

# SITE

► **Marxism in Venice.** Picture postcard, unknown artist, 1983

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CONTENTS

PAGE 2  
*Letter to Hofmannsthal*  
By Edmund Husserl

PAGE 3  
*Phenomenology and the Possibility of a Pure Art: Husserl's Letter to Hofmannsthal*  
By Sven-Olov Wallenstein

PAGE 5  
... (why Husserl) ...  
(why Husserl is more contemporary than time itself) ...  
(time itself) ...  
By Nicholas Smith

PAGE 9  
*On Viewing: The Continuous Negotiation Between Image and Viewer in the Works of David Claerbout and Jeff Wall*  
By Bert Vandenbussche

PAGES 12–13  
Site Project:  
*Twentieth Century Legacy*  
By Carl Michael von Hausswolff

PAGE 14  
*Robert Smithson and the Importance of a Sovereign Criticism*  
Lars-Erik Hjertröm  
Lappalainen

PAGE 16  
*Architecture, Critique, Ideology*  
By Sven-Olov Wallenstein

(S)Talking Tafuri: Tafuri anno 2009  
By Rixt Hoekstra

PAGE 18  
*Intellectual Work and Capitalist Development: Origins and Context of Manfredo Tafuri's Critique of Architectural Ideology*  
By Pier Vittorio Aureli

PAGE 21  
*The Task of Architectural History, Today*  
By Andrew Leach

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## Venetian Views

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“Ich habe etwas ganz Wunderbares gesehen. Nein, ich kann es dir nicht sagen. Nein.”  
Edmund Husserl's last words to his wife Malvine

**The philosophical journey** begun in Edmund Husserl's (1859–1938) quest for a phenomenological origin of the sciences, of our experience of ourselves, and of the world, is still underway. His 150th anniversary might be taken as an opportunity to pause and reflect upon the divided trajectories that have characterized the philosophical geography of the last century: the split between analytic and Continental thought, but also the interior rifts and conflicts that have come to mark the latter, this nebulous entity known as “Continental philosophy”.

It is often said that phenomenology, especially in its post-Husserlian variants, has a certain affinity with aesthetic experience, and that the concept of sense that it wielded from the very outset made it more permeable to questions that lay outside the sphere of the sciences. While this is less true of Husserl himself, the development that had begun in Heidegger and was continued in Gadamer and various French followers in many ways warrants this description. But what then of Husserl himself? In a dense and even enigmatic letter to the poet Hugo von Hofmannsthal, written in 1907, when Husserl felt he had just discovered the essential outlines of his own method, he suggested a close proximity between the intuitive procedure of a pure phenomenology and a pure art, and his reflections on phantasy and image consciousness in fact draw him close to certain developments in early modern art.

Other related aspects of Husserl's phenomenology would intrigue later readers, not the least of which was his profound analysis of temporality, which is at the core of Nicholas Smith's essay. Drawing on, but also rectifying, Derrida's influential analysis in the light of recently published manuscripts, Smith shows the centrality of time

in Husserl's thought, and why he is, and will remain, “contemporary” in all senses of the word.

A crucial art-critical debate that erupted in the late 1960s concerned precisely the question of time, and the reference to phenomenology played a highly ambiguous role: minimal art, Michael Fried argued, introduces a temporal flow in the experience of art objects, which makes their “presentness” degrade into the everyday time of “presence” and dismantles their autonomy. Reversing the argument proposed by Fried, Bert Vandenbussche's essay picks up this thread in an essay that scrutinizes the work of Jeff Wall and David Claerbout, and reads the relationship between audience and work as a dynamic game of identification and alienation, or a “continuous negotiation”.

One of the first to emphatically assume Fried's negative charge as a positive point of departure was Robert Smithson, whose works and writings are often taken as the very paradigm of the radical shift towards the idea of “art in general” that occurred during the '60s. If Fried chastised in-betweenness as hostile to artistic quality, Smithson welcomed it, and Lars Erik Hjertröm discerns an analogous positive reversal in Smithson's writings: moving between academia, criticism, and fiction, Smithson invents a kind of “sovereign criticism” that stays so close to the object that it discovers a “subhuman” dimension of language itself.

The Venice School, and in particular the work of Manfredo Tafuri, which is the object of the thematic section in this issue, can be understood as a critical excavation of all ideas of purity in art or architecture is only a superficial effect of underlying social processes. In his influential

interpretation of the first phase of modernism in architecture and the arts, the task of the avant-garde, Tafuri suggests, was in fact to introject and master the causes of anxiety in modernity, so that they could be affirmed as the new cultural form of the Metropolis.

Tafuri's work spans architectural history from the Renaissance to the 1980s, and any interpretation of modern architecture that ignores him undoubtedly condemns itself to irrelevance. And yet his legacy is a contested one: does the kind of critical theory he proposed in fact block our perception of the present, should it be respectfully laid to rest in the archives, or is there a need to re-think—with, through, against him—the task of critical theory?

For Rixt Hoekstra, we must separate the program of research initiated by Tafuri from the context of 1960s and '70s Italian politics – and it is clear that the question of the ideological role played by architecture and the negative logic of the “Metropolis” is very much alive today, as can be seen in the writings and projects of someone like Rem Koolhaas. Pier Vittorio Aureli's essay addresses the historical context as well, but it does so in order to show that the thesis of a “death of architecture” often ascribed to Tafuri appears rather different when seen in the light of his analysis of “intellectual work”. Andrew Leach, finally, asks the question of the historian's own practice, and of how we today should approach the divide between the “critical” and the “operative”, especially in view of Tafuri's sustained reflection on the tools of historiography itself, and suggests that this is what constitutes the most productive as well as the most problematic part in his legacy. •

THE EDITORS

# Letter to Hofmannsthal

## Edmund Husserl



↑  
Hugo von  
Hofmannsthal,  
1874–1929

Göttingen, January 12th, 1907  
Hoher Weg 7

Dear Herr von Hofmannsthal,  
You have told me<sup>1</sup> how difficult life is for you because of a constantly swelling flood of letters. But since you graced me with such an exquisite gift,<sup>2</sup> I must thank you nonetheless. You have to bear the consequences of the evil deed, and allow yet another letter to wash over you. I must also deeply apologize for not thanking you right away. Long sought-after syntheses of thought suddenly presented themselves, as if dropped from the heavens. A considerable amount of work was required to quickly provide them with a stable form. Your “short dramas”, which were constantly by my side, were a great source of inspiration, even though I was only able to read certain parts here and there.

For me, the “inner states” that are portrayed in your art as purely aesthetic, or not exactly portrayed, but elevated into a sphere of pure aesthetic beauty, these states hold, in this aesthetic objectification, a particular interest—i.e. not only for the art lover in me, but also for the philosopher and “phenomenologist.” For many years I have attempted to get a clear sense of the basic problems of philosophy, and then of the methods for solving them, all of which led me to the “phenomenological” method as a permanent acquisition. It demands an attitude towards all forms of objectivity that fundamentally departs from its “natural” counterpart, and which is closely related to the attitude and stance in which your art, as something purely aesthetic, places us with respect to the presented objects and the whole of the surrounding world. The intuition of a purely aesthetic work of art is enacted under a strict suspension of all existential attitudes of the intellect and of all attitudes relating to emotions and the will which presuppose such an existential attitude. Or more precisely: the work of art places us in (almost forces us into) a state of aesthetic intuition that excludes these attitudes. The more of the

existential world that resounds or is brought to attention, and the more the work of art demands an existential attitude of us out of itself (for instance a naturalistic sensuous appearance: the natural truth of photography), the less aesthetically pure the work is. (To this also belong all kinds of “tendency”.) The natural stance of the mind, the stance of actual life, is “existential” through and through. Things that stand before us in a sensuous way, the things of which actual scientific discourse speaks, are posited by us as realities, and acts of mind and will are based on these positings of existence: joy—that this *is*, sorrow, that this is *not*, wish, that it could *be*, etc. (= existential attitude of the mind): the opposite pole of that stance of the mind that belongs to pure aesthetic intuition and the corresponding emotional state. But just as much the opposite pole of the pure phenomenological attitude of the mind, which is the only one within which philosophical problems can be solved. For the phenomenological method too demands a strict suspension of all existential attitudes. Above all in the critique of knowledge.<sup>3</sup>

As soon as the sphinx of knowledge has posed its question, as soon as we have looked into the abyssal depths of the possibility of a knowledge that would be enacted in subjective experiences and yet contain an in-itself existing objectivity, our attitude to all pre-given knowledge and all pre-given being—to all of science and all assumed reality—has become a radically different one. *Everything* questionable, everything incomprehensible, everything enigmatic! The enigma can only be solved if we place ourselves on its own ground and treat *all knowledge* as questionable, and accept no existence as pre-given. This means that all science and all reality (including the reality of one’s own I) have become mere “phenomena.” Only one thing remains: to clarify, in a pure intuiting (in a pure intuiting analysis and abstraction), the meaning which is immanent in the *pure phenomena*, without ever going beyond them, i.e. without presupposing any transcendent existences that are intended in

them; that is, to clarify what knowledge as such and known objectivity as such mean, and mean according to their immanent essence. This applies to all types and forms of “knowledge.” If all knowledge is questionable, then the phenomenon “knowledge” is the only thing given, and before I permit one particular kind of knowledge as valid, I perform my research in a purely intuiting (as if it were aesthetic) fashion: what validity in general means, i.e., what knowledge as such means, with and in its “known objectivity.” If I am to investigate in an “intuiting” way, I must of course not hold on to a merely verbal quasi-knowing (symbolic thought), but to the proper, “evident” and “insightful” knowing, even though the symbolic thought, in its relation to evident knowing, also requires a phenomenological analysis of essences.

Phenomenological intuiting is thus closely related to the aesthetic intuiting in “pure” art; obviously it is not an intuiting that serves the purpose of aesthetic pleasure, but rather the purpose of continued investigations and cognition, and of constituting scientific insights in a new sphere (the philosophical sphere).

Another thing. The *artist*, who “observes” the world in order to gain “knowledge” of nature and man for his own purposes, relates to it in a similar way as the phenomenologist. Thus: not as an observing natural scientist and psychologist, not as a practical observer of man, as if it were an issue of knowledge of man and nature. When he observes the world, it becomes a phenomenon for him, its existence is indifferent, just as it is to the philosopher (in the critique of reason). The difference is that the artist, unlike the philosopher, does not attempt to found the “meaning” of the world-phenomenon and grasp it in concepts, but appropriates it intuitively, in order to gather, out if its plenitude, materials for the creation of aesthetic forms.

\*

What a hopeless and typical professor! He cannot even open his mouth, without giving a lecture.

But happily enough, part of the philosophical “essence” of a lecture is the absence of a demand for an answer, and the same thing holds for the essence of “academic freedom,” that one can fall asleep or skip school as much as one wants.

But I wish you all the best, dear H, in the new year. And what I wish you, I wish the entire world of people who take such a great interest in your inner development and growth, with its blossoms and flowerings.

P. S. I find myself reluctant to say anything about your work. I think that you would be indifferent to praise and scorn, and wise talk of any kind. And the three golden rules for the artist (in the widest sense), which at the same time are the public secrets of all true greatness, are surely familiar and evident to you: 1) He shall have genius—obviously, otherwise he *is* not an artist. 2) He shall follow, purely and solely, his *daimonion*, which, from within, drives him to an intuiting-blind production. 3) Everyone else knows better, thus he observes them all—in a purely aesthetic and phenomenological fashion.

With best regards, from all of us to all of you

Yours truly  
E. Husserl •

*Husserliana Dokumente, Briefwechsel*, vol. VII, *Wissenschaftlerkorrespondenz*, (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1994), 133–36. Translation: Sven-Olov Wallenstein.

#### Notes

1. Hoffmannsthal visited Husserl on December 6, 1906, when he was in Göttingen to give a lecture at the invitation of Theodor Lessing.
2. Presumably Hofmannsthal’s *Kleine Dramen* (1906). This volume has however not been found in Husserl’s library.
3. I am leaving out the parallel domains of the philosophical critique of “practical” and “aesthetic,” in general evaluating “reason.” (Husserl’s marginal note.)

# Phenomenology and the Possibility of a Pure Art: Husserl’s Letter to Hofmannsthal

Sven-Olov Wallenstein

## I. Aesthetics and art in the phenomenological tradition

Within the first decades of phenomenological philosophy, there emerged two main responses to a question that had already been broached in German Idealism: what is the significance of art and aesthetics for philosophy? Do works of art constitute yet another object of study that can be safely circumscribed and eventually endowed with a limited “autonomy”, or do they point toward a dimension that exceeds the grasp of philosophy, and exceeds it not merely as an external factor, but as something more intimate than subjective interiority itself, something that would be inextricably bound up with the very possibility of thought?

The first and more restricted response, which focuses on the a priori or eidetic conditions of the aesthetic object, was the one that took precedence among those philosophers that remained within the orbit of Husserl’s initial proposals. The second and more provocative response, which to a large extent draws on Heidegger’s rejection of the concept of aesthetics in the 1930s, belongs to a later phase, where the “event” of the work demands of thought that it rethink its own concepts, and ultimately aspires to transform the discourse of philosophy itself. That this was a historical *repetition* of the question was, within the first type of response, largely unconscious—or at least not an explicit focus. But it became increasingly important in the second response, since this turned out to be a history that would take us back not only to idealism, but even, as if in a series of ever widening circles, to Plato and a certain restaging of the “ancient quarrel”, the *palai diaphora*, staged in the *Republic*, where poetry appears as the *rival* par excellence of philosophy.

This decisive presence of questions of art and aesthetics—both in the restricted and the general sense—in the phenomenological tradition, especially as it developed into various existential, hermeneutic, and deconstructive phases, from Heidegger and Gadamer to Sartre and Merleau-Ponty, Ricoeur and Derrida, is matched only by the scarcity of Husserl’s own comments on the topic. Even though he at various points in his career suggested a parallel between the phenomenological *epoché* (the suspension of our “positings of existence” in favor of an examination of their *sense*) and the aesthetic attitude,

this proximity seems never to have become a decisive issue for him, and it never led him to any in-depth questioning of the primacy of the theoretical attitude. But as early as the time of the transcendental turn of phenomenology, first announced in 1913 in the first volume of *Ideas*, there emerged a wide range of attempts to develop a phenomenology of art, to the effect that Werner Ziegenfuss in 1927 could publish a thesis entitled *Die phänomenologische Ästhetik*, dedicated to a systematic survey of works written from a more or less phenomenological standpoint, which all in various ways dealt with what in Husserl’s vocabulary could be called the “regional ontology” of the work of art.<sup>1</sup> Roman Ingarden’s investigations into the layers of signification in the literary work of art (*Das literarische Kunstwerk*, 1931) constitute a landmark in this development, and it was continued after the war in Mikel Dufrenne’s systematic analyses of aesthetic experience (*Phénoménologie de l’expérience esthétique* 1953).

These two lines of inquiry have each developed separately, but they have also intersected, picked up influences from other traditions, and produced new hybrid forms. In this sense, the tradition of phenomenological aesthetics is still in the making, its identity highly fluid. However, it is also true that it has suffered from a certain historical jetlag in relation to contemporary art, and sometimes turned into a set of aesthetic values and an implicit defense of an unquestioned modernist canon rather than an analytical approach.<sup>2</sup> Re-reading some of the decisive documents from the first phase with an eye to their ambiguity—for which Husserl’s 150th anniversary provides us with an opportunity as good as any—gives us a vantage point from which some aspects of the present may be discerned, and from which the possibility of a phenomenological aesthetic can once more be addressed as a living question.

## II. The object of phantasy and aesthetic intuition

Explicit although brief references to aesthetics are scattered throughout Husserl’s work, but only on a few occasions does he address the question head-on. Many of these passages can be found in the volume *Phantasie, Bildbewusstsein, Erinnerung*,<sup>3</sup> where Husserl, in his attempts to grasp the phenomenological essence of phantasy

and image consciousness, often draws on artistic examples; then there is an important section in the volume on the phenomenological reduction (which assembles manuscripts from 1926 to 1935), where Husserl brings out the proximity of reduction to art, but also attempts to define a line of demarcation between them; and finally, there is the brief, dense, even enigmatic letter to Hugo von Hofmannsthal (translated here), written in 1907, the year after the idea of the *epoché* was beginning to take form, and which thus occupies an absolutely crucial place in the chronology of Husserl’s development.

Husserl’s apparent lack of interest in the topic is undoubtedly due to the general direction of his philosophy as it emerges in the 1890s: regardless of how we may finally assess the influence of Frege’s criticism of the earlier work on the philosophy of arithmetic, the move away from psychologism was part of an attempt to provide a secure foundation for the mathematical and logical disciplines, as well as for the natural sciences, and even though the question of the foundations of the human and social sciences was always there, it was never the focal point of Husserl’s research.

The excursions into the domain of aesthetics that we find in *Hua* XXIII belong to the preparatory investigations for a systematic presentation that Husserl in a note from 1906 describes as a “very comprehensive work on perception, phantasy, and time.”<sup>4</sup> This work, which, like most of Husserl’s projected books, failed to materialize (parts of it were however published in Husserl’s lifetime in the 1928 Heidegger/Stein edition of the lectures on time-consciousness), would have meant a step beyond the sphere delineated in the *Logical Investigations* (1900), and it would have started off from the “opposite pole”, i.e. the pole of sensuous experience that must precede the sphere of “judgment”. Aesthetic issues indeed form a part of this sphere, and although they are always subordinated to the more general issues of phantasy and image consciousness as such, the attempt to define the various modes of “representation” (*Vergegenwärtigung*) as opposed to direct perception or “presentation” leads Husserl to scrutinize the experiences we have of paintings, sculptures, photographs, theater performances etc., even of the newly born art form of cinema (cf. 536f/645f)—experiences which often appear as paradigmatic for the whole domain

under investigation. Phantasy furthermore presents a particular problem in transporting us into a world of its own, and although Husserl initially thought that phantasy could be analyzed as a particular “neutralization” of a previous positing of actuality, he eventually gave up this two-step view, which in fact makes the structure of phantasy, as an *originally non-positional act*, even more difficult and enigmatic, but also more decisive.

Phantasy in fact plays a crucial role in phenomenology, since the technique of “phantasy variation” is what opens up the whole domain of essences—it is the “vital element” of phenomenology, Husserl says in another context (cf. *Ideas* I, § 70). Understood in opposition to perception, memory, and expectation, it is an inventive rather than a positing act, it is endowed with a highly “protean character” (*Hua* XXIII 58/63), and characterized by modes such as “as it were”, “as if”, and “quasi-”, which are directed against the mode of actual existence. The phantasy object, Husserl says, is always vague, veiled, and unstable, and only given as “hovering before us” (335/405).

In many of his descriptions, Husserl appears to be retrieving the Kantian vocabulary of imagination and beauty in the third *Critique*, for instance when he determines phantasy as the domain of “disinterestedness” (577/694), “purposelessness,” and “play” (577/695). Another echo of Kant, this time with respect to the his analysis of reflexive judgment and feeling, can be overheard when Husserl emphasizes that I can indeed pass judgments on phantasied objects, just as I can have feelings towards them, although in a “quasi”-mode that separates such acts from those that are based on perception (from determining judgments and acts that involve interest, as Kant would say). Phantasy is characterized by freedom, at the limit even an “unconditioned arbitrariness” (534/692), which is an indication of its subjective character, as well as of its opposition to the normal perceptual world. This subjective nature does not preclude the phantasied object having a certain identity, although Husserl’s understanding of this was shifting: sometimes he understood this object as something “possible,” but in the end he abandoned this view, just as he abandoned the theory of phantasy as a modification of a prior positing of existence. Phantasy constitutes an *object of its own*, and the many conceptual shifts and displacements that



▲  
Edmund Husserl, 1859–1938

traverse *Hua* XXIII—in Husserl’s own and often cited words: “every step forward yields new points of view from which what we have already discovered appears in a new light, so that often enough what we were originally able to take as simple and undivided presents itself as complex and full of distinctions” (18/19)—may, at least with respect to the structure of phantasy, be taken as a gradual elaboration of the autonomy of the phenomenon at stake. Husserl was never a theorist of “pure art”, although his analysis of phantasy as an originary and irreducible mode of consciousness could be taken as pointing in this direction.

