico defines monster as "a special case of human representation" by explaining that "monster" (monstrare = to

show) was the name given to children of prostitutes according to Roman law because their origin was in an "uncertain union."[11] Frascari explains that Vico introduces the monster as a poetic trope because, like the love-child for which it is named, it is something that is both factual and real, physical and metaphysical: the monster, in the Roman sense, is not only the factual result of a carnal union, but also symbolizes real ideas of love or desire. Because of its nature of being in-between, because of its condition of simultaneity, the monster assists in the understanding of change. The monster as mediator is analogous to the role of architecture as device for transcendence. In Louis Kahn's terms the in-between is, of course, in-between silence and light or the immeasurable and the measurable.

Rhetorically, returning to Lynn's article; his description of the joining of geometric organizations, phrased in the language of the quasi-biological, relies on the authority of the scientific to bring his argument to fruition. In Vico's terms, the scientific becomes real for Lynn. The persuasion of the argument results when he presents the real as factual — his personal truths are presented in such a way as to imply their universality. He has sold us a story.

BLASÉ: IMAGES FOR COMMODIFICATION

Presenting the real as factual is necessary, in a very basic sense, for the persistence of commerce. However, with the separation of image and content arise difficult issues concerning superficiality.

A rear spoiler on a Cadillac sedan, waffle soles on Nike Cross Trainer running shoes, the angled head and asymmetric bristles of a Reach Toothbrush; quasi-scientific fiction is sold as fact on a daily basis and is probably the single largest influence on the shape of design today.

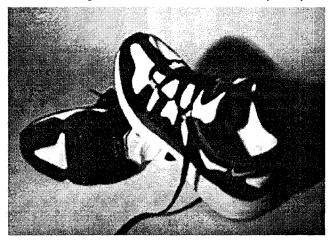Since the Enlightenment, rational discourse and empirical proof
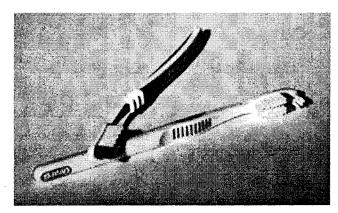

Fig. 1. Shoe.

Fig. 2. Toothbrush.

have defined the modern. In the pinnacle achievement of man over nature, "it was Newtonian physics that guided the Apollo rocket to the moon and back."[12] It only stands to reason that rocket-like fins on the tails of our cars would give everyone that same Newtonian power over nature — or at least make it look like it. Fredric Jameson states:

> What has happened is that aesthetic production today has become integrated into commodity production generally: the frantic economic urgency of producing fresh waves of ever more novel-seeming goods (from clothing to airplanes), at ever greater rates of turnover, now assigns an increasingly essential structural function and position to aesthetic innovation and experimentation."[13]

Essays written by Massimo Cacciari in the 1970s describe the negativity of the metropolis because of its inability to synthesize production and social relations. Cacciari examines Georg Simmel's blasé persona as a product of an environment in which the individual is isolated by commodification. According to Simmel, the Metropolis seeks to expand the scope of perception and increase the quantity of stimuli—liberating the individual from repetition.[14] The metropolitan personality type results from an uninterrupted transformation of external and internal impressions. Exhibiting indifference toward the qualities of things, the blasé type is the offspring of the Metropolis.

His relation to things and to the universe of things is completely intellectualized. Money is exchanged for commodities which are valuable only in light of their monetary worth. "[the blasé type] has learned, with a sense of despair, that things and people have acquired the status of commodity, and his attitude internalizes this fact."[15] He acquires commodities knowing he can never get near them.

From as distant as Vico (c. 1744), the split between the real and the factual has been a persistent topic of interest. Many have identified capitalism as the underlying force behind a condition of superficiality that results from a splitting of aesthetic and commodity. Plato was even compelled to propose censorship as a hopeless solution to political orations which were deemed meritorious not for their content, but for the manner of their presentation.[16] He saw the liquidity of the words obscure the content of the message and feared not only superficiality, but political collapse as well.