As we have noted, these discussions always inscribe art in the more general space of phantasy. In the sections on “image consciousness” Husserl however approaches the phenomenon from the point of view of the material object, and in extended and painstaking analyses he attempts to demonstrate the peculiar nature of the material substratum of the image. He proposes that we must distinguish between the thing, which is the work of art “in an improper sense,” and the aesthetic object, which is located as a construct on a higher level and corresponds to an aesthetic intentionality of a particular kind, without these two objects being correlated in any necessary and/or causal fashion (aesthetic response must be free, as Kant would say, and it cannot be compelled by any concept, either theoretical or practical). There is in fact an intricate interplay here between materiality and ideality, mediated by an “image object” that Husserl describes as a “figment” (*Fiktum*) or “semblance” (*Schein*): the materiality is what makes the object public (unlike phantasy, which remains private), but what we see in image consciousness is, rigorously speaking, only the image object, where a certain “seeing-in” makes the subject of the image (Bismarck, the Madonna) appear, and distinguishes it from a symbol or a sign. The dialectic “suppression” of the necessary materiality of the image sets up a complex dialectic: the canvas as a real existing object, physical image, the image subject, which can be purely fictional, and the image object, which is indeed what is perceived in principle, although it “has no existence at all” (22/23) and can be understood as a “*nothing*” (46/50). The gambit of modernist painting, from Cubism to Suprematism and onwards, starts somewhere here, in drawing on these phenom-

enological structures as a set of tools for creation.

In the letter to Hofmannsthal, Husserl points directly to the proximity of the activity of the artist to that of the philosopher. He begins by excusing himself for not having written earlier, suggesting that an important breakthrough is the reason for the delay: “Long sought-after syntheses of thought suddenly presented themselves,” he writes, “as if dropped from the heavens”—which may be taken as a reference to the whole complex of the *epoche*, which had begun to dawn on him in 1906. These syntheses now appear to be closely connected to those “inner states” that Husserl finds in Hofmannsthal,<sup>4</sup> and they point towards the true method that Husserl believes he has just uncovered. Just as

### In the letter to Hofmannsthal, Husserl points directly to the proximity of the activity of the artist to that of the philosopher.

art, phenomenology must depart from all “natural” and “existential” attitudes (i.e., those that assume certain things as simply there and existing, and are modes of “actual” life and consciousness). Art must exclude all influences from the intellect and the will. Here too we may recognize certain features from Kant: pure aesthetic judgments must suspend, if not entirely undo, the relations to the faculties of knowledge and desire (a connection that Husserl himself makes in *Hua* XXIII, cf. 145/168 note), as well as any political “tendency”. The more the “the existential world resounds or is brought to attention,” the less aesthetically pure the work is, Husserl claims, whereas the world opened up by phenomenology and the *epoche* is a field of pure intuiting, a conversion that lays bare a new foundation for our epistemic, ethical, and aesthetic stances.

This foundation, however, first appears as almost wholly foreign to the *fundamentum inconcussum* in the Cartesian sense, and more as an intense experience than that our everyday convictions are slipping away: in the “abyssal depths” opened up by the *epoche*, we must say “Everything is questionable, everything incomprehensible, everything enigmatic!” In order to solve this mystery, we need to place ourselves “on its own ground”, which itself at first sight appears as a certain groundlessness that demands of us that we “treat all knowledge as questionable, and accept no existence as pre-given.”

Phenomenological intuiting is in this sense closely allied with aesthetic intuiting as the possibility of a presuppositionless research—carried out in an “as it were” aesthetic fashion, Husserl says—even though a certain epistemic quality in the end determines their relation: aesthetic intuiting, in a suspension of all forms of positing of value and existence that liberates the imagination, provides a key to what phenomenological intuiting might mean, although in the final instance the latter is always called upon to found the former as one of its regional modalities.

The task of the artist is threefold, Husserl concludes: he must be a *genius* (once more a Kantian echo: unlike science, art need not account for all of its steps and procedures, and it does not attempt to grasp the world in concepts); he follows his own *demon*; and he observes the world in a “purely aesthetic and phenomenological fashion”. Together, this demon and this capacity for observation, Husserl suggest, lead to an “intuiting-blind production” (*schauend-blindem Wirken*). The idea of a pure art and a pure phenomenology in this way remain closely tied together, and the first wave of abstraction that emerged at the same time Husserl wrote his letter was one way to articulate this connection. Others would follow, opposing themselves to a certain modernist “purity” by, often unwittingly, drawing on other aspects of the phenomenological heritage, most notably temporality and kinaesthesia. The story of these highly complex exchanges remains to be written. ●

#### Notes

1. Werner Ziegenfuss, *Die phänomenologische Ästhetik* (Berlin: Arthur Collignon, 1928). The early history of phenomenological aesthetics is still relatively unexplored; for two works that survey this development, see Gabriele Scaramuzza, *Le origini dell'estetica fenomenologica* (Padua: Antenore, 1976), and Georg Bensch, *Vom Kunstwerk zum ästhetischen Objekt. Zur Geschichte der phänomenologischen Ästhetik* (Munich: Fink, 1994).
2. It is undoubtedly true that, for a long time, a certain type of modernist reflection on painting, from the most sophisticated to the most naïve, could draw on an implicit phenomenological premise, i.e., that painting could serve as the paradigm for a return to an originary stratum of sense and sensibility that would precede technological mediation, and thus save and preserve something that is lost in other media. The most famous example is Merleau-Ponty’s meditations on the “truth in painting” that Cézanne constantly promised and withheld in his attempts to articulate a “first word”; cf. Merleau-Ponty, “Le doute de Cézanne”, in *Sens et non-sens* (Paris: Nagel, 1948). In the subsequent development of postwar French abstraction, phenomenology indeed served as a privileged interlocutor, eminent examples of which can be found in Henri Maldiney’s essays from the early ‘50s and onward, collected in *Regard Parole Espace* (Lausanne: L’Age d’Homme, 1973). A more contemporary case, which draws on the same legacy, is Eliane Escoubas *L’espace pictural* (La Versanne: Encre Marine, 1995). Robert Klein provides a brief and rather skeptical assessment of the connection between phenomenology and “informal” painting in the ‘40s and ‘50s in his “Peinture moderne et phénoménologie”, in Klein, *La forme et l’intelligible* (Paris: Gallimard, 1970). It would however be misleading to connect someone like Cézanne solely to phenomenology; cf. for instance Jean-François Lyotard, “Freud selon Cézanne”, in Lyotard, *Des dispositifs pulsionnels* (Paris: Bourgois, 1980 [1973]), which poses the deconstructing of sense and the muteness and opacity of Cézanne’s last works, read in terms of the “figural” operations of libidinal economy, against both the theatrical and representational space of Freud, and what Lyotard calls the “gullibility of the phenomenologist”.
3. *Phantasie, Bildbewusstsein, Erinnerung. Zur Phänomenologie der anschaulichen Vergegenwärtigungen. Texte aus dem Nachlass (1898–1925)*, *Husserliana*, vol. XXIII, ed. Eduard Marbach (The Hague, Nijhoff, 1980). Eng. trans. by John B. Brough as *Phantasy, Image Consciousness, and Memory (1898–1925)*, *Collected Works*. Vol. 11 (Dordrecht: Springer, 2005). The *Husserliana* edition of Husserl’s works will henceforth be cited as *Hua*, followed by volume and page number, then by a page reference to the English translation (if available).
4. For details on this, see the introductions by Rudolf Boehm in *Hua* X, xv, and by Eduard Marbach in *Hua* XXIII, xxxiii ff.
5. It should be noted that the idea of artistic intuiting presented by Husserl is in fact reminiscent of Hofmannsthal’s own views, for instance in the famous “Chandos Letter” (1902); cf. “Ein Brief,” in Hofmannsthal, *Gesammelte Werke*, ed. Bernd Schoeller (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1979), vol. 7, 461–72.

# ... (why Husserl) ... (why Husserl is more contemporary than time itself) ... (time itself) ...

Nicholas Smith

Et, en effet, vous retrouverez toujours ce geste chez moi, pour lequel je n’ai pas de justification ultime, sauf que c’est moi, c’est là où je suis. Je suis en guerre contre moi-même, c’est vrai, vous ne pouvez pas savoir à quel point, au-delà de ce que vous devinez, et je dis des choses contradictoires, qui sont, disons, en tension réelle, et qui me construisent, me font vivre, et me feront mourir. Cette guerre, je la vois parfois comme une guerre terrifiante et pénible, mais en même temps je sais que c’est la vie. Je ne trouverai la paix que dans le repos éternel. Donc je ne peux pas dire que j’assume cette contradiction, mais je sais aussi que c’est ce qui me laisse en vie, et me fait poser la question, justement, que vous rappelez, “comment apprendre à vivre?”

Jacques Derrida, *Apprendre à vivre enfin, entretien avec Jean Birnbaum*

## I. Au-delà: beyond the French reception of Husserl

Even though Husserl’s thinking has received a remarkable amount of attention over the last decades, the full extent of many of its central aspects still remains surprisingly unknown. It is in particular the development of genetic phenomenology that is at stake here, as it plunges ever deeper into “originary constitution” ferreting out the structural relations between inner time-consciousness, affectivity and intersubjectivity, while at the same time never giving up static phenomenology and a certain prioritizing of Cartesian subjectivity. To take just one example, Derrida, who spent his formative first fifteen years (between 1953 and 1967) studying Husserl’s oeuvre with exceptional philosophical creativity and rigour, returns to Husserl’s analysis of the lived body and the *sinnliche Untergrund* of reason from *Ideas II* (a theme left conspicuously absent in his major works on Husserl) in one of his last central texts to be published before his death: *Le toucher*, Jean-Luc Nancy. In Derrida’s development, the analysis of Husserl gradually became filtered through the optics of Heidegger’s destruction of ontology. Husserlian phenomenology thereby came to be seen as the pinnacle of a metaphysics of presence, which founded the entire history of western metaphysics. Husserl’s philosophy celebrated a consciousness that addresses itself through the voice of inner thought, in the fullness of the “living present” as its temporal, constitutive foundation. Against this, Derrida argued repeatedly that the desire for presence,

which in the Platonic sense was a desire for the Good (*Rep.* VI), is a desire for that which cannot be had since presence is always divided. If fulfilled, such a desire for the Good would lead to death: pure theoretic vision obliterating all sensuous life. Self-presence for Derrida is in fact always divided, always split and this is what deconstruction set out to demonstrate. But since Derrida’s late reading of Husserl remains within the orbit of texts that he worked with in the 1950s, it will never reach the level of interpretation that is increasingly being called for today. That being said, it is at the same time clear that many of the themes that are only now becoming visible in Husserl’s texts owe much to the patient and inventive interpretative work that Derrida performed, together with Merleau-Ponty and Levinas. The most innovative aspects of their work with respect to Husserl were often presented as decisive steps “beyond” (which the earnest reader soon learned to recognize as following upon the magical *au-delà*: “au-delà des analyses Husserliennes, il faut montrer que ...” etc.). But if it turns out that important parts of these innovations are already to be found within Husserl’s thinking (which more and more seems to be the case), then his philosophy must be reconsidered from this new vantage point. At least such a scenario suggests that the borders of transcendental phenomenology be pushed forward, and the limitations that have become associated with it be opened up for scrutiny again. That would also be the only way to respect the interpretative work that his most demanding and creative disciples have undertaken, thereby contributing to the liberation and fuller understanding of their own work as well.

One such topic that suggests itself in this context is that of difference, in all of its rich, meandering variations in Merleau-Ponty, Levinas and Derrida: *écart*, *écart originaire*, *se différer dans l’identité*, *Différence originaire* and even *différance*. All three worked on these themes during the 1950s and 1960s, in explicit and close connection with Husserl’s analyses of time in its relation to sensuous, bodily affection. In the case of Derrida, more specifically, it was the structure of Husserl’s extended now (consisting of a “now”-point that is inseparably tied to a retention that opens it onto the immediate past and a protention that opens it toward the coming) that brought on his criticism. There is no room in Husserl’s model to account for an originary contamination of the now, since despite its break with traditional

conceptions of the now as a point, it cannot enable us to think outside of the schema of origin-derivation: the now (extended though it may be) is an absolute point of origin which can only be followed by another such point, and the latter is accordingly derived from the first according to the strict laws of temporal succession. What became necessary for Derrida was thus to deconstruct this whole schema and to liberate time from the tyranny of the now as *terra firma*, which is to say from time in its reliance upon the metaphysical foundation of full presence:

The concepts of originary *différance* and of delay are unthinkable within the authority of the logic of identity or even within the concept of time. The very absurdity betrayed *by the terms* provides the possibility—if organized in a certain manner—of thinking beyond that logic and that concept. The word “delay” must be taken to mean something other than a relation between two “presents”; and the following model must be avoided: what was to happen (should have happened) in a (prior) present A, occurs only in a present B (*Writing and Difference*, 329n5).

In the following I would like to point to an alternative reading of Husserl’s philosophy of time and subjectivity, based on material that was never examined by Derrida (except for some marginal references in *Le problème de la genèse*, 238ff). A general problem for interpreting this theme is that Husserl never succeeded in presenting a systematic overview of a phenomenological “transcendental aesthetics”—one that would span over both static and genetic analyses and that would connect the passive syntheses of inner time-consciousness with those of bodily-kinaesthetic syntheses and the constitution of space. And yet many interpreters from Levinas to Henry have stressed this belonging together of temporality and sensuousness in Husserl’s thought, although the closer determination of the two fields is insufficiently developed in all of his published works (and those unpublished that they examined). As a consequence, the co-originality and mutual interdependence of the constitution of space and time, of originary spacing as flesh (*Urleib*) and originary temporization (*Urzeitigung*), which first enables a comprehensive grasp of the originary processes in the living streaming present, has remained virtually unknown.

## II. The radicalized reduction to the “streaming living present”

Husserl devoted many important manuscripts to the closer determination of the structure of the streaming living present in the early 1930s. It is immediately clear that we are not dealing with anything like a solipsistic substance closed upon itself, as if Husserl’s late philosophy was based on the foundation of a solid subjectual core. What we do find is prerequisites that enable the ceaselessly ongoing self-transcending movement in relation both to myself, the world and the other, kept at bay and in relative, yet fragile, stability due to the uninterrupted passive syntheses at work. One of the main features of the late, so-called C-manuscripts on the constitution of time from the 1930s, in comparison to the 1905 lectures and the 1917–18 texts on inner time-consciousness, is that the predominantly formal aspects of the latter give way to a decisively more “concrete” analysis, which stems from the investigation of transcendental life that was undertaken in the meantime. This is clearly reflected in the central concept of *lebendige Gegenwart*, which is analyzed from various angles in virtually all the C-manuscripts. When Husserl refers to the expression *lebendige Gegenwart* in earlier texts, it does not yet have the particular connotations that were first developed in connection precisely with the “radicalized reduction” in March, 1930. This enables Husserl to investigate the constitution of time as pertaining to the “I” more thoroughly in the C-manuscripts, and from this “self-transcending” source as a living streaming presence to further account for all the layers of constitution ending with communally constituted objective time.

For the reduction as presented in his earlier texts leads to a noetic-noematic stream of experiences, whereas the “radicalized reduction” thematized in C-3 from 1930, which leads to the “streaming-living present”, shows us that the representation of consciousness as such a stream is merely a necessary yet naïve pre-stage. This stream is *itself* constituted and the proper transcendental reduction is now to disclose the source of this constitution. The *Rückfrage* into the genetic sources of our world-apperception thus gains a new focus by revealing yet another pre-judgment that clouds our self-understanding. This leads to the sphere of *Urzeitigung*, of originary temporization, which is but another name for the most fundamental process taking place in the living present:

The reduction to the living present is the most radicalized reduction to the subjectivity in which the process of all becoming-valid-for-me is originarily completed, in which all being-meaning is meaning for me and experientially given for me as consciously valid meaning. It is the reduction to the sphere of originary temporization, in which the first and original source-like meaning of time appears—time precisely as living streaming present (XXXIV, Nr. 11 [C 3/1930], 187).

After this new, radicalized reduction is performed, the view of consciousness as a stream of experiences is no longer valid, i.e. is shown to be a naïve presupposition. With this new reduction, we are asked to give up a notion of ourselves that has not only been reached by demanding philosophical labor (i.e. the bulk of Husserl’s published work, except *Crisis*), but which is also deeply rooted in our everyday self-understanding. For once I bracket the validity of regarding myself in terms of my own life process, as my own sequential flow in which one experience is linked with another, we are left only with the very functioning “there” which gives these experiences. Like the absolute consciousness of the early lectures, this functioning center is not itself *in* time and has no location on a temporal scale, since the radicalized reduction has bracketed the representation of time as a stream consisting of one now after the other. This “pre-temporal” present does not come and go but is the constant source of my world-presentifying life, the presentifying present “I” that in this sense must be understood as being my “living” source, my “living” present. But there is more to it than this, since the radicalized reduction brings into view—for the first time—that deeply hidden source that is at the same time that which is closest to us and, precisely because of this the most foreign, most inaccessible aspect of our functioning lives. Husserl tries to capture this paradoxical “egoic” aspect of the streaming living present with the term *Ur-Ich* or *Ur-Ego*.

Natural everyday life in its modern configuration, due to its historically determined (scientific) tendency towards an unquestioned realism, covers over the processes of the *Ur-Ich* to such a degree that they appear completely foreign, “unheard of” for the “I” when they eventually become disclosed by means of the radicalized reduction. This deepest functioning source of time

and also space, conjoined by the originary hyletic that affects our living flesh and thus triggers temporization, is almost fully concealed from our everyday life. These processes that are simply taken for granted are still that which in a sense are closest to us since they *are* our functioning intentionality, that which gives us the world.

The functioning life of transcendental constitution is first “by nature”, but not first “for me”; it represents the hidden philosophical foundation of our naïve, worldly life which, in turn, necessarily must precede philosophical reflection. What we have here is a deepening of the “splitting of the I” (*Ichspaltung*) that has been an integral part of phenomenology from its conception (approached in *Logical Investigations* already as the distinction between the subject in the world and the phenomenologist reflecting upon her worldly self). The position accorded to the phenomenological (which became the transcendental) “I” is now shown to be an intermediary between the worldly “I” and the *Ur-Ich*, which is to say that the transcendental position has been given a new grounding. Husserl’s *Ichspaltung* thus shows how selfhood and otherness in their deepest functioning source are inseparably intertwined, and that consciousness is essentially subjected to a necessary fissure, so long as it wants to understand its own processes. Here Husserl posits the division of the “I” more clearly within the very structure of the streaming living present, thus disclosing the presence of the *Ichspaltung* also at the genetically deepest functioning level. At the very heart of what is most intimately my “own” there is a fissure, a fundamental difference between what pertains to the *Ur-Ich* and to the *Nicht-Ich*. Although in the vicinity of both Heidegger and Derrida’s thought here (*Riß*, *différance*), Husserl does not (unlike Derrida) emphasize the difference itself as originary, as “productive” of the two themes brought together. But that does not mean that we remain safely on the shores of foundational metaphysics, for the “absolute has in itself its ground and in its groundless being its absolute necessity”, as he puts it in a text from 1931 (XV, 385f).

But how does all this talk of *Ur-Ich* at the level of the radicalized reduction relate to Husserl’s late published works? *Crisis* is in fact our sole candidate here, since the radicalized reduction had not been discovered at the time of *Formal and Transcendental Logic* and *Cartesian Meditations*. This type of question raises serious difficulties for any interpreter of Husserl’s late philosophy,

for it is a fact that issues such as inner time-consciousness, originary constitution, drive intentionality, the originary structure of the living streaming present—all these major themes from other texts in Husserl’s late philosophy—are virtually absent from *Crisis*. This is probably the reason why so little attention has been given to these themes and the possible connection they have with Husserl’s more “official” philosophy. The obvious answer to such questions, to the extent that one is even aware of there being an interpretative problem, is to regard the themes related to “originary constitution” (the drives, temporization, etc.) as pertaining to research manuscripts that were never intended for publication at best, and as being private musings that are philosophically totally irrelevant at worst. Both these views are obviously quite wrong, and we know that Husserl was working almost solely for his *Nachlass* in the final years, which after the great systematization of manuscripts in 1935 (the division of manuscripts into groups A–E) became itself a kind of monstrous replacement for the one book that he could never write.

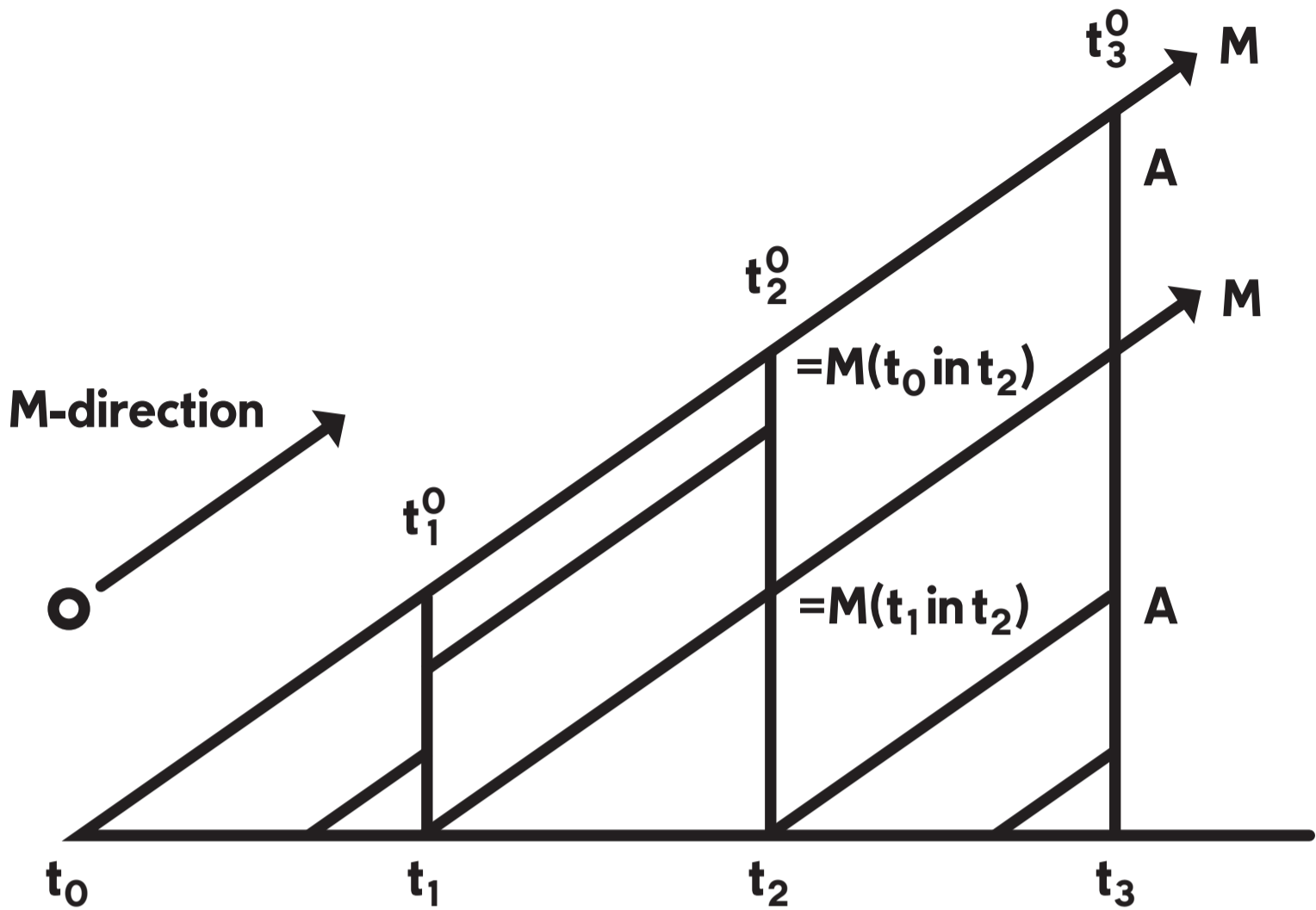
It is important to note that the problematics of the *Ur-Ich*, which in Husserl’s published works most notably surfaces in *Crisis*, is only thematized once intersubjectivity has been properly presented (§ 54b). The problem of the *Ur-Ich* comes to the fore as soon as the seeming discrepancy between the intersubjective and the radically egological conceptions of phenomenology demands a solution. This means that the level of the streaming living present, as the standing-moving source of all intentional life, can be seen as one at which the distinction between “I” and “we” is invalid. It is in this sense that Husserl speaks of the radicalized reduction as creating “a unique sort of philosophical solitude which is the fundamental methodical requirement for a truly radical philosophy”. Thus the “I” that is reached in the *epoche* is not an “I” properly speaking, and as Husserl says, can only be called “I” “by equivocation”. Since to the recollected past there belongs an “I” of that present, which is intentionally related to the present and actual “I” of originary presentification (*Urgegenwärtigung*), we are able to trace how the *Ur-Ich* constitutes itself in self-temporization as enduring by means of its “past”. In a similar fashion, the *Ur-Ich* constitutes in itself another as other (*einen Andern als Andern*). The analogy thus brings out two other aspects of the fundamental self-alterity that inhabits the “I” at the deepest genetic level

of investigation, in that there is within me a ceaseless and constitutive movement away from presence into the past and the future as a *de*-presentification, an *Ent-Gegenwärtigung*, just as there is a movement away as a self-alienation, as *Ent-Fremdung*, which is a modification of this *de*-presentification by means of empathy. We have seen the role of temporality in connection with the individuation of the singular stream of consciousness, and now it is used at the deepest genetic level first made possible by the radicalized reduction also to account for the givenness of the other. So we have on the one hand the alterity of me towards my own past and future, and on the other hand the alterity of me towards the other: what is the relation between these two kinds of alterity? Are they the same?

III. The universal reduction and intersubjectivity

Having spelt out some of the consequences of the radicalized reduction for Husserl’s analysis of egological subjectivity, we must now proceed to see whether or not it will also affect his analysis of intersubjectivity. The intersubjective reduction, first presented in the breakthrough 1910–11 lectures *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, offered a revolutionizing possibility to present the transcendental field as being “extended” by means of my ability to so to speak “live myself into the other” in empathic acts. The structure of this was later more clearly expounded upon by appealing to the notion of “intentional implication”. But all throughout these analyses, there has never been any question of presenting the otherness of the other in ways that would move beyond her givenness for me as retraceable from out of my present intentional situation. That is to say, the other has always been an *alter ego* that I could account for by means of my own intentional life, both active and passive, but never beyond what a genetic questioning would be able to come up with as belonging within my retrievable horizon. The question now is whether or not the radicalized reduction, which brings forth a hitherto concealed genetically primal level of constitution, may disclose an intersubjective dimension that precedes this. There is a whole group of texts that attempt to work out this relation by means of a somewhat different approach, where the static position of an ego standing over against another ego is further geneticized. This final position will be investigated in two steps, first in relation to the radicalized reduction that

▼ Edmund Husserl, graphic representation of the structure of internal time-consciousness



is presently being analyzed, and second in relation to the universal reduction.

In the “concrete living present” understood from the radicalized reduction that was introduced earlier on in C-3, Husserl in this highly important text (which is to some extent unprecedented in at least his transcendental philosophy, although there are important references to German idealism here) begins to draw out the real implications that are opened by means of this reduction. There, he says, we also find every other ego that is transcendently streaming present being, constituted in me as streaming co-present (*mitgegenwärtig*) subjectivity, which itself is concrete, streaming living concrete present: “the other is co-present in me” (*HuMat* 8, 56). This analysis of *Mitgegenwart* will be used to stretch the Cartesian dualism that still stands in the way of a more genuine grasp of intersubjectivity, in that it allows for a greater freedom of manifestation in comparison to the thought of the other as “appresented” by me. This means that the previously so often invoked analogy between recollection and the other undergoes a shift in meaning, in that the “co-present-being” of the other in the originary empathy is now described as a “co-recollection” (*Miterinnerung*), that is to say a “self-recollection of the other (*ein Selbsterinnern der Anderen*; *ibid.* 53f). At the opening of this analysis, Husserl is once more careful to stress that the identity of the self is reassured by means of reflection, stating that the “I” as ego-pole is abstract so long as the contents of the streaming living present are not taken into account: this alone makes it “concrete”. This identity will be subjected to quite severe pressure in the remainder of this seminal text, now that the “I” has been rethought in terms of the living streaming present, and the full force of the streaming as pre-egoic will be shown to also include the other, so that the transcendental field will—at the limit—be shown to be intersubjective. The step that Husserl takes here is the starting point of many of his most interesting late analyses that investigate this deepening of static egology in the direction of a genetic constitutive *intersubjectivity* that is originarily streaming being. Obviously many interpreters have raised objections to this step, claiming that this is “unphenomenological” (Landgrebe, Zahavi, Hart), that Husserl has here crossed the most fundamental line for the very idea of transcendental phenomenology. Many more simply overlook it, as if it wasn’t there, but as this represents the outcome of Husserl’s

transcendental genetic *Rückfrage*, it cannot be dismissed without proper argumentation. Starting out from a philosophical enterprise mainly set upon clarifying epistemological issues, Husserl, by following what at heart remains the same basic reductive methodology, is led to a decentering of the very same ego that was to do the clarification. This however should in no way be conceived of as the abandonment of egology, nor a questioning of its validity: the egological starting point remains as ever our sole access to transcendental phenomenological inquiry. But this very inquiry also brings us to the experience of its limits, and the experience that in the order of constitution there is a genetically deeper layer that is *not* egological and that in this sense precedes the “I”. How can we ever hope to find a way to combine these two perspectives, the egological as essentially first for every transcendental knowledge and the intersubjective as essentially first in some other sense? I think the key to understand this seeming paradox lies in the differentiation that Husserl so often falls back upon between an order of knowledge and an order of being. As epistemology becomes radical phenomenology, it starts to critically examine its own presuppositions and finds not only that there is a hidden transcendental “I” that constitutes the world, but furthermore that this transcendental “I” itself rests on concealed presuppositions that the reductive experience gradually starts to reveal. Intersubjectivity represents the “order of being”, the *ordo essendi* or the *proteron te physei*, but this can only be known and made explicit from an egological point of view that represents the *ordo cognoscendi*, the *proteron pros hemas*. Speaking of the universal reduction towards the end of the *Crisis*, Husserl says that it is only with the utmost difficulty that one can begin to grasp it as something else than a universality of individual reductions:

How could it be possible otherwise? Human beings are external to one another, they are separated realities, and so their psychic interiors are also separated. Internal psychology can thus be only individual psychology of individual souls [...]. All this appears perfectly obvious. Thus one will take it as a gross exaggeration, in part as an absurdity, if I say in advance that the properly understood *epoche*, with its properly understood universality, totally changes all the notions that one could ever have of the task of psychol-

ogy, and it reveals everything that was just put forward as obvious to be a naïveté which necessarily and forever becomes impossible as soon as the epoche and the reduction are actually, and in their full sense, understood and carried out (*Crisis*, § 71, 247).

So it is only by bringing out the temporal foundation as presented in the C-manuscripts that Husserl’s many investigations of *constitutive* intersubjectivity in his other late texts can ultimately be clarified. The *Rückfrage* leads to the experience of a community of streams that are not located in my ego but precisely in a manifold of streaming living presents, united by means of an “intersubjective association” (XV, 191). This deepening of the egology that served as the starting point of the *Cartesian Meditations*, leads to a level of investigation where the “I” is no longer statically opposed to its other in terms of an *alter ego*. It is only by this radical intersubjective reduction, which brings into un concealment the deepest functioning source of both my life *and* that of the others, that the experience of the other as co-presence is enabled. From this originary streaming intersubjectivity a progressive analysis can proceed in displaying the founded static level of *ego–alter ego*, and from that point on social relations at a worldly level. It is the temporal flow itself that makes up this originary community of a plurality of living streaming presents, and this co-presence is to be found at a level where the opposition between different egological streams no longer makes sense. The operative distinction between what is first for me and what is first at the level of being makes it possible, at a first stage, to keep Husserl’s analysis from fusing all distinctions between me and the others in an undifferentiated way.

Husserl broke off his early investigation of the intersubjective reduction in 1910–11 precisely due to the difficulties he encountered concerning the question of how to understand temporality in relation to a manifold of subjects. This remained a vexing question for him, as can be seen in many texts from the early 1920s, where he again reflects on the (as he puts it in one place) “problem of the possibility of connection and separation of the streams of consciousness and that of unification and pluralization” (XIV, 300). He rejects the thesis according to which there is an originary fusion between the monads, and in this sense the whole analysis of individuation of the stream of consciousness that spans over the larger part

of Husserl’s career can be seen as a prolonged phenomenological grounding of Leibniz’ principle of individuation. Once the monad is reinterpreted in terms of the radicalized and the intersubjective reduction, it becomes an expression of this “intersubjective streaming being” as the *Monadenall* (XV, 668). There is no “fusion” of the monads in the *Monadenall*, which would cause serious, and in truth insolvable, problems for the individual identity of transcendental subjectivity. For in each monad there remains, when considered at the deepest genetic level, a ceaseless process of self-alteration which negotiates between the two irreducible aspects of selfhood and otherness. At one extreme there would thus be a fusion of streams of consciousness whereas on the other there would be monolithic egology—both alternatives that are rejected by Husserl. As is suggested at one point, talk of the “I” should really be replaced by talk of the self, *le soi-même*. This suggestion of an “ipseology” instead of an egology is the result of the discovery of the genetic foundation of the “I”, which is presented as “concrete I” and is “determined from its actions and passions”, that is to say “the real I of inner experience” which does not exist abstractly but as “living its life” (XIV, 43f). If the genetic foundation of egology is thus life that is better captured with reference to streaming selfhood rather than to the objectivated “I”, this life does not reject the outcome of reflective knowledge, even though it is not its primary mode of functioning. The monad is here a constantly self-transcending unity, a ceaseless opening towards the world and the other, as a part of the absolutely streaming flow of consciousness that is egologically speaking pre-individuated. Each experience that I have is mine and can never be that of any other, this will never be given up by Husserl, but still every experience is “precisely that window through which I can stretch out to the other and reach him with my motivation” (XIV, 474). It is by interpreting these analyses in terms of the theory of intentional implications that Husserl in the 1920s really finds his way into the heart of these difficult processes. When this is done, it becomes clear to him that the proper way to express this is to say that the plurality of monads is *implicated* in my monad.

#### iv. The genetic-ontological foundation of egology: the self in difference

The gradual unfolding of this level of investigation does indeed pose problems so long as one

refuses to go along with the genetic deepening of the static *ego–alter ego* position that Husserl maintains in the *Cartesian Meditations*. It is only towards the very end of *Crisis* that we find a rigorous account of the loose ends that have been conjured up here, which will enable us to bring this discussion of the genetization of monadology to a preliminary end. Having established the necessity to open up the level of *Ur-Ich* as a bridge between the “ontological” and the “psychological ways” by means of a (non-explicit) radicalized reduction, Husserl brings to a halt the previous investigation of life-worldly intersubjectivity. The reason for this is to further investigate the genetically-transcendental status of the communalization (*Vergemeinschaftung*) and temporization (*Zeitigung*) that were reached in a preliminary fashion earlier on (§§ 47, 50). It is therefore in a sense the very process by which the life world must come to understand *itself* that is at stake, and for this it can only rely on its singular participants. From the position of the “unique sort of philosophical solitude” (*einzigartige philosophische Einsamkeit*)—which is not the mere “unnaturalness” that the first reduction disclosed but its genetic deepening—Husserl begins the complex movement that will lead to at once a radical decentering of the ego, *and* to its unquestioned validity. The whole differentiation and order of the personal pronouns is at this stage rendered invalid, and yet the *Ur-Ich* is something that can never lose its “uniqueness and personal indeclinability”:

It is only an apparent contradiction to this that the ego [...] makes itself declinable, for itself, transcendently; that, starting from itself and in itself, it constitutes transcendental intersubjectivity, to which it then adds itself as a merely privileged member, namely, as “I” among the transcendental others. This is what philosophical self-exposition [*Selbstausslegung*] in the epoché actually teaches us (*Crisis*, § 54b, 185).

In order to show that the contradiction is indeed only “apparent”, which is the problem that has kept the interpretation moving back and forth, Husserl in a high-density formulation brings into play the two-sided process of “de-presentification” (*Ent-Gegenwärtigung*) and “self-alienation” (*Ent-Fremdung*) that was just mentioned. The problem of the individualization of the “intersubjective streaming being”

that characterizes the monadic totality here finds its solution, by means of a ceaselessly ongoing and self-altering duplicity that accounts for my pre-identity at the deepest genetic level. The self-presence that characterizes the transcendental “I” at the level of streaming living present thus ultimately consists of two different modes of self-alteration, which by their very movement brings about this “self”. It is thus not a question of a fixed and stable unit that is stirred to life from out of its eternal slumber in passivity, but a “self” that is constituted *through* these “unconscious” movements away from it. It manifests itself as a dual movement away from “itself”, the “self” gaining contour only by the traces that these two motions leave behind as constantly shifting sedimentation, with the arrival of ever new hyletic material that by means of temporization provides material for the pre-constitution, and from which eventually lived experiences are constituted. *Ent-Gegenwärtigung* here accounts for our temporal projects, and although Husserl here only mentions the past (to explicate the analogy between the givenness of my past and the other), its scope must be extended to the future as well. Unlike retention, the emphasis is now more on the self-transcending movement than on the living-on of temporal objects. Its task is not to assure that the objects are not lost as soon as the now has brought another phase of the object into presence, but to account for the deepest pre-egological structuring. This means that the aspect of non-presence that retentional and protentional intentionality brought with them is now reinforced, bringing out the foreignness that inheres in memories and expectations, and confronting them with their own limits: oblivion and death. *Ent-Fremdung*, on the other hand, is more immediately foreign since it involves not my own self-alterity but the alterity of the other. Beneath empathy, and making it possible for the “I” at higher levels of constitution to intend the other empathically, there is a constant process wherein the *Ur-Ich* (which is prior to all differences between “I” and “we”), by moving away from itself in the direction of the other, thereby produces itself. To speak of “self-alienation” as Carr does in the English translation, is therefore incorrect to the extent that it encourages one to hold on to the illusory notion of a “self” that only afterwards and almost by accident encounters alienating tendencies—for in *Ent-Fremdung* there is no self heard, only movement away and a strange, passive process

(since there is no “I”) of alienation. In between these two intimately connected movements (*Ent-Gegenwärtigung* and *-Fremdung*), an “in-between” that is produced by them, a zone for possible centering occurs. The *Ichzentrierung* that comes about together with these two processes is thus not due to some subjective gravitational force, but is a field of tension that is not located in any specific part within the structure of the living present, but is in a sense “everywhere”, atopic. Husserl seems to mean that this constitutive self-altering duplicity is a constant process that always underlies our passive intentional life as well as our entire experiential act-life, and not something that occurs just once. If we wouldn’t continue this passive dual self-alteration, there would be no self, no egoic centre that could reflectively-narcissistically reach out to itself in apodictic evidence. The constitution of the “I” is a ceaseless process that knows of no pauses. The two aspects of “self”-constitution by means of a primary “self”-alteration (my temporal difference to myself and my difference to the other) are not opposed, but in practice inseparable and always function intertwined one with the other: the self-transcending in the direction of time will always encounter that kind of intensified foreignness that stems from the other. This structure of *Ent-Fremdung* in its temporization in Husserl’s theory serves as the primary “groundless ground” for the possibility to understand the otherness of the other. In this sense, the analysis complies with the most general methodological requirements of transcendental phenomenology, its egological “Cartesianism”, even though admittedly there is not much of an ego to be found at this point.