APPLICATIONS

There is however, another reading in which the real and the factual may be evaluated relatively, based on the usefulness one has for the story being told. Reconsider the Nike shoes and the Reach toothbrush. Each item respectively is marketed with claims of performance enhancing criteria: the shoe has a number of features which will allow for faster running and higher jumping; likewise, the toothbrush has a number of features to promote whiter, cleaner teeth. Because the claims made by these product manufacturers are, for the most part, impossible to corroborate, one has to evaluate based on the believability of the story. If what the manufacturer says is plausible, and discrepancies and hyperboles are undetectable, it does not matter if factual validation exists, it simply becomes useful to accept the story, believe in the product, and move on, acknowledging that the factual design features (the waffle soles of the shoes or the angled head of the toothbrush) are being accepted as real. More common stories that are frequently accepted as fact without proof involve religious and legal systems.

Before examining the architectural implications of the factual and the real, the contemporary Coca-Cola can being distributed in the United States may provide further clarification. Coca-Cola's current can is an ordinary aluminum, 12 ounce can with attached pull-tab — it is no different than any other 12 ounce aluminum can being distributed by any other American beverage company. What makes the Coca-Cola can interesting for study is its label. On the can is a picture of a bottle; the classic Coca-Cola bottle, along with some text which describes the beverage (i.e. "unique," "refreshing," "deli-
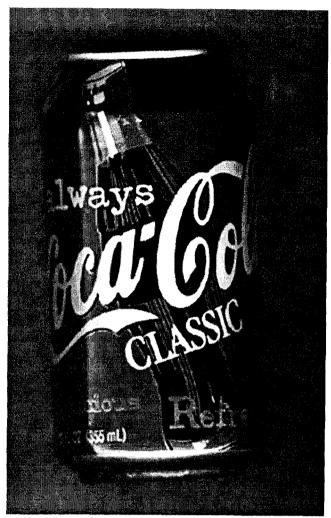
Fig. 3. Coca-Cola.

cious," etc.). The label, the image of the bottle, assumes the role of the container and prescribes the experience of the contents. The container is a pre-loaded suggestion of an experience that operates through internal references — even though holding and drinking from this can is no different than any other can.

The image of the snake swallowing the elephant and Jean Nouvel's New National Theater in Tokyo, Japan (1986) are useful for clarifying a possible reconciliation between content and the pre-loaded container. Nouvel's theater, sitting like a massive, solemn whale belies its internal organ-like auditorium spaces which hover over an immense, flowing lobby. The importance of this building is in its distinction of interior and exterior (This is not an entirely new concept. There are many buildings and architects throughout history such as Adolf Loos, who have held similar ideals and intentions. The New National Theater happens to be a convenient, contemporary example). Through this interior/exterior distinction a distance is established. A distance that the coke can and various over-formalized postmodern architectural projects do not provide. In this distance the user is allowed to develop their own interpretations rather than being subjected to over-loaded market spin. A literary example of this distancing can be found in *Giles Goat-Boy* by John Barth.[18] Barth develops the story through a series of editors who are discussing the story. The authority of Barth is diminished because of his literary device which makes a story about a story. The reader then is free to determine what the story is about, not what the author is about. In a sense, the real, the personal interpretation of the factual, is returned to individual
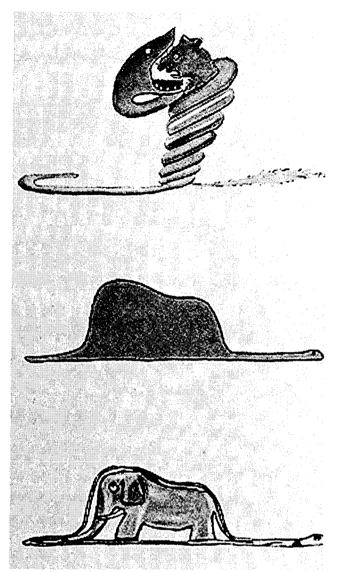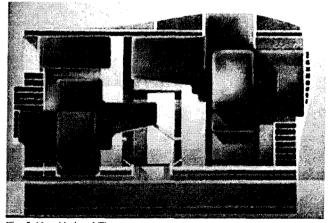

Fig. 4. The Little Prince.[17]

Fig. 5. New National Theater.