Derrida’s critique of Husserl for being unable to think beyond the foundations of pure self-presence, pure perception, etc., in short: pre-sentifying modes of givenness (*Gegenwärtigung*) can thus no longer be upheld. According to Derrida, it is the “complicity”, the “metaphysical presupposition in common” between psychology and phenomenology that lies behind Husserl’s adherence to presence, and behind that the complicity with occidental metaphysics at large (*La voix et le phénomène*, 50). But as we have seen, the genetic foundations of the first-level genetic phenomenology that were unearthed by means of the radicalized and the intersubjective reductions also show a far more dynamic approach. Here we discovered the genetic pre-structure of representification (*Vergegenwärtigung*) such as

phantasy, memory of my own past and empathy as the givenness of the other, i.e. what are fundamentally modes of givenness of that which is absent in relation to my extended now. These, it was shown, are not secondary in relation to the stable foundation of an ego, which stands over and against an alter ego in secure possession of itself by means of the self-affection of inner time-consciousness, and can therefore be said to have already from the outset contaminated all points of origin. •

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# On Viewing: The Continuous Negotiation Between Image and Viewer in the Works of David Claerbout and Jeff Wall

## Bert Vandenbussche

### Introduction

Since minimalism, the relationship between an image and its public has been one of the main concerns of contemporary artists. Conceptualists David Claerbout and Jeff Wall conceive of this relationship as a dynamic “game” that constantly oscillates between identification, distancing, and alienating. Perhaps this game can be best described as one of “continuous negotiation”. The term “negotiate”, after all, presupposes a negotiation between two parties (in this case between image and viewer): an exchange of “arguments” whereby the distance of the viewer in relation to the image can be determined. The addition of the adjective “continuous” points to how negotiations are never concluded. The relationship of the viewer to the image, in other words, cannot be pinned down definitively.

### David Claerbout

Claerbout presents most of his projections in a context that is closely related to the cinematographic *black box*: one in which the exhibition space is completely blacked out and wherein large format images are projected towards the front according to the classic aspect ratio 16:9. The artist even takes it a step further by aiming for continuity between the fictive space of the image and the real space of the projection-annex exhibition space. This is most apparent in works such as *The Stack* (2002) and the second projection of *American Car* (2002–4), which fill the entire wall. These projections no longer allow the viewer to perceive the wall as a distinct entity and thereby the distinction between the exhibition space and the space represented by the image is eliminated.<sup>1</sup> This effect is further enhanced by the fact that in the darkened space the viewer is literally surrounded by the light of the projection. By this means, Claerbout’s projections exercise an irresistible attraction on the viewer in which she seems to be swallowed up by it, thus stimulating her identification with the image.

Furthermore, Claerbout’s projections are characterized by a carefully balanced sense of composition, lending them a considerable unity wherein they present themselves as closed and self-sufficient realities. This experience is akin to that of classical film shots, but perhaps can be attributed even more to the absorptive quality of paintings as described by Michael Fried in his studies of late 18th and 19th century painting in France.<sup>2</sup> This impression of an autonomous reality allows the viewer to completely identify with the image, so much so that Claerbout’s viewer imagines herself wandering freely under the bridges in the no man’s land of *The Stack*, in the large garden of *Villa Corthout* (2001) or in the vast landscape of *American Car*. Or, as is the case in *Four Persons Standing* (1999), the viewer witnesses

an even more dramatic scene in which two men and two women are waiting anxiously for something or someone. This experience of anticipation induces in the viewer an ominous feeling of suspense: “something (bad) is about to happen”.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, Claerbout’s characters—whether the sleeping woman in the first projection of *Rocking Chair* (2003), the two observing men in the first projection of *American Car*, or the gathered people at a small football pitch in *The Algiers Sections of a Happy Moment* (2008)—are completely absorbed in their actions and pay no heed to the presence of the viewer.

However, the viewer cannot continually identify with Claerbout’s image as he is confronted with several distancing strategies, forcing him “to step out of the image”.<sup>4</sup> For example, the second projection of *Rocking Chair* shows the rear-view image of the woman filmed from inside her house. The voyeuristic arrival of the viewer causes the woman to briefly look over her shoulder, suggesting that the viewer has penetrated into her house and woken her from her afternoon nap. The woman however, after a few seconds, turns around, lays her head on her hand again, and sleeps on. She adopts a completely introverted attitude, as she is clearly not paying attention to the viewer anymore. In an interview with Stephan Berg, Claerbout explains that such works engage with “the possibility or impossibility of ‘addressing’ a work to a certain audience. I believe there is some sort of negation of contact or interactivity in this piece, which affirms isolation. The few ‘interactive’ pieces that I have made show the subject in a very sunny setting, while the visitor stands on the other side, in darkness.”<sup>5</sup> I would formulate this in a rather different manner. When the explicitly “not-looking-any-more” is experienced by the viewer as a complete rejection, she still feels some kind of residual contact with the woman, albeit in an indirect, denying manner. The viewer knows that she knows that she’s there in her house, but she equally knows that she just doesn’t care; she has deliberately chosen to turn her back on the viewer!

*American Car* complicates this relationship between characters and viewer in another way. The men in the first projection are looking diagonally out of the car and in the second projection they are no longer visible. The viewer just has to assume that they are still present in the car. However the combination of the two projections makes it clear that the viewer himself is being watched all that time. This is similar to the effect in *Rocking Chair* in which the viewer feels addressed by the projection but is similarly negated. It goes without saying that such a negation of contact counters the classical formulation of identification on the part of the viewer with the image. This negation of the viewer becomes

even more existential in *The Stack*, where the viewer is confronted by the brief but confusing apparition of a homeless person, who in most parts of the projection remains invisible, hidden in the shadow on the foreground. “Why does that person suddenly appear in the image? What should I think of him? Am I expected to help him? Or should I stay at a safe distance?” The viewer can no longer merely adopt a pleasurable gaze; she is obliged to give a different form to her gaze in her relationship to the projection in general and to the homeless person in particular.

Claerbout also consciously presents his images as “being made”. One simply cannot deny, for example, the pixelated look of the digital (re)constructed images in *Ruurlo*, *Bocurlosche Weg*, *1910* (1997), *Villa Corthout* or *The Shadow Piece* (2005). The apparent endlessness of hundreds of accumulated snapshots gives the impression of a camera circling around the central event in *The Chinese* and *Algiers Sections of a Happy Moment* (respectively 2007 and 2008) and makes the viewer experience the gap between the artist’s endeavor to fully capture that particular happy moment and its impossibility. This discrepancy accentuates the restrictions of a man-made image. These aspects betray, as it were, the artefactuality of the image, termed by Fried as “to-be-seeness” in his recently published *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before* (2008).<sup>6</sup> They put the natural appearance of the image in brackets, causing a kind of turning over whereby the viewer’s attention is drawn away from the image, that is, away from the represented reality of that which is shown, to the characteristics of the medium: how things are shown. This shift in focus interrupts the viewer’s identification with the image. This is also the case when the viewer becomes aware of the construction of the projection according to the conventions of a specific type of image. For instance, the viewer, as it were, realizes one moment that the various elements of imagery in *Four Persons Standing* and the first projection of *American Car* have been brought into view according to a particular schema, namely that of police or gangster movies from the 1930s and 1940s. This awareness of cinematic conventions has consequences for the viewer’s way of looking given that she no longer experiences that which is filmed as natural and self-evident, but as constructed according to certain conventions. Of course such an informed and self-conscious perception also demands that the viewer distance himself from that which is shown. I would like to refer to this kind of perception as a notion of “theatrical perception” along the lines of that introduced by Elisabeth Burns.<sup>7</sup>

Only some of Claerbout’s works make the viewer aware of their mise-en-scène. These works create a break between the representation

(the reality represented) and that of the event of representation (the conspicuously staging of the image by the artist), resulting in an effect of alienation, a term which I quite naturally borrow from Bertolt Brecht.<sup>8</sup> Although, for example, they give us at first glance the opposite impression, the characters in *Four Persons Standing* and *Villa Corthout* don’t interact at all. They don’t even seem to notice one another’s presence. So rather than forming a coherent group as is suggested, they are a heterogeneous collage of people. This contradictory effect allows the image to estrange itself from itself. Another effect of this estrangement comes from the way in which the projection of *The Algiers Section* puts too much emphasis on the expressiveness of the happy moment; a fact the viewer is made aware of once more by the accumulation of images that each time depict another point of view. Perhaps this explicitness becomes most clear in the very subtle overacting of the characters. They are not professional actors, but Claerbout’s neighbors in Antwerp. He invited them into his studio and let them make several poses in his search for the right expressive attitudes. As we witness these attitudes over and over again, they become more or less unnatural because they are visibly acted. You as viewer eventually realize that they are staged.

“Exhibiting a piece is always a bit like stretching out your hand and saying: ‘Please, take this,’” Claerbout states.<sup>9</sup> And taking the hand back, I would add, as the viewer cannot continually identify with what is given. This continuous process of negotiation in his works—shifting between identification, distancing and alienation—is also at times significantly steered and stimulated by the musical accompaniment. The suggestive soundtrack in *Four Persons Standing* takes the viewer in tow continually. It first builds up a dramatic sense of suspense, which lets the viewer feel that something is about to happen. It leads the viewer, as it were, into the image projection. But in fact the feeling of suspense—that “something” that actually never happens—is diminished by the soundtrack which leaves the viewer stranded with his unanswered expectations. This in turn leads the viewer back out of the projection. *Villa Corthout* and *American Car* do not have a filmic soundtrack as such, but rather one of environmental noises, which are part of the projected reality (such as the blowing of the wind and the strumming guitar music in the former piece and the chirping of birds and the dripping in the second projection of the latter work). Claerbout, however, does not position the audio speakers at the height of the projection screen but spreads them over the entire exhibition space, paradoxically creating a *surround*-effect. The viewer, on the one hand, has the auditive impression that they are in the

► David Claerbout, *The Algiers' Sections of A Happy Moment*, 2008

Single channel video projection, black & white, stereo audio, 37 min 12 sec. Courtesy the artist and galleries Hauser & Wirth, Zürich London; Yvon Lambert, Paris New York and Micheline Szwajcer, Antwerp



space that is represented but is also simultaneously aware of the real exhibition space. By means of sound she “feels” the space, which is surrounding her.

#### Jeff Wall

Like Claerbout, Wall also deploys various strategies in order to undermine the initial absorptive effect of his images. Once again image and viewer are in an ongoing negotiation of their relationship to one another. This relationship can be analyzed through the same three movements: identification, distantiation, and alienation. However, as will be seen, Wall's images foreground their mise-en-scène more explicitly than those of Claerbout.

Foremost, the viewer feels constantly drawn to identify with Wall's images due to their content as well as their formal characteristics. In the first place, the artist makes a lot of use of absorptive characters and motives.<sup>10</sup> Most of his characters are preoccupied by what they are doing, their feelings and/or thoughts and in no way acknowledge the viewer's presence. This is the case for example with *Adrian Walker, artist, drawing from a specimen in a laboratory in the Dept. of Anatomy at the University of British Columbia, Vancouver* (1992). The characters *A Ventriloquist at a Birthday Party in October, 1947* (1990) and *After “Spring Now” by Yukio Mishima, chapter 34* (2000–5) have even their back turned to the viewer. None of them seem to be aware of a spectating audience. The image's attraction in *The Ventriloquist* is further increased by the opening in the middle of the semi-circle, which invites the viewer to go immediately towards the ventriloquist and her doll at the centre of the image. One can also distinguish in Wall's work the two conceptions of absorption Fried spoke of. From this point of view *Mimic* (1984) and *Dead Troops Talk (A Vision After an Ambush of a Red Army Patrol near Moqor, Afghanistan, Winter 1986)* (1986) among others continue the dramatic images of historical paintings. On the other hand the vast landscapes in for example *The Old Prison* (1987) and the forest in *Excavation of the floor of a dwelling in a former Sto/lo nation village* (2003) stem from the pastoral conception of landscape paintings. In spite of the undeniable differences between these images, they all present themselves as perfectly autonomous, introverted, and natural looking realities thus inviting the viewer to be absorbed by them. Various formal factors are also at play in this identification between the image and viewer. The luminosity and optical intensity of Wall's light boxes attract and hold onto the viewer's gaze similar to film and television images. As well as this, Wall's works literally emit light through their internal lighting mechanism and therefore stake out their own “light space” within the exhibition space. Consequently the

viewer, as is the case with Claerbout's projections, is literally engulfed by the work's glow. A final important consideration is the fact that Wall usually affixes these light boxes at eye-level and as such they cannot confront the viewer with his overall position in the exhibition space.

Some details however undermine the absorptive dynamic of most of Wall's images, subtly interrupting the identification of the viewer to create a certain distantiation. This is perhaps best explained on the basis of one of Wall's better-known works, *The Story Teller* (1986), an apparently absorptive image of six characters. The viewer initially notices three characters that are looking out of the image. In so doing they indicate that the something that is attracting their attention is actually happening outside of the image proper. This implies that the image is no longer conceived as a completely autonomous reality, but it is involved with a place outside of the image, which is by definition invisible to the viewer. The viewer is thus aware that she is looking at a limited representation, whereby her initial identification with the image is interrupted. Secondly, the clever positioning of the electricity wires (situated close to the picture plane whereby they throw up a minimally functional yet effective barrier between the exhibition space in front of the represented space behind the picture plane) can alert the viewer to the composition of the entire image. They delineate a triangle, formed by a piece of wood and the highway, which perhaps is reminiscent of the triangular composition of David's *Le Serment des Horaces* (1784) and leads the gaze of the viewer ever deeper up to the white house in the background which is just visible beneath the electricity wires. In this way they divide the image into a lower half, which more or less corresponds to the landscape as such and an upper half, which more or less corresponds to the sky. In making the viewer aware of all this, the wires are a visual marker of the artefactuality and to-be-seeness of the image.

Other works by Wall indicate that a gradual difference in the effectiveness of distantiation needs to be taken into account. In general one could state that the impact of this distantiating dynamic is delineated by a lower and an upper limit. The lower edge guarantees a minimal distantiation, which hinders the viewer from remaining identified with the image as in *The Holocaust Memorial in the Jewish Cemetery* (1987). On the contrary, *The Vampires' Picnic* (1991) operates above the upper edge, demarcating the maximum impact of distantiation. The viewer takes the artificiality of the attitudes of the characters immediately into account, and by consequence, also the theatrical staging of the image creating an effect of alienation.

As has been related with respect to Claerbout,

these distantiating details cause a shift of focus: the viewer's attention is drawn away from that-which-is-shown to how-things-are-shown. In so doing, the viewer can begin to take into account the status of Wall's images as *near documentary photographs*. They look like objective representations of an existing reality, whereas they are in actual fact staged very precisely by the artist. This staging becomes clear from the attitude of some of the characters pictured in his images. Although it isn't always immediately noticeable, many of Wall's characters adopt a specific pose which accentuates their significance within the photograph, as is exemplified by *Picture for Women* (1979). Model and artist both give the impression that they are “aware of their presence within a construction” (to use Wall's words).<sup>11</sup> This transpires from the particular poses of the hands: the model humbly and subversively places her crossed hands in front of herself, while the artist—the young Wall himself—is firmly holding the camera's cable release. These two gestures refer a little too emphatically to the classical relationship between the male artist and the female model: the active artist determines how the model is pictured as a passive character and how she will be seen by the audience. The artist not only figuratively but also literally has the controls in his hands. The emphasis upon these “expressive gestures”, as Wall calls them, creates an effect of alienation.<sup>12</sup> The two characters *show their posing*, causing the viewer to become estranged, which is to say, she realizes that *they are an appearance which is posed by actors in order to be seen by the viewer*.<sup>13</sup>

The posed character comes most strongly to the fore in works such as *The Vampires' Picnic* and *Milk* (1984). The characters explicitly show that they have to act out a certain pose, which has been staged in function of a certain expressivity. Note however how this picture is not a *snapshot* of an existing film-setting (in which actors play vampires), but the staging of a film-setting (in which actors act that they are actors playing vampires). The effect of estrangement of *The Vampires' Picnic* in other words results in the realization that the staging of the film-setting is itself staged. In *A Ventriloquist* the poses are less noticeable in comparison with the two other works. They are as it were disguised from the viewer by the natural looking context of the living room and by the fact that the attention of the viewer is directed towards the ventriloquist and the dummy. The fact that all of the children without exception are facing the ventriloquist coupled with the contradiction between the idea of a birthday party and the expressionless children's faces renders apparent the staged nature of the setting.

The viewer not only finds himself estranged from the characters, but also from the entire

image. Wall often uses what he terms *jump* or *irrational cuts*: contradictions in terms of content which should render visible the staging of an image. They do this by both undermining the unity of an image and by simultaneously affirming it. “They [the jump cuts] appear as their opposites, as adherence to a norm, the unity of the image or picture. I accept the picture in that sense, and want it to make visible the discontinuities and continuities—the contradictions—of my subject matter. The picture is a relation of unlike things, montage is hidden, masked, but present, essentially.”<sup>14</sup> *Jump cuts*, in other words, create yet another break between the representation and the reality represented between the representation and the way in which the reality presented presents itself as a montage. They consequently reveal that the photographed reality has been consciously pictured in order for it to be seen by the viewer in a specific way. Without being exhaustive, I would like to discuss two kinds of *jump cuts*, namely unnatural image details and the representation of a group as collage.

Certain image details make the viewer clearly aware of the staging of the image. They represent objects that don't fit in the reality that is represented. This is the case of the bizarre costume of the ventriloquist's dummy in *The Ventriloquist*, which is composed of a 17th century collar, an army jacket and a skirt of rags. The doll, moreover, is missing a sock and a shoe on its left leg and thus takes on a further grizzled appearance. As a consequence it becomes clear that this is no ordinary child-friendly ventriloquist's dummy as is to be expected at a birthday party. Likewise the man's clothing in *Milk* also reveals that he cannot really be a beggar as suggested by his attitude. He is impeccably dressed in a fashionable shirt and trousers, yet there are laces missing from his recently polished shoes. Such elements absolutely convince the viewer that the image can no longer refer to an objective existing reality but must have been consciously staged by the artist.

Another effect of estrangement comes from the way in which the various characters are presented as a group within an image. The characters of *The Story Teller* and *The Vampires' Picnic* are completely absorbed by their own activity and have little or no involvement with each other (which can after all be expected from a group). As a result they seem to have been depicted just a bit too emphatically, wherein the image presents itself as a collage of absorptive, autonomous characters, created by the artist. This is strengthened even further in both works by the shrewd placement of the characters on the terrain. The characters of *The Story Teller* are not really shown as one group but are very balanced in three

► Jeff Wall, *Fieldwork*, 2003

Excavation of the floor of a dwelling in the former Sto:lo nation village, Greenwood Island, Hope, B.C., August, 2003, Anthony Graesch, Dept. of Anthropology, University of California at Los Angeles, working with Riley Lewis of the Sto:lo band 2003

Transparency in lightbox  
219.5×283.5 cm



► Next spread  
*Twentieth Century Legacy* by Carl Michael von Hausswolff

Photograph taken inside the sadly and badly treated Kurt Schwitters hytte at Hjertöya, Molde, Norway, 2007 in connection with 27 SENSES and exhibition at KUBE, Ålesund, 2009, curated by Lina Dzuverovic/ Electra. Courtesy the artist and Gallery Niklas Belenius, Stockholm

groups of respectively one, two or three people. These smaller groups are more or less situated in the three corners of the square. In *Mimic* a similar, albeit less remarkable effect, can be found in the relationship between the man and the woman and the two men. Although she is walking hand in hand on the street with the white man, the woman does not appear to be aware of his irritation towards the person of color.

There are other aspects, which have an important role to play in Wall's staging theatricality. Wall's photographs often evoke an uncanny sense of completion. Every detail of *The Ventriloquist*, for example, perfectly matches the title (which in itself already conveys a lot of information), namely the fact that what is of concern here is a female ventriloquist at a birthday party in October 1947 (the half full and empty glasses, the wrapping paper, the balloons, the props and furniture in the interior, the suggestion of dusk and such like). Wall specifically states: "[...] you can get the feeling that the construction contains everything, that there is no 'outside' to it the way there is with photography in general."<sup>15</sup> It is this contrast between the factual completeness of the image and the presupposed incompleteness of photography that results in a sense of alienation. Consequently the presentation of the cibachrome images in light boxes can also be pointed out. The intensity of the internal lighting creates the impression that the reality represented wishes (just a bit too clearly) to show itself. It also results in intensified effects in terms of its chromaticism, which feels more or less unnatural. This is the case for example in *Milk*, where the (optical) luminescence lends an unreal character to the wall behind the man. Boris Groys has stated that lighting functions as quotation marks with which an image is "cited". Wall himself clearly recognizes that the light box can cause an alienation effect.<sup>16</sup>

Wall makes an important distinction between two styles of posing or acting, namely "acting out" and "being in".<sup>17</sup> The acting out has the connotation of an active intervention by the characters. It therefore concurs with the idea of a staged reality, making identification problematic. Being in, on the other hand, carries the connotation of a certain passivity, in that the characters don't need to act out anything. This in turn pairs itself with the idea of a real, existing reality that allows identification without any problem. Wall however states that both imply a "mode of performance", that is, a manner of acting. Awareness of the staging of Wall's near documentary photography allows the viewer to deduce this minimal acting style and less visible pose of the characters from two aspects: their static poses and the expressiveness of their gestures. The static pose arises out of the fact

that the majority of Wall's characters are sitting, lying down, or standing still without the slightest suggestion of movement. This is even the case on the graveyard of *The Holocaust Memorial*, where a certain amount of coming and going would normally be expected. The characters subsequently give the impression of being frozen in their poses (instead of just having been frozen in their movement by the photographic capturing). Even the wandering characters of *Mimic* give the impression, at a second glance, to be standing still. All three characters seem to be lifting their feet off the ground. This means that none of the legs are actually in movement at the moment of the recording. The characters have thus taken on the pose of the walker, but are in actual fact not walking. The expressivity of their gestures comes forth from the cognizance that the characters are giving just a little too much expression to their psychological state as is the case with the gesture of the storytelling woman in *The Story Teller* and the subdued poses of the people at *The Holocaust Memorial*.

To conclude, it's important to note once more how Wall does everything at his disposal to keep the construction of the image hidden as such. The dynamics of distantiating and alienation can only ever counter our initial identification, but it cannot cancel it out completely. In doing so it merely installs a process of continuous negotiation between the image and the viewer. This idea of a continuous negotiation also concurs with Wall's personal view of the way an artwork functions. "There are no closed works of art, really. My experience of works that I have really admired is a kind of out-of-body experience. That is, it's a kind of phenomenology of identification and disidentification which is continuously happening, and which is essential to the experience, and even the possibility of experience."<sup>18</sup>

Notes

1. It was even Claerbout's explicit intention to give the impression that the homeless person in *The Stack* was lying in front of the screen in the viewer's space. Personal interview with Claerbout in Fall 2004.
2. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s Michael Fried published an art historical trilogy in which he attempted to sketch the evolution of French painting between roughly 1750 (with the first genre paintings by Chardin and Greuze) and 1860–70 (with the onset of modernism with Manet). His main position in this is that French painting of that time is typified by an anti-theatrical tendency, which he refers to with the term "absorption". See Michael Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980); *Courbet's Realism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990) and finally *Manet's Modernism, or, The Face of Painting in the 1860s* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).
3. According to Fried there were two means of conceiving the absorptive mode in painting. The dramatic conception mainly occurs in historical painting,

of which the work *Le Serment des Horaces* (1785) by Jacques-Louis David is a good example. The second conception of absorption can mainly be found in the genre of landscape painting. Paintings such as Jean-Honoré Fragonard's *Le Colin-Maillard* (ca. 1775) no longer confront the viewer with historical characters and situations in a dramatic setting but with the "magical recreation of the effect of nature itself". (Fried 1980, 131–2).

4. One of Claerbout's aims is precisely to subvert the classical cinematographic relationship between the image and the viewer. This viewer, so Claerbout states, is seduced by the film images: "the filmic editing leads to an erotization of looking. The viewer is stimulated, triggered and even deceived by the filmic images." His works call on the contrary for an "active viewership" whereby the viewer not only identifies with the images but where he begins to actively relate to it. Personal interview with Claerbout in Fall 2004.
5. In Stefan Berg, "David Claerbout/Stephan Berg A Conversation", *David Claerbout* (cat.), Centro Galego de Arte Contemporanea Santiago de Compostela (Santiago de Compostela, 2003), 48.
6. Michael Fried, *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2008), 42–3. Further cited as Fried 2008.
7. Burns describes the theatrical experience as the viewer "becoming aware" of the constructive elements of behavior of a person in everyday life or of the character on a stage (this behavior for the person in question however remains natural and spontaneous). She conceptualizes theatricality by means of the perceptive practice of the viewer: "theatricality is determined by a particular viewpoint, a mode of perception." In Elisabeth Burns, *Theatricality. A study of convention in the theatre and in social life* (New York: Longman, 1972), 13.
8. Brecht writes for the first time about the "alienation principle" in the essay "Verfremdungseffekte in der chinesischen Schauspielkunst" (1936). This can be found in Bertolt Brecht, *Schriften zum Theater. Über eine nicht-aristotelische Dramatik*, Siegfried Unseld (ed.) (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1965), 74–89.
9. Lynn Cooke, "Conversations." In *David Claerbout 1996–2002*, Kurt Vanbelleghem (ed.) (Brussels, 2002), 125.
10. Fried considers Wall to be the most important photographer continuing the tradition of absorptive painting in our time. See Fried 2008, 5–94.
11. Martin Schwander, "Restoration". In Jean-François Chevrier, Thierry de Duve, Boris Groys (eds.), *Jeff Wall* (London: Phaidon, 2002), 127. Henceforth cited as *Jeff Wall*. This interview was originally published in *Jeff Wall Restoration* (cat.) Kunstmuseum Luzern and Kunsthalle Düsseldorf (Luzern-Düsseldorf, 1994).
12. Jeff Wall, "Gestus". In *Jeff Wall*, 76. This essay was first published in *A Different Climate* (cat.), Städtisches Kunsthalle Düsseldorf, (Düsseldorf, 1984). Here Wall describes an expressive gesture as "a pose or action which projects its meaning as a conventionalized sign." They function as social emblems of a specific time, that is, as gestures which are able to express a historically determined social essence. The representation of expressive gestures (in line with the representation of the gestus with Brecht) serves to bring a historically and culturally determined essence to expression. Wall moreover understands the expressive gestures of modern man as automatic reflexes of people, as mechanically carried out movements, and as compulsive physical answers to the behavior of others. These gestures form a significant facet of the gestus: they are a part of the contemporary vocabulary of unconscious

social behaviors. The most remarkable coincidence with Brecht's theory however doesn't lie in the fact that these expressive gestures are typified by a form of conscious awareness (as the artist and the model demonstrate in *Picture for Women*). The photographer writes that the (social) essence in the represented body appears "as a gesture which knows itself to be appearance." The expressive gesture in Wall's photography subsequently leads to a similar dichotomy as the alienating acting style of the actor with Brecht. It presupposes a self-observation of the posing person, whereby he becomes aware of himself as a constructed pose in front of an audience: "gesture creates truth in the dialectic of its being for another—in pictures, its being for an eye."

13. The fact that these poses are purposefully disposed within the frame of the image marks the important difference with the classical appearance of portrayed people. They, of course, also construct a kind of pose by which they present themselves to the viewer. This construction however is not given shape in an artistic practice of staging. Classical portraits consequently do not have an alienating effect, and are not characterized by a staging theatricality à la Brecht.
14. Arielle Pelenc, "Arielle Pelenc in correspondence with Jeff Wall", in *Jeff Wall*, 11.
15. Ibid., 9.
16. Boris Groys, "Boris Groys in conversation with Jeff Wall", in *Jeff Wall*, 152. This interview is the 2001 reworking of the following article: Boris Groys and Jeff Wall, "Die Photographie und die Strategien der Avantgarde: Jeff Wall im Gespräch mit Boris Groys", *Paradox*, November 1998.
17. "In absorptive pictures, we are looking at figures that appear not to be 'acting out' their world, only 'being in' it. Both, of course, are modes of performance" (*Jeff Wall*, 127).
18. T. J. Clark, Serge Guilbaut and Anne Wagner, "Representation, Suspensions and Critical Transparency", in *Jeff Wall*, 117. The interview originally appeared under the same title in *Parachute*, nr 59, 1990:4–10. We also find the idea of negotiation with other authors, albeit in different phrasing. Tietjen for example speaks of a mode of perception which continually oscillates between confrontation and contemplation. See Friedrich Tietjen, "Erfahrung zu sehen. Produktions-uns Rezeptionsweisen Jeff Walls fotografischer Arbeiten". In *Jeff Wall Photographs* (cat.), Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien (Vienna, 2003), 59. Wall's works according to Stemmrich require acknowledgement of the theatrical character within an "intensified contact between the work and the viewer". See Gregor Stemmrich, "Zwischen Exaltation und sinnierender Kontemplation. Jeff Wall's Restitution des Programmes der *peinture de la vie moderne*". In *Jeff Walls Photographs* (cat.), Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien, (Vienna, 2003), 172.

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Pfui

**BR**

du Scheuche

„Du bist ja  
keine Schüch“



# Robert Smithson and the Importance of a Sovereign Criticism

Lars-Erik Hjertström Lappalainen

**It is surprising** that Robert Smithson’s critical writings should give rise to a feeling of importance even though they don’t pretend to play on the only two recognized fields of importance today: the market and the university. According to recent debates, criticism is soon to die if it doesn’t find a proper utility for either of these fields.<sup>1</sup> Daniel Birnbaum and Isabelle Graw resume the contemporary situation saying that the American critics opt for the former stance (death of criticism), the Europeans for the latter (future in the knowledge economy).<sup>2</sup> In relation to this “cultural confinement” of criticism today, Smithson’s writings are like criticism “for nothing” (Beckett). It doesn’t provide knowledge or facts relevant to sciences, not even to the history of art. And it doesn’t deal with careers, reconstructing the progress of artists and other aspects that was important for the market of his time. But they do put the light on the consensus (i.e. the topic-not-to-be-discussed) of the debates of today: criticism need to be justified by some other field (and not even by art), it should be a servant. But if Smithson’s writings trigger the sense of importance, provokes an increased concentration and attention, it must be that they also project a different horizon behind criticism, and thus connect criticism to something else than money or knowledge.

Like a pointing dog this criticism “for nothing” indicates something important. In general, it is this sense of importance that structures experience and make the world non trivial.<sup>3</sup> And in our context, we must say that it saves art from being an object of positivistic research or of a mere descriptive exercise. Obviously it is philosophically savage to say, “this thing here is important, fantastic”, because “important” as such doesn’t have an easily definable content. It is certainly not reducible to the indicated fact, maybe not even ever fully explained by any number of other factors. But, if there actually is a concept of importance, supposed to articulate the sense of importance with a matter of fact, there must be something (and not “nothing”) that corresponds to this sense, this indication. But, reading Smithson’s criticism, you get the impression of a naked sense of importance, a pointing but in the manner of his non-sites: “there’s no way you can locate the point”, leaving you with the feeling that there is “no object to go toward”.<sup>4</sup> Smithson seems to put some effort into making his readers lose their sense of orientation. To a certain extent, his texts are simply not intelligible; the “metaphors” are too far fetched, the details too many, the descriptive tools too singular (for example the “‘ha-ha-crystal’ concept”) and if they provide information, again it’s in the style of his non-sites: “The information tends to obliterate itself so that there is obviously information there, but [...] it tends to lose itself.”<sup>5</sup> He is certainly himself one of those “infra-critics” who “advance specifically to get lost, and to intoxicate himself in dizzying syntaxes, seeking [...] voids of knowledge...”<sup>6</sup> His criticism actually wants to avoid reality, avoid the object—but if that’s the case, could they ever give material for a concept of importance? Anyhow, that importance, and not knowledge or business, is the horizon of his criticism is likely. As a critic, he talked about “teratological systems”, where “the ‘marvelous’ meaning of that word has to be brought to

consciousness again” (73). The marvelous, the fantastic meaning of “teratological” pertains to the sense of importance, while the system could be that obscure reality corresponding to that feeling. Thus, the attitude of a Smithsonian critic is that “the Art World is both a monster and a marvel” (73). That’s probably the horizon: his criticism orients itself toward the importance. The general importance of Smithson’s criticism for criticism today certainly consists in this new horizon, but also in two other contributions: it gives a specificity to criticism, and it manifests it as a sovereign activity.

The specificity of criticism is clear from Smithson’s treatment of what he called “infra-criticism”, ie. artists’ writings on their own work or on art as they understand this general notion. Smithson doesn’t treat infra-critical texts as theoretical theses, demonstrations or proofs, but rather as, for example, “a register of laughter without motive” presenting the concepts that “are prisons devoid of reason”, “[t]houghts crushed into a rubble of syncopated syllables”, an intricate language at “the fringes of communication”. But neither are they treated as works of art, or as part of works of art, but simply as language “in the vicinity of art” (67–69). Not art, but activity in its vicinity, that’s criticism.

Most of Smithson’s texts are to be regarded as criticism, infra- or not. And it is quite clear that criticism in general for him does not belong to science, and “the whole idea of literature is as bad as philosophy”.<sup>7</sup> So, if his writings seem important, it can’t be in relation to science, philosophy or as part of his artistic work, and not by their literary value.<sup>8</sup> James Elkins mentions that what is generally considered the most important for art criticism is to have a descriptive value, providing historical context and, literary value.<sup>9</sup> Obviously Smithson doesn’t meet the general demands, his criticism is something else. But it has specificity.

For criticism today (or rather tomorrow), the major importance of Smithson’s criticism probably resides in the liberties he takes, his sovereign use of criticism. Sovereignty comes to my mind when faced with Smithson’s creations of critical tools, such as the “‘ha-ha-crystal’ concept”, leading to a work descriptive criticism like this: he (Meyers) “sets hard titter against soft snickers, and puts hard guffaws onto soft giggles. A fit of silliness becomes a rhomboid, a high-pitched discharge of mirth becomes prismatic, a happy outburst becomes a cube, and so forth.” (17) This, I must say, is a great idea and great piece of criticism. If I understand it correctly, it transforms “anti-matter” into real matter in the form of “laugh-matter” (not to confound with laughing matter), which permits you to understand a work of art as a “solid-state hilarity” (18). The creativity expressed by the description is appealing, it presupposes a critical work that does whatever it has to do to detect something fantastic in a work. It is sovereign criticism. Not only is it mapping the artist’s joy of creation and laughter as a kind of actual matter at work (once ordinary matter is turned into art), but thereby it also reveals a particular perspective or point of view of the critic. Thus, it exemplifies the sovereignty of criticism: it’s ability to create perspectives, concepts and values (in as much as it finds these descriptions, perspectives and concepts important) that are

useful for it. And the experience of art is also translated into its “syntax”. As a description, it is as much a construction. It is actually a “split-window” that puts time into play. The description refers to past time (or present), the constructive aspect hinting at a future, a possibility, or rather to an almost super-sensible eternity; together they give an impression of repetition within the phrases where the passed work returns or is about to return in laugh-matter. The phrases communicate something like a Kierkegaardian Moment, a repetition, a “time [that] oscillates in a circumscribed space” (50).

The conditions of criticism are actually more favorable to a sovereign one today than in Smithson’s time. The market has let go its grip on it and no one really expects anything from it any longer, not even, as Boris Groys has noted, some educational or informative content.<sup>10</sup> This actually implies that there are no given conditions for conformism in art criticism today: you can pretty much write whatever you like, however you like and publish it at any length on the web. But instead of this, critics are busy discussing the crises and death of criticism. Smithson is indeed untimely, giving voice to ideas of specificity, sovereignty and proper importance of art criticism.

Let’s turn to Smithson’s critical praxis, and see how criticism could be done and what its horizon might be. His first critical aim is to find (and produce) a Brechtian influenced “alienation effect”. He is attentive to this effect in art. That’s why he favors the “pictures” of mannerism over “paintings”; the former, not creating illusion, incarnate the idea that “illusion exists on an equal level with reality” (213). This alienation effect is what “critics [...] committed to expressive naturalism [...] fail to understand.” That’s a whole new level of experience, of properly aesthetic or artistic, critical, experience.

Insensitivity to this level reigns since “critics generally speak from the point of view of reality”<sup>11</sup>, being “convinced they know what reality is, so that they bring their own concept of reality and start looking at the work in terms of their own reality”.<sup>12</sup> This gives rise to a partial criticism, and, unfortunately, the favored part (reality) is one compromised by the fact that it is the reflection of the critic’s auto-projection. It is obvious that this orientation is not navigated by the sense of importance. Because “the sense of importance [being] embedded in the very being of animal experience”<sup>13</sup> such an experience would give critics a subhuman kind of subjectivity, way below their own reality. But instead of getting a new subjectivity within the work, they are projecting their own subjectivity on the work. Adorno would say that the reality thus projected by critics constitutes the work as merchandise, and that is also Smithson’s opinion. To Smithson it is important to substitute this *point of view* with another that enables critics to take the entire work (not only reality) in consideration as art, not as merchandise.

By staying passive, critics could refrain from projecting themselves into the work. The experience of art, constituted by perception and thought, must suffer a double short circuit. “Perception as deprivation of action and reaction” (12); perception as the medicine that heals “the malady of wanting to ‘make’ [...]”, and the malady of wanting to be ‘able’ is disabled.” (96) The role

of perception is to render the viewer passive, or blind. But not only perception but also “mind is important, but only when it is empty.” “A sweet nihilism” of “immobility and inertia” (212) in mind and perception is what is needed to evade a given notion of reality and be attentive to the moment when “the artist gets ‘tired’” from all his “actions and reactions” in the work, “and settles for a monumental inaction” (10).

This moment of passivity is what alienates, because “inertia or invincible idleness” is what transforms objects into signs (51). This obviously changes the status of the object as well as the possibilities of criticism. The object is no longer the possibility of criticism. Because who would start to describe a sign, analyze the morphology of a sign? Who would face a sign believing to “have” the reality at hands? Smithsonian critics can’t but experience works of art as the impossibility of criticism. Thus, Smithson once treated Sol LeWitt’s works as “obstructions”; and Insley’s work is “a blockade” (13). He described one of his own works as “a Map of Impasse.” (96) A work of art is what stops you from writing yet another article, you don’t know how to go about, what and how to say something about it. The critic is blocked, having a sense of importance in front of a piece of art, but not knowing what it is about. According to Gilles Deleuze, there is no possibility of interpreting a sign by tracing it back to its origins, whether in the artist or in the history of art.<sup>14</sup> A sign has to be used in a forward going movement, it has to be pushed into a proper activity, be regarded as “the center of a paradise” (Novalis). What substitutes reality as a *point of view* is in every case a particular sign used as perspective.

The work of art as the impossibility of criticism is a veritable appeal to go deeper into the experience of alienation, to reach “the bottom of the a[lienation]-effect”. There, what we find is a simple “*turning away* from what is thought to be ‘important’” (213). No general Cartesian doubt about every part of reality is needed, only about its fundamental aspects. A given criterion of importance must be avoided in order to get in touch with art. For a critic like Smithson, at that time, that certainly meant turning away from the “object”. It was the basic thought of criticism, and the “specific object” one of the main artistic inventions at the time when he started to write criticism. “[C]riticism [is] dependant on rational illusions” (90) among which he counts the object, specific or not. Smithson detects in the ordinary critical praxis much of the same proceedings as Nietzsche in metaphysics. Faced with the threat of an ambiguous objects, being at the same time real and illusion (the reality put on equal level with illusion), after their self-projection into the works they—the critics as well as the metaphysicians—separate this dual “object” from itself in order to constitute a more definite one, namely a discursive object, art as “a matter of reasoned discourse” (87), an object that is “the excrement of thought and language” (96). This substitution of the discursive work for the actual one is actually both the beginning and the end of ordinary criticism. It’s the discourse on this object as a reality that turns criticism (as well as philosophy and science) into “mythology”, ie. “a believed fiction.”<sup>15</sup> This, he says, is not the case with his own criticism.



◀ Johann Heinrich Füssli,  
*The Nightmare*, 1781



▲ Rodney Graham, *Halcion Sleep*, 1994, video still

It is obvious from his critical texts on Donald Judd's works that he abstains from reality, object and mythology. Judd is the perfect artist to use for a demonstration of this critical thinking, since Judd is the champion of reality (using the gallery as "real space") and objects, specific objects that are neither representations, nor abstractions. Thereby, Judd felt that with his art, American art could once and for all say farewell Europe, leaving the old "European" problem of illusionism behind. A conscientious critic aware of the history of art should have said of Judd's work that literalness was king and no "illusions" produced. To go along with that interpretation in a piece of critic would have been share mythology to Smithson's mind. What he found was something else:

"A reversible up and down quality was an important feature [...]. It is impossible to tell what is hanging from what or what is supporting what. Ups are downs and downs are ups. [...] What is outside vanishes to meet the inside, while what is inside vanishes to meet the outside" (6).

He found illusion at the core of Judd's work, turning them into signs of a different space than the real one. He is liberating the works from an anthropological or "organic" notion of space, where a body is always implied at the center, head up, feet down, left here, and right here. This rational illusion is according to Kant the fundamental condition for "orientation in thought".<sup>16</sup> Thus, it is also the fundamental piece of a "reality concept" that doesn't come from the works of Judd, but from elsewhere (from the critic Judd, among others), from the mythology. The effect of Smithson's interpretation is certainly one of alienation (Judd did not recognize his work in that description) produced by a critical turn away from what was thought to be important.

Let's leave Smithson's analysis of Judd at this point, only to pick it up later in order to show that Smithson actually carried out criticism in accordance to our construction.

The next practical difficulty is: how could a critic turn the work, as an impossibility of criticism, into an "object" for criticism? By a liquefaction of the object in the work. In art, he said in an interview, "there is no object, any more than you can say that a painting by [Kazimir] Malevich is an object. It explicitly tells you that it's a non-object."<sup>17</sup> In an article, Smithson explains that this Malevich painting has to do with an "unbounded state", an experience of a "physical abyss" and "suspension of boundaries" (84). Instead of transcending the boundary between subject and object in space, through projection, the critic should do it in time. And once again, passivity is the technique: "absolute inertia or the perfect instant, when time oscillates in a circumscribed place." Actually, if an object is art, it contains a movement of time, even if static. This time depends on the viewer (90). At the same time as perception is passive, the mind should turn its attention to the time passing in looking at the work, how it "takes place in time" (90). Because "[w]hen a *thing* is seen through the consciousness of temporality, it is changed into something that is nothing" (90). It looks like we have reached the point where the impression of

a criticism "for nothing" is made. It's the effect of a properly critical passivity revealing a stream of time running through the work. And this time is by Smithson almost always understood as some kind of catastrophic time that is only proceeding by decay, a time only operating on, and thus recognizing as real, what could be an object of entropy and dedifferentiation and thus neither is, nor has, an essence. If criticism is capable of reaching a level of sovereignty, this capacity resides in the passivity of the critic and presupposes objects without essences, non-objects, nothing, i.e. a level without something that dictates the proper perspective and concepts to be used. These non-objects changes over time, and criticism can and must determine the slices of time characterizing the object at a certain time in a sovereign manner for its own use. Criticism self furnishes the "object", be it a nothing, corresponding to its sense of importance. Our best possibility to get a glimpse at this "furnishing" of objects is art: "Only when art is fragmented, discontinuous and incomplete can we know about that vacant eternity that excludes *objects* and determined meanings" (211). If art is not a matter of projected reality, of a given extra-artistic system of importance, it is because it is not a matter of opinion and meanings. It is a matter of a vacant eternity, waiting to be temporarily occupied by a subject of some kind. What is important, Smithson's very notion of importance is that this place is always vacant anew, always on its way of emptying itself, destroying its content, and thus has time for something new. It's the hospitality of the eternal. But the only way to render it through criticism is to have a critical experience and writing that are fragmented, discontinuous and incomplete. Criticism doesn't need to be coherent and complete, because that presupposes that art is given a unity it doesn't have. As soon as you read a coherent and complete interpretation of a work, you can be sure it rests upon a falsification of the art in question.<sup>18</sup>

Here is the place to pick up Smithson's interpretation of Judd again. He actually finds a new importance there: "The important phenomenon is always the basic lack of substance at the core of the 'facts'" (23). What is important about those boxes is not their quality as real objects in space, but that "these very definite works verge on the notion of disappearance" (23). His art actually "vanishes into a series of motionless intervals" that is time (10). Thus, to Smithson's mind, he has redeemed Judd's work from the "lobotomizing" mythology of reality and object by finding its time. "By desecrating this domain [the time of the artist], certain critics defraud the work and mind of the artist. Artists with a weak view of time are easily deceived by this victimizing kind of criticism, and are seduced into some trivial history" (91). The only way not to turn critical discourse into mythology is to find the time in the work, and to treat it as an object of fiction. Otherwise, critics will project their own reality into it, and inscribe it, i.e. themselves, in a historical mythology.

Smithson's criticism brings art back to time. But time is not a matter of fact—still it seems to correspond to the sense of importance—thus the impression of criticism for nothing. Whitehead admitted that "matter of fact" actually is an intellectual myth, the myth of finite facts:<sup>19</sup>

"Importance is derived from the immanence of infinitude in the finite."<sup>20</sup> As we saw, Smithson's infinitude appears to be time. If his criticism is relevant today again, it certainly depends on this fundamental break with the thought of finitude that dominated thinking during the twentieth century. This fetishism of finitude is probably the reason the concept of importance has not been a part of the horizon of thinking and criticism. This infinity, though, is not the old transcendent one, but an immanent infinity. It seems, though, like Smithson places the importance, not at all within the finite, but in the "finitization" of the infinite. Time itself contains something like a fictionalizing force that creates finite parts of it that it then dedifferentiates again. Time is nothing, if it is not breaking apart only in order to destroy the pieces anew: "The fictions erected in the eroding time stream are apt to be swamped at any moment."<sup>(90)</sup> This fictionalizing capacity, Fiction, that fragments time and thus calls it into existence, is what constitutes Smithson's criterion of criticizability. Time considered as entropy and as a vacant eternity is his criterion of importance; time considered as a fictionalizing force his criterion of criticizability. His criticism is determined by the fact that he "is aware of Time as 'fiction'" (51). He complains that fiction is a notion the place of which in all the arts has not been understood (71). It is the task of criticism to make this experience of time as fiction, as a particular fiction, in every great work or exhibition. That is, to accept the work as the very impossibility of criticism, and locate the Fiction within it as the very criticizability of art. Fiction gives a common ground to art and criticism without loss of their respective specificity; Fiction is the "vicinity to art" that is also within art.

In that sense, criticism (and art) was the only thing Smithson believed in: "the integrity of fiction" which for a critic means "the integrity of writing".<sup>21</sup> This integrity consists in staying faithful to time and its subject. When the work has become infinite, or at least indefinite, critics must use the details they concentrate on as perspectives, in stead of seeing "all" of the work from the same point of view. It is a critical task to "heighten the loss of focus" i.e. the proliferation of focuses at work in a work. The status of the work changes accordingly, from an expected unity to a veritable circumference without a corresponding center. A work is a limit, a border zone that the critic can penetrate. Even if you can't cross the border (maybe because there is none) you can stay in the border zone of multiple perspectives on the world that a work is as time. What is the subject of time, the critic? As we saw earlier, Whitehead talked about the sense of importance as a part of animal sensibility. I guess Smithson would go further, saying it's a part of sub-organic processes, subjectivity of a mineral monster speaking as a mineral ("Words and rocks contain a language" (87). That's how far the critics must go, or maybe: that's how ridiculous a critic must be prepared to appear. If needed, they have to become rocks. This subhuman subjectivity at work in Smithson's criticism is doubtless the second reason his criticism in relation to importance has not had a tremendous influence on other critics. Since his time, we have experienced a humanistic backlash, with the return of "anthropology", in a Foucauldian sense, in

criticism, where psychoanalysis, cultural studies and communication theory have dominated. But in this idea of for example a mineral subjectivity, Smithson's philosophical forerunner is doubtless Schopenhauer. His philosophy actually permits a becoming mineral or vegetable in the aesthetic contemplation of a work/idea. Of course, for Schopenhauer, that takes place outside of time, while it for Smithson is the very subject of time. Once critics have become a piece of rock, critical thinking turns into the sliding of crystal clear concepts down the muddy side of the brain, thus metamorphosing themselves into the stream or flux of perspectives that are to an equal part illusion and reality, i.e. signs. This integrity of fiction is to be transferred to integrity of writing, for example writing according to syntax of minerals. Critical writing should be real fiction, illusion without illusion, using language as a material, a "language of fragmentation", disruptive, full of voids, "somehow a product of exhaustion rather than creation" (87), always written in relation to an obscure importance, guided by the critics' subhuman sense of importance. •

#### Notes

1. Last year, at least two important anthologies of conference contributions and round table discussions were published on the topic of art criticism. Birnbaum & Graw (ed.): *Canvases and Careers Today. Criticism and Its Markets* (New York/Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2008), and Elkins & Newman (ed.): *The State of Art Criticism* (New York: Routledge, 2008).
2. Birnbaum & Graw, *Canvases and Careers Today*, 6.
3. All I have to say on the topic of importance comes from the first chapter of A. N. Whitehead's *Modes of Thought* (New York: Macmillan, 1938).
4. Jack Flam (ed.) Robert Smithson: *The Collected Writings* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 218.
5. Ibid., 219.
6. Nancy Holt (ed.) *The Writings of Robert Smithson* (New York: New York University Press, 1979), 67. Henceforth cited in the text with pagination.
7. *The Collected Writings*, 214.
8. This opinion that Smithson's writings are not literature is actually corroborated by a recent French anthology of writings by conceptual artists, Hermann, Raymond & Vallos (ed): *Art conceptuel, une entologie* (Paris: éditions MIX, 2008). By calling it an "entologie" and not and "anthologie" the inoculation (Fr. *enter*) of their writings on the branch of literature is supposed to be indicated (10).
9. James Elkins, *What Happened to Art Criticism?* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2005), 49–50.
10. Boris Groys, "Critical Reflections", in Elkins & Newman, *The State of Art Criticism*.
11. "Robert Smithson" in Alberro & Norvell (ed.): *Recording Conceptual Art: Early Interviews with Barry, Huebler, Kaltenbach, LeWitt, Morris, Oppenheim, Sieglau, Smithson, Weiner* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2001), 132.
12. Ibid., 129.
13. Whitehead, *Modes of Thought*, 12.
14. Gilles Deleuze, *Proust et les signs* (Paris: PUF, 1964).
15. *The Collected Writings*, 213.
16. See Immanuel Kant, "Was heisst: Sich im Denken Orientieren", in *Schriften zur Metaphysik und Logik 1, Werkausgabe*, Vol. V, W. Weischedel (ed) (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1977).
17. "Robert Smithson", in *Recording Conceptual Art*, 130.
18. "Unity [...] belongs more to life (also called reality) and not to the terrible dualities of great art." *The Writings of Robert Smithson*, 211.
19. *Modes of Thought*, 12.
20. Ibid., 28.
21. *The Collected Writings*, 213.

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# Architecture, Critique, Ideology

Sven-Olov Wallenstein

“To dispel anxiety by understanding and internalizing its causes: this would seem to be one of the principal ethical imperatives of bourgeois art”—the opening lines of Manfredo Tafuri’s *Progetto e utopia* (1973) provide a condensed view of his understanding of modernity and the role of art and architecture in capitalism. For Tafuri, art and architecture do indeed allow us to grasp the reasons for the cleavages and anxieties that beset the modern subject,<sup>1</sup> but this understanding also, in a second step, produces an illusory mastery that leads us to affirm, even desire, the most troubling aspects of our condition as an expression of our own will. For Tafuri, breaking this spell, which is both theoretical and practical, means taking up a truly critical stance toward the present, one consequence of which is the sharp divide between an “operative” history that he saw in successors like Sigfried Giedion, Bruno Zevi, and Reyner Banham, who attempt to link

past and present in terms of progress, and a critical history that would expose the contemporary moment as the result of contradictions located beyond the reach of architecture and urbanism.

In some respects, Tafuri’s work is about retrieving the anxiety of modernity and allowing it to have its full impact on us, and the wide-spread fatigue and even rejection that his work evokes among contemporary theorists are undoubtedly in many respects signs of a repression and a refusal of this anxiety. The rejection of the dialectical models inherited from the early 20th century avantgarde culture, sometimes in favor of a transformed way of thinking difference and resistance, but increasingly often and even more “radically,” in favor of an attitude variously baptized as the “post-critical”, the “projective”, the “performative”, or even the “instrumental”,<sup>2</sup> would from Tafuri’s point of view appear as a simple return to “architectural ideology” in its purest sense. On

the other hand, to stubbornly uphold the ethos of an ideology critique inherited from the 1960s and 1970s does not seem to live up to the phrase from Franco Fortini that Tafuri often refers to: be “cunning like doves” (*Astuti come colombe*). The shifts in cultural production that have marked the last decades, taking us through the debates around postmodernism, globalization, electronic capitalism, post-Fordism and several other concepts coined to grasp a fleeting and increasingly liquid present, can undoubtedly be read as a gradual abandoning of the Marxist conceptual-ity that once formed the matrix for the “Venice School”, but also as a continual displacement of a fundamental set of problems: how to connect the present mode of production with the artistic, architectural, and urban forms that surround us, and how to forge theoretical tools that are as advanced as capital itself.

In the dense writings of Tafuri and his colleagues, a wide array of divergent and often conflicting influences are brought together in tenuous syntheses: Marx and Nietzsche, Benjamin and Heidegger, Simmel, Weber, and the classic texts of German sociology from the first decades of the 20th century. To some extent, this synthesis—and even more so the split between operative and critical history opened up by Tafuri—may be read in the light of a crisis of Marxist theory itself, emerging at that moment when theory and practice began to seem incapable of coming together, and the critique of ideology started to point less to a set of alternatives than to a position of nihilism and “negative thought”, as Massimo Cacciari called it, a negativity that breaks away from all ideas of reconciliation, and owes just as much to Nietzsche and Heidegger as to the critique of political economy.<sup>3</sup> The analysis of architecture and urbanism here becomes one moment, although a privileged one, in the reading of modernity as an infinite crisis.

A basic thesis in Tafuri, recurring throughout all of his works that deal with modern architecture and the illusions of operative history, is that architecture is structurally incapable of solving those social contradictions that it addresses, which is just as much a theoretical presupposition as an empirical observation. This claim underlies

his analysis of how the modern masters were caught up in an illusion—a *project* which is always also a *utopia*, as the original title of his dense and somber 1973 book reads: *Progetto e utopia*. Ever since the failure of these grand projects, which Tafuri locates in the early 1930s, before the advent of totalitarian politics, generations of historians have attempted to show how they, correctly understood, still contain the “hidden unity” and “secret synthesis” that will heal our culture (Giedion), or the “organic architecture” of the future (Zevi), to cite two of the most prominent cases. Tafuri can in this sense be located within a third wave of modernist historians: the first (Giedion, Kaufmann, Pevsner) attempted to create a historical synthesis that would lend credibility to the modern movement as the true heir of the tradition; the second (Zevi, Banham) wanted to rethink modernism as a more complex phenomenon and retrieve aspects that had been lost; the third engaged in a reading of the critical *limit* of modernism, beyond which it could neither be simply continued nor begun anew, and which called for a step back that would take us out of architectural discourse and into a critique of modernity as such.<sup>4</sup> Tafuri’s work situates itself, uneasily and anxiously, on this critical line. Sometimes retreating into the expertise of architectural culture, sometimes demanding a wholesale critique of society and a revolutionary action for which neither the architect nor the historian would seem equipped, it lives off its own violent contradictions and its unfulfilled promises.

These contradictions seem less explosive today, at least in the specific form they assumed within the landscape of Italian cultural politics of the 1960s and 1970s; the sharp divide between an operative and a critical history appears difficult to uphold in the light of contemporary theoretical work on historical writing; the forms of power and subject production in the contemporary world have become far more insidious and diversified than they were some forty years ago; and architecture, both as a practice and theory, has moved into the digital and virtual, forming alliances with the most sophisticated image technologies and post-Fordist forms of production, to the effect that ideas of “resistance” and

Manfredo Tafuri and the Venice School

# (S)Talking Tafuri: Tafuri anno 2009

Rixt Hoekstra

The American writer Mark Twain once wrote in a letter: “Rumors about my death have been greatly exaggerated.” This also seems to be true in the case of Manfredo Tafuri (Rome, 1935–Venice 1994) whose insights more than fourteen years after his death remain the subject of debate in architecture. The Italian architect and historian was one of most important architectural theorist in the twentieth century. The American historian James Ackermann described Tafuri as “probably the most influential architectural historian of the latter half of the twentieth century”.<sup>1</sup> Yet during his lifetime Tafuri was also controversial and received fulsome praise as well as trenchant critique. Most of all, Tafuri was viewed as a typical Marxist historian who produced a leftwing outlook on architecture and its

history. Today, in a world that has changed radically since the 1970s and 1980s, there seems to be every reason to bury the work of Tafuri along with him. However, following recent debates in architecture, the work of this historian seems anything but written in the past tense. If Tafuri remains topical, the question is: what causes this enduring currency?

Today, almost two decades after his death, Tafuri seems a haunting presence in architectural debate. His presence is haunting because he confronted the architectural world with a seemingly insolvable impasse: while, since the twentieth century, it has been an almost existential craving for architects to contribute to a better world with their designs, Tafuri has proved the historical untenability of exactly this enterprise.

Today, Tafuri seems to cast a dark shadow over each discussion of the possibility of architectural engagement. At present, his legacy is such that simply to speak about such an engagement almost automatically takes on pathetic characteristics, while the alternative of a “building without ideals” is, for many architects, just as unacceptable. This deadlock is also present on a theoretical level. For example, Tafuri and Dal Co’s thesis that the history of contemporary architecture should be viewed as “the record of an increasing loss of identity... in the wake of the enormous processes of socio-economic transformation”, has never been disputed nor elaborated by other architectural historians.<sup>2</sup> While Tafuri uncovered a fundamental “crisis” at the heart of modernity, the suspicion and anguish generated by this insight seems to have never disappeared—it has only been repressed or denied.<sup>3</sup> Since his untimely death at the age of fifty-eight, Tafuri’s legacy evokes an uneasiness. What is at stake is the ethical question of the responsibility to carry on Tafuri’s radical historical and critical project. Is it possible to reformulate Tafuri’s critical project? Is it desirable? Or should we by now accept the erosion and loss of a critical modus that is based in architecture?

In this article I will evaluate the legacy of Tafuri by focusing on the difference between the proverbial baby and bathwater. It is my contention that Tafuri should be admired for his analytical capacities with respect to architecture, and that his capacities remain unsurpassed in this area. Posing the question of the baby and the bathwater really means to pose the question of Tafuri’s *program* of architectural history and its enduring value. Was Tafuri a historical and contingent phenomenon or did he correct our understanding of architectural history in such a fundamental way that he simply cannot be ignored by anyone coming after him? In what ways can we *think* the presence of history in architecture, theory and architectural history after Tafuri? At the same time, there is another important debate connected to the legacy of Tafuri: this is the debate on the posi-

tion of contemporary architecture in society. It is my contention that since the 1970s architecture has remained under the influence of two equally “extremist” visions on architecture: that of Tafuri and Koolhaas. Koolhaas in a way responded to the condition depicted by Tafuri, however, the question is whether the discourse of Koolhaas can be regarded as a form of radical critique of architecture and society in the same way as in the case of Tafuri.

## Tafuri: Local or Universal?

In an interview, Nikolaus Kuhnert, editor-in-chief of the German architectural journal *Archplus*, reflects on the translation of *Progetto e utopia*, *Architettura e sviluppo capitalistico* into German in 1977: the book received the title *Kapitalismus und Architektur, von Corbusiers “Utopia” zur Trabantenstadt* (Capitalism and Architecture, from Corbusier’s “Utopia” to the Satellite City).<sup>4</sup> In the interview Kuhnert recalls his first encounter with Tafuri. This was in the middle of the 1970s, during a period in which the editorial team of *Archplus* developed an interest in the first manifestations of postmodernism in the Italian architectural scene, for instance in the debate on typology, or in the architect Aldo Rossi. Kuhnert and his team went to Venice to meet with Tafuri. As he recalls, this was quite a peculiar experience, with Tafuri sitting in a large room behind an equally large table, like the traditional Italian professor. To his left and right, standing, were his assistants and at the back of the room there were many books—all translations and compilations of the German discourse on modern architecture from the 1920s. Whereas in Germany this discourse had completely disappeared from view in the decades after the war—a consequence of Germany’s troubled past—here it was studied again and in a completely new and surprising manner. Beyond the polarized debates of the political left and right, a group of Italian intellectuals offered a compelling new outlook on Germany’s modern architectural and intellectual past. However, at the same time *Kapitalismus*

“critique” seem like relics from a distant past.

And yet it can be argued that the task of critical theory remains more urgent than ever, precisely in the face of such new power structures, which demand a fundamental rethinking of its tools and procedures. What, if any, would be the place of Tafuri and the critique of architectural ideology in the present conjuncture? The following contributions all address crucial aspects of Tafuri’s legacy, but also, although more indirectly, the question of what a critical theory of architecture could mean today, and in this they are as relevant to historical research as to an understanding of the present moment.

Rixt Hoekstra’s essay opens this section by asking for the reason behind Tafuri’s enduring and even “haunting” presence in contemporary architectural discourse. As we have seen, this kind of Marxist analysis, deeply embedded in the conflicts of the Italian left in the 1970s, may today seem wholly outdated; or this is at least what many would wish. The question of the ideological role of modern architecture—which Tafuri and his fellow travelers studied in great depth, drawing on analyses of architecture and urban planning in the Soviet Union, the Social Democratic state of the Weimar Republic, and the U.S.—still remains valid however, she suggests, and the contradiction this analytical work has left us with, above all in the guise of the divide between a critical and an operative reading of history, remains a crucial issue, no matter how much we would like to mitigate or even repress it.

In Hoekstra’s reading, we must nonetheless distinguish between the program for architectural historiography proposed by Tafuri, and the context of its emergence. In fact, she argues, the idea of the “Metropolis” as the essential site of Capital, developed by Tafuri and Cacciari, is still very much alive today, although approached from the opposite angle, most famously in the writings and projects of Rem Koolhaas, who can be understood as the most rebellious of Tafuri’s implicit disciples. The question remains to what extent this type of reworked avantgarde sensibility—which claims to analyze the structures of the emergent as opposed to the residual, and then declares an unconditional support for

the new—means to simply identify with the aggressor, or can be understood as a more fluid and flexible way to deal with the contradictions of the current state. Tafuri’s critical analysis of the restructuring of capitalism after the 1929 crash, and the emergence of the plan as an instrument that effectively transformed architecture into a tool and displaced its earlier utopian projections, undoubtedly still provides an essential subtext for these current debates.

Pier Vittorio Aureli addresses the more precise historical context of Tafuri’s work, and starts off from a less known essay written just after the more widely read “For A Critique of Architectural Ideology” (1969). Here Tafuri focuses on the theme of intellectual work, stressing that it cannot be done from an outside position, since intellectuals themselves are workers in a system that has become able to incorporate the forces that used to resist it (all of which coincides with a series of rapid shifts in the Italian political scene in the 1960s). Rationally planned and reformed capitalism, scientific management and modernization, became attractive options, and Aureli points to Olivetti’s “Comunità”, a factory transformed into a cultural campus, as a paradigm case.

The movement that would later become known as the “Operaists” (Workerists) launched an attack against this cultural turn, and demanded that workers seize control and not just demand reform. As Aureli suggests, this led to a suspicion of traditional forms of intellectual production, and the introduction of thinkers like Adorno and Benjamin proved to be crucial, especially in relation to the form of writing itself, as can be seen in the case of Tafuri, where the critical reflection on the tools of analysis becomes decisive. It is in this context that Aureli traces the emergence of Tafuri’s “critique of architectural ideology” as a rejection of “operative” criticism, which for him was based on an idea of progress and a masking of the real forces that shape architectural history. The strategic invention of a “counter-plan” (*Contropiano*, as was the title of the journal in which Tafuri published his essay) implied an appropriation of the most advanced parts of capitalist culture within the space of “negative thought”, as it was formulated by Cac-

ciari in a series of essays from the same period, a thought that brings out the irresolvable conflicts of modernity that had already been assumed by advanced bourgeois thinkers like Weber, and transforms them into a political instrument for a working class culture (all of which finds its echoes, Aureli notes, in current Italian political thought on cognitive work as “immaterial labor”). This move required that we understand architects and planners as intellectual workers, and not just as manipulators of formal design solutions. Seen from the perspective of the larger political context, Aureli argues, the reading of Tafuri’s work as the promotion of a “death of architecture” proves to be misleading.

Andrew Leach’s text poses three essential questions in relation to the legacy of Tafuri: his definition of the modern era, the crisis of modern architecture that Tafuri sees as beginning already in the Enlightenment, and finally the nature of the architectural historian’s own practice.

For the Tafuri of *Teorie et storia dell’architettura*, Leach notes, modernity begins already with Brunelleschi’s gesture where he sets the dome of the Santa Maria del Fiore apart from Florence’s medieval city fabric. The year after, both in the book *Architettura dell’umanesimo* and the famous *Contropiano* essay on modern architecture, Tafuri refers to this as an “architectural ideology” that seeks a foundation in the past as well as projecting a future (this image of a Renaissance rupture will, however, be substantially complicated in later texts, most notably in *Ricerca del rinascimento*, as Leach stresses). This autonomy of architecture is one of the essential aspects of its ideology, and it will be further reinforced in the modern era, as it is described a few years later in *Progetto e utopia*. The crisis of architecture thus depends less on any desiccation of its own theories, and more on the fact that its fundamental problems lie outside of its own scope, which is what this ideology conceals. Operativity is as such a fundamentally architectural move, and probably a necessary one, and Tafuri’s critique should be seen as directed against the historians, whose smoothing out of contradictions with a view to the needs of current production renders a truly critical history impossible. In Leach’s reading,

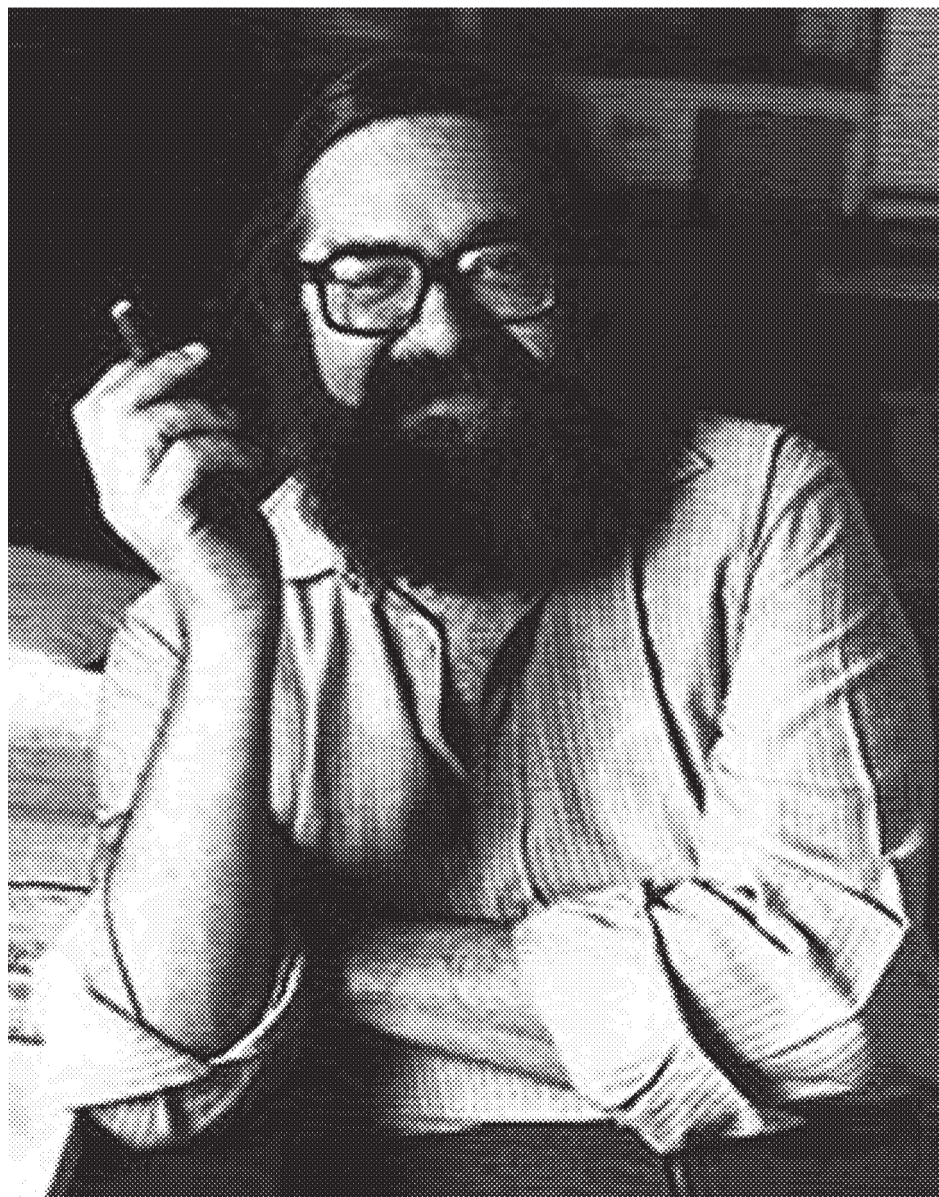
the kind of criticality that Tafuri proclaims “rescues architectural ideology from self-ratification by connecting it to the real,” whereas the operative view of history spawns an idea of “architecture’s absolute freedom”, although “within a system that no longer needs it, and does not at all miss it.”

The idea of a writing of history that would be “true”, and would have the capacity to shed all operative presuppositions must of course itself be questioned, and this continual critical evaluation of the historian’s tools is where Leach locates Tafuri’s fundamental contribution, which traverses his work from *Teorie et storia* in 1968 to the *Ricerca del Rinascimento* in 1992. There is indeed a “deconstructive effect on knowledge” produced by the deeper pursuit of historical complexity, and as Leach notes, the question of the connection between the excavation of the past and its critical value in the present became more and more tenuous, both for Tafuri himself and in the reception of his work. This divide between history and theory, between reflections on the past and the kind of reflection that is inherent in production, is one of Tafuri’s most questionable legacies. Whether overcoming it also means to overcome Tafuri is an open question. •

#### Notes

1. “Anxiety” (*angoscia*) should here not be understood merely as psychological concept, but as an idea that amalgamates the analyses of existential ontology and the Freudian and Marxian vocabulary; see Anthony Vidler, *Histories of the Immediate Present: Inventing Architectural Modernism* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT, 2008), 180ff.
2. The idea of a “post-critical” turn has recently been advocated by Michael Speaks in several essays, for instance “Design Intelligence and the New Economy,” *Architectural Record*, January 2002. For the idea of a “projective” practice, see Robert Somol and Sarah Whiting, “Notes Around the Doppler Effect and Other Moods of Modernism,” *Perspecta 33: The Yale Architectural Journal*, 2002. For a general survey of the discussion, see George Baird, “Criticality and Its Discontents,” *Harvard Design Magazine*, No. 21, Fall 2004/Winter 2005.
3. For the idea of “negative thought,” see Massimo Cacciari, *Architecture and Nihilism: On the Philosophy of Modern Architecture*, trans. Stephen Sartarelli with a preface by Patrizia Lombardo (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993). For a discussion of the connection to Heidegger’s analysis of nihilism and technology, see my *The Silences of Mies* (Stockholm: Axl Books, 2008), 22–40.
4. See Panayotis Tournikiotis, *The Historiography of Modern Architecture* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT, 1999).

#### Manfredo Tafuri and the Venice School



und Architektur may be called representative for the average Tafuri translation: quite a lot is lost in translation and the German reader had a difficult time capturing Tafuri’s message. Despite Tafuri’s study of German modern architecture, this translation never led to a wider debate—not even in the circles of *Archplus*. In the German architectural discourse, Tafuri was never a presence. This is surprising for the reason, among others, that Tafuri would have fit in quite well within the intellectual discussion on the left, especially in the context of the rediscovery of the Frankfurt School in the circles of the German student movement. However, at least until the middle of the 1980s, German architectural discourse lacked the theoretical context to do justice to Tafuri. Instead, there was, in Kuhnert’s words, “debating with the hammer”: a polarized and politicized discussion on the right- and leftwings of architecture.<sup>5</sup>

During a conference held in New York in 2006, American architectural theorist Diana Agrest reflected upon her first meeting with Tafuri.<sup>6</sup> This also happened in the 1970s. Tafuri was still a relatively unknown young Italian scholar, who, because of his Communist affiliation, had trouble obtaining a visa for a trip to the United States. Tafuri was invited by Agrest and her colleagues Mario Gandelsonas and Anthony Vidler from Princeton University because it was their aim to introduce a critical discourse in architecture. “Critical” for them was synonymous with “struggle”, as a direct application of new theoretical and political insights in the fight for political and social change. While this meant an absolute break with the then prevailing interpretation of the International Style as “aesthetic surface style”, for Agrest and her colleagues, an unproblematic return to the classical doctrines of modernism was just as impossible. Tafuri was heralded as a European scholar able to provide a new insight into European architectural modernism, balancing both militant engagement and disenchanting knowledge. While Agrest and her colleagues experienced New York in

the 1970s as a city in crisis and as a chaotic, unordered explosion of fragments, Tafuri wrote about the “crisis of the object” and about the end of the organic, complete form.

Some twenty years later I met Tafuri in a classroom in Venice. I was part of a group of international students who had the privilege of being in Venice as Erasmus exchange students. Tafuri seemed physically weak, but very strong in his analyses of architecture. In 1994, the year in which I participated in Tafuri’s course, the Berlin Wall had already been down for five years. Fifteen years earlier Lyotard had published *The Postmodern Condition* (1979), declaring the end of grand narratives: for us there was no longer a clear separation between the political left and right. For most of us this was the first time we explored the scientific legacy of the 1960s and 1970s, the first time we studied neo-Marxism and its relationship to architecture. We were impressed by the engagement of the intellectuals in this period; in comparison, our own time seemed only too superficial. As Tafuri suddenly passed away that year, we also realized that from now on there would be a difference between the narrow understanding promoted by “Tafuri’s children” and our own generation. For us, exegesis alone would not suffice: studying the work of this historian automatically implied formulating a judgment on the durability of his insights for the future.

In the last few years a number of studies have appeared that stress the particular Italian circumstances in which Tafuri developed his body of work. In the dissertations of Leach (2005) and Aureli (2007), and also in my own dissertation (Hoekstra, 2005), the particularities of the Italian political and cultural landscape are sketched in this way.<sup>7</sup> These studies certainly have their strong points: they can be explained in light of the background of the fundamental misreadings of Tafuri in the past and the fact that his body of work has long been shorn of the context that once gave his voice its distinctive grain. At the same time, these dissertations foreground a

# Intellectual Work and Capitalist Development: Origins and Context of Manfredo Tafuri’s Critique of Architectural Ideology

Pier Vittorio Aureli

In 1970, Manfredo Tafuri published a long article entitled “Lavoro intellettuale e sviluppo capitalistico” (Intellectual work and capitalist development) in the journal *Contropiano*.<sup>1</sup> The article followed the publication of the more famous “Per una critica dell’ideologia architettonica” (For a critique of architectural ideology) published in the same journal in 1969.<sup>2</sup> What is remarkable about “Intellectual Work and Capitalist Development” is that it contains no reference to architecture. The article is a dense reflection on the nature of intellectual work itself seen within the conditions established by the capitalist system of production. If “For a Critique of Architectural Ideology” had a large critical reception at the time of its publication, “Intellectual Work and Capitalist Development” remained in its shadow. By re-approaching Tafuri’s critique via his arguments about intellectual work, it is possible to suggest that Tafuri’s critique was not so much, or not only, directed towards architectural form and the architectural project, but also concerned with the theme of “intellectual work” in general. For this reason, the aim of the following essay is to recuperate the concept of intellectual work in Tafuri’s critique as a major force of his argument, and as the reason for the radicality of his critique of architectural ideology.<sup>3</sup>

Through his intense activity of historicizing, Manfredo Tafuri was the first intellectual in the field of architectural history and criticism to understand that intellectuals were no longer able to address the issue of social and cultural changes provoked by capitalist development from a perspective *outside*. In other words, according to Tafuri there was no outside position within capitalist development, since the totality of such development was constituted by the reality of work, which also incorporated the role of the intellectual. It was for this reason that he understood that the critique of capitalism could no longer be produced from an external point, but only from one *within*, i.e., starting from the categories and forms through which intellectuals were—consciously or unconsciously—culturally mediating the effects of capitalist production. For Tafuri and for those who influenced his critique, this new condition meant that any critical

and political discourse needed first of all to be addressed towards intellectuals themselves as *workers*, rather than to “others” than intellectuals, as if the social and political mandate given to the latter could have been taken for granted.

In order to analyze this, I will place Tafuri’s critique within the original context in which it was formulated. This context was the debate on intellectual work in relationship to its political mandate that took place in Italy in the 1960s.

## Reformism and critique

Between the 1950s and the 1960s, Italy went through an intense process of modernization that changed the political, social, and cultural geography of the country in the span of a few years. What was happening in the US in the 1930s occurred in the North part of Italy in the 1960s: the beginning of a Fordist-Taylorist organization of work. This meant the shift from a backyard capitalism based primarily on accumulation to a capitalism based on the politics of waged labor, technological innovation, and organization of production in the form of organization of the entire spectrum of social relationships. It was for this reason that many intellectuals in the early 1960s started to understand capitalism not simply as an unjust process of circulation and distribution, but as “The Plan of Capital”: a new cycle in which the organic link between capitalism and welfare state was the new form of capitalist domination.<sup>4</sup> The most important political effect of this new cycle was the establishment of the first center-left government in Italy in 1962, in which the Italian Socialist Party (PSI) took active part. The involvement of the left in the government of a country that was part of the Atlantic Pact was seen by many intellectuals and political activists of the left as the sign of capitalism’s development: that it could incorporate as a new social interface the very forces that had opposed it.

In the second half of the 1950s, following the USSR’s 1956 invasion of Hungary and the process de-Stalinization, the Italian Socialist Party started to gradually withdraw from its historical alliance with the Communist Party and simultaneously intensified its political relationship with the Christian Democrats. At the basis of this

Manfredo Tafuri and the Venice School

meaningful tension. Is the value of this historian present in the *genius loci* of postwar Italy, or rather in the fact that he has transcended his national context to become important for a wide international public? In other words, was Tafuri a fascinating historical incident, possible then, under those circumstances, but also impossible to repeat? It is my contention that Tafuri should not merely be considered a historical phenomenon, entirely defined by his context. Rather, the basis for the “future of Tafuri” should be the universality of his program for a new architectural history.

## Tafuri’s program

What was Tafuri’s program in architectural history? When Tafuri started to publish his main works, his *capolavori*, at the end of the 1960s, he single-handedly created a rupture with what was by then a well-established historiographic tradition. In publications such as *Teorie e storia dell’architettura* (1968) and *Progetto e utopia, Architettura e sviluppo capitalistico* (1973) Tafuri openly criticized historiographical giants such as Wittkower, Zevi, and Giedion, whose work remained a common point of reference for architectural theory and history well into the 1960s. In fact, what historians of modern architecture such as Nikolaus Pevsner (1902–1983) or Sigfried Giedion (1888–1968) had in common was that they worked from a moral conviction about the place of architecture in a modern world. Fueled by a belief in progress, this was the central leit-motif behind their writing: the historian writing about modern architecture also identifies with the modern architect. If the architect builds for a better world, then the historian should reflect this ambition in his history, for instance through the choice of buildings discussed, for example. The architectural history that resulted from these attempts was optimistic in nature, speaking about artistic revolution and about the modern architect as a hero. Tafuri however no longer saw it as his task to confirm the emancipatory trajectory of the Modern Movement.

Independently from the agenda of the architect, Tafuri connected architecture to a certain ideological load. Not the confirmation of the ways of the modern architects, but rather to expose and critically analyze them as a form of modern ideology. Tafuri thereby introduced a discourse that was far more complicated and also far more negative. In the 1960s, Tafuri introduced new references whose relevance for architectural discourse was at that time unknown. For example, in *Teorie e storia dell’architettura* he pointed to the work of Roland Barthes, thereby proposing to see architecture as a system of signs that, just like literature, photography or cinema, was essentially an attempt to give meaning to the world around us—an operation which always to a certain degree failed. Tafuri invented new, puzzling tropes with which to reflect on modern architecture: “operative criticism”, “the ideology of architecture” or “regressive utopia”.

Once the identification with the goals of the architect was left behind, Tafuri was preoccupied with one principal question: what is modernity and what is the role played by architecture in modernity? How can the constant tension and implicit conflict between architects and their own time be explained? The concept of the Metropolis—or “the postulate of the intrinsic negativity of the large city”—became central to Tafuri’s understanding of modern architecture. “Metropolis” did not simply apply to modern urban experiences of constant speed, innovation and change; in Tafuri’s writing the Metropolis had an additional value, as it was raised to the status of a theoretical category. For both Tafuri and Massimo Cacciari, “Metropolis” was the figure for the life of capitalism, as the general form for the rationalization of social relations. Modernity is Metropolis. The rational-capitalist system only has one place, and that is the Metropolis. In 1973, the year of the publication of *Progetto e utopia*, Tafuri’s friend, the philosopher and political activist Cacciari, published the book *Metropolis—Saggi sulla grande città di Sombart, Endell, Scheffler e Simmel*.<sup>8</sup> It was, claimed Cacciari, German

sociology at the start of the twentieth century that first captured the exact consequences of modernity. The Metropolitan world consists of abstractions in which the process of rationalization and intellectualization is totally dominant, from economics to politics to everyday life. In “Die Grossstädte und das Geistesleben”, Simmel points to the consequences of this reality. It is a ruthless process that is described by Simmel.

**Once the identification with the goals of the architect was left behind, Tafuri was preoccupied with one principal question: what is modernity and what is the role played by architecture in modernity? How can the constant tension and implicit conflict between architects and their own time be explained?**

He claims that the monetary market economy of the modern Metropolis is not only decisive for the exchange of goods, but also defines the norms of human behavior. This is the ultimate consequence of total rationalization: calculation, reason and interest had reached beyond the experiences of working life and invaded the most intimate pores of daily material and

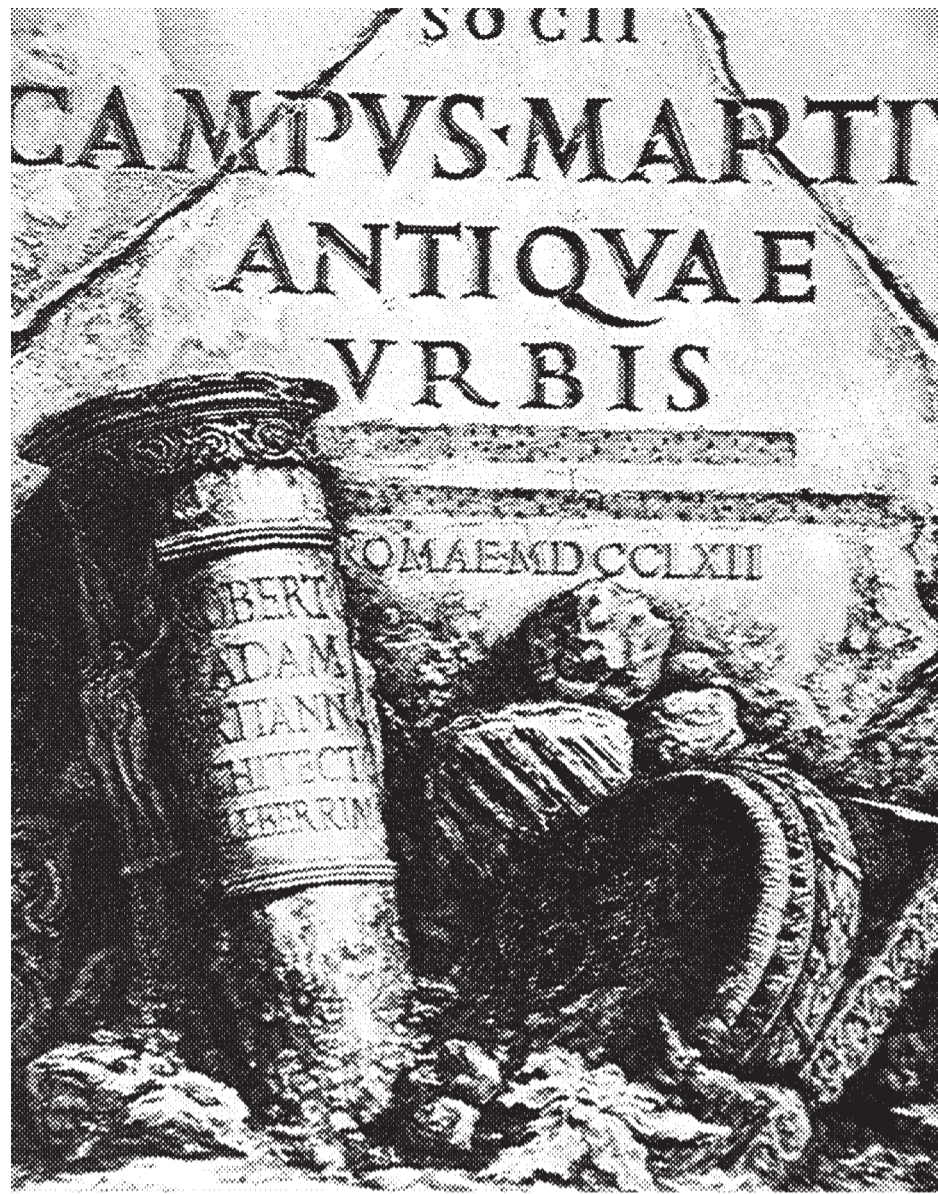
psychic existence. In this way, Tafuri and Cacciari tried to capture twentieth century modernism as a complexity of societal processes, of contradictory manifestations, from which nothing could escape. They tried to name capitalism at a certain stage of its development, where it displayed its most widened social effects, its impact on individual consciousness and the “colonization of everyday life”. They were therefore prepared to take the idea of rationalization much further than such thinkers as Lukács or Weber were prepared to go. Just as in the monetary system, claimed Cacciari, where the value of products is decided by their monetary exchange value and not by their intrinsic quality, so also in the interaction between people, the unique character of psychological experience is disregarded in favor of a notion that measures each human being according to her place in the system. This has as an important consequence that the city, conceived as a *polis*, as an organic unity, has been destroyed. From now on, it can only figure discursively as a lost ideal, as a nostalgia for plenitude, totality and the integrity of values. Such is the new Metropolitan condition according to Cacciari. For Tafuri, the challenge was now to position architecture as ideology within this fully rationalized capitalist system. Cacciari, in *Metropolis*, had already claimed that the process of the interiorization of money circulation was counteracted by an opposing movement. *Der Mensch ist ein trostsuchendes Wesen*: Cacciari suggested that, in order to function in the modern, anonymous life of the big city, it was necessary to let one’s *Gemüt*, or heart, come forward every now and then. This was by no means an escape from the Metropolitan condition, but rather a form of irrationality that was completely functional to the rationality of the system. Cacciari thus essentially claimed that in a modern world architecture had become a matter of *Trost*, of consolation: an archaic, nostalgic experience and a form of ideology. Both Cacciari and Tafuri tried to find out the exact working of this ideology, its exact functionality to the system in various historical periods. As

political shift there was the Socialists' belief of the possibility to reform capitalism towards a rational and socially sustainable form of economy. According to the Italian Socialists, rationally *planned* capitalist production could have been used as means for social justice if reformed at the level of workers welfare. For the socialists the concept of *economic planning* implied the rational and fair management of industrial production through a vast and comprehensive organization of a welfare program. To the idea of class-conflict, the socialist started to oppose the idea of *reform* of the production system in the form of a scientific management of productive forces. This position leads many socialist politicians and intellectuals to embrace what would become one of Italy's main political theme of the 1960s: reformism. As soon this ideology started to be adopted by progressive politics and by the State, it became a fundamental pole of attraction for many intellectuals. To modernize became an imperative for many leftist politicians and intellectuals, but also a diffuse mentality that involved many sectors of cultural production. It is within the wave of the euphorically rationalist ethos provoked by reformism that strong interest gathered around issues such as new regional planning, the legacy of social-democratic urbanism, and the role of design in all aspects of everyday life. The cultural prototype of the new wave of socialist reformism was the affirmation of Adriano Olivetti's "*Comunità*", an attempt to transform a factory into a cultural campus that elevated production as the possibility of a socially sustainable and culturally articulated community. Olivetti involved not just managers, but artists, designers, and writers in the work at his plant.<sup>5</sup> The intent of Olivetti was to demonstrate on the one hand the intrinsically rational nature of production and on the other the possibility of a new social humanism based on industrial development.

The new wave of class conflict that took place in Italy in the 1960s started precisely from the criticism of the reformist ideology that accepted and even idealized production as a scientific and thus reformable form of development. Reformism was thus attacked as the new political and

cultural form of capitalist power over society, as capitalism's most advanced form of ideology.

The main attack to the reformist ideology of industrial production came from a group of leftist militants affiliated with the journal *Quaderni Rossi* and that later were to be called "the Operaists" (the Workerists). One of the main theses of this group, as it was first formulated by one of its leaders, the socialist activist Raniero Panzieri, was that the workers should not only demand the social reform of the forms of production but claim political power over them. In a fundamental essay that can be seen as the very beginning of Italian autonomous Marxism, Panzieri theorized this kind of worker's power as "workers' control" (*controllo operaio*).<sup>6</sup> For the Operaist, workers' control was the struggle against the very essence of production: work, its organization, its plans, and its leaps forward in terms of technological innovation. This meant that the critique of capitalism was to be directed not only at means of circulation and consumption, but most of all at methods of production itself, at what Panzieri called the "machines", the techno-social apparatus required to extrapolate surplus value from the whole of social relationships.<sup>7</sup> This critique was based, on one hand, on a direct reading of Marx, especially the Marx of the fourth section of the first book of the *Capital* where the founder of the Communist party describes the several passages of the history of industrial production, and of the *Grundrisse*, and on the other, on a renewed use of the critique of ideology, which was aimed against all those institutions that were preserving the reality of production as essential form of capitalist sovereignty, such as the State, the unions, but also culture.<sup>8</sup> It was precisely the critique of "culture", and especially of progressive leftist culture seen as ideological mediation at the service of capitalism's reformist strategy, that was the fundamental asset of the critique of ideology practiced by the Operaists. Critique of ideology, on one hand, advocated a resistance to reformism, especially the one incarnated by progressive forms of culture, and on the other, attempted to rethink the role of the function of intellectuals within the framework of class struggle.



▲ G. B. Piranesi, frontispiece from *Campo Marzio Dell'Antica Roma*, 1762

## Manfredo Tafuri and the Venice School

critical intellectuals, they saw this as their task. Architecture could not transcend the level of ideology, just like the new blasé inhabitant of the Metropolitan world could buy commodities but could not "get close to these goods, he cannot *name* them, he cannot *love* them."<sup>9</sup>

In Tafuri's account of modern architectural history, many of the well-known discursive parameters elaborated by historians like Giedion and Pevsner were preserved. Its revolutionary character does not derive from a presentation of a completely different history; the well-known tropes of modern architectural history are given a completely different meaning. For example, like many of his predecessors, Tafuri placed an emphasis on the position of the twentieth century avantgardes as groundbreaking for a completely new form of art. However, he gave a completely different interpretation of these avantgardes—an interpretation which is closely connected to his assumptions about the nature of architectural history. For both Tafuri and Cacciari, the Metropolis was not an agglomeration of static, built objects. Rather, these built entities were understood as a condensation of social processes, as petrified residues of social events. For Tafuri, the challenge of architectural history was to bring meaning to the material artifacts of architecture by providing them with a sense within the broader context of social, political, and artistic history. It is also in this perspective that we may understand Tafuri's view of the avantgarde. For Tafuri they were "agents" in the internal reconfiguring of capitalist social relations in the early decades of the twentieth century. They thought of completely new forms of making art or designing buildings because they felt the need to sweep away older modes of being. In an indirect way, so Tafuri claimed, they thus reacted to the arrival of a "new economic form". However, while Pevsner and Giedion, as well as Zevi and Benevolo, had welcomed the "cheerful alienation" of the avantgardes as forerunners of a new era, Tafuri was engaged in a completely different intellectual operation. Where Benevolo, for

example, had pointed to the "flowery socialism" of William Morris as a precursor of modernism and as such as a desirable cultural policy, Tafuri depicted the tormented passages of "architectural ideology" as it developed in the twentieth century. As a consequence of the coming about of a "new economic form", artists and architects felt their work was becoming increasingly a reification and social abstraction. To fight this tendency, they broke with tradition and introduced radical new forms: this was an effort, so Tafuri claimed, to break away from social abstraction and to reconnect to life. This is what Tafuri calls the inherent contradiction of the avantgarde: while the invention of radical new forms of art could only separate the artistic avantgardes from reality—think of the assemblages of Dada or the "disarticulated recompositions" of De Stijl—in the end this was only a form of *récluer pour mieux sauter*, as this separation only served the purpose of rejoining reality, of affecting reality in a way that conventional art no longer could. However, Tafuri argued, in the end this operation could only fail: through their alienated, radical forms, the avantgardes ended up reaffirming the tragic condition they had sought to transcend. The avantgardes were therefore an important example of the central illusion of architecture-as-ideology: the belief that design could not only make a difference at a social level, but that it could also withstand the conditions of the Metropolis, that it could resist its tendency to intellectualization and rationalization.

An important element of Tafuri's history was the way in which he related the vicissitudes of the avantgardes to the political history of the first part of the twentieth century. This was an important part of Tafuri's program: to identify the role played by architectural ideology within the three great ideological systems of the twentieth century—the realized socialism of the USSR, the social democracy of the Weimar Republic in Germany, and the capitalism of the US. For Tafuri, the "crisis of the avantgarde" was not a direct consequence of the political dictatorship

in this period—again, a view that was completely different view from that of his colleague, the art historian Giulio Carlo Argan, who wrote the book *Walter Gropius e la Bauhaus*, emphasizing exactly this connection.<sup>10</sup> For Tafuri, the rise of Hitler's Germany and Stalin's USSR were in fact important events, but at the same time they were all different ideological reactions to the restructuring of capital and what Tafuri called "the realization of the modern economic form" as it happened around the year 1920. So they were all reactions to an epochal event that occurred during the first decades of the twentieth century, and Roosevelt's liberal-capitalist America was also part of the same framework