CONCLUSIONS

The question was stated earlier whether reconciliation was possible between the necessities of the free market and the desire for meaningful architecture? Architecture is a monster (mediator) because its

production involves recognizing and combining a variety of physical and conceptual variables. The real and the factual are both inevitable and valuable. Demitrios Porphyrios has suggested that heterotopia, typology, and metaphor have or will fail because they are concerned in some degree to project a "false consciousness of reality"[19] — a fiction in other words. While these issues do raise many questions, they have not failed or will not fail because of projection of a false consciousness. If anything, their failure will be attributed to the fact that the consciousness they projected was not false enough — the fiction was not sustained. Pragmatically speaking, these issues were not very useful and therefore they failed. It has been suggested that, "Language so liquefies the world that one never gets to the real thing."[20] The question that needs to be asked is not how to eliminate the "liquid" (real); that is impossible. The real — the individual interpretation of the factual — is necessary if meaning is to exist. The important questions have to do with ways in which we begin to recognize the value of the "liquid" in completing the role of architecture as mediator, and ways in which the plasticity of architecture is maintained.

There is nothing wrong with an illusion of intensity, provided the illusion is sustained.[21]

NOTES
[1] Edgar Wind, *Art and Anarchy* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1985), p. 88.
[2] Ibid. p. 15.
[3] Massimo Cacciari, *Architecture and Nihilism: On the Philosophy of Modern Architecture* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993), p. 59.
[4] Ibid. Pp. 59-60.
[5] Georg W.F. Hegel, *Vorlesungen uber die Aesthetik, vol II* (Berlin: Berlag von Dunder und Humblot, 1843), p. 236. Also Georg W.F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of Fine Art, vol II*, trans. F.P.B. Osmaston (London: G. Bells and Sons, LTD., 1920), p. 397.

Hegel's term, "unendliche Herumbildung," is translated by Osmaston as meaning "infinite reconstruction." It is not entirely clear but the translation of "Herumbildung" to mean "plasticity" may be attributed to E. Wind (see note 3). Regardless of the credit for the translation, the notion of the endlessly transformable or malleable suggests the possibility of continual, adaptive change.
[6] Wind, *Art and Anarchy* , p. 24.
[7] Tom Robbins, *Skinny Legs and All.*
[8] Gilles Deleuze, "The Fold – Leibniz and the Baroque, the Pleats of Matter," *Architectural Design Folding Architecture* (New York: VCH Publishers Inc., 1993), p 17.
Gilles Deleuze states, "The Baroque refers not to an essence but rather to an operative function, a trait. It endlessly produces folds. It does not invent things: there are all kinds of folds coming from the East, Greek, Roman, Romanesque, Gothic Classical folds... Yet the Baroque trait twists and turns its folds, pushing them to infinity, fold over fold, one upon the other. The Baroque fold unfurls all the way to infinity."
[9] Greg Lynn, "Multiplicitous and Inorganic Bodies," *Assemblage* 19 (1992): 38.
[10] Ibid. p. 39.
[11] Marco Frascari, *Some Mostri Sacri of Italian Architecture,* AA Files #14 (London: Architectural Association, 1987) p. 42.
[12] Robert Maxwell, *Sweet Disorder and the Carefully Careless* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1993), p. 289.
[13] Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991), p. 4.
[14] Cacciari, *Architecture and Nihilism* . p. 5.
[15] Ibid. p. 8.
[16] Plato, *The Republic* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1992), pp. 78-81.
[17] Rodolfo Machado and Rodolphe el-Khoury, *Monolithic Architecture* (New York: Prestel-Verlag, 1995), p. 10.
[18] John Barth, *Giles Goat-Boy or, The Revised New Syllabus* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1966).
[19] Maxwell, *Sweet Disorder and the Carefully Careless*, p. 151.
[20] Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe, *Beyond Piety* z (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 321.
[21] Wind, *Art and Anarchy* , p. 26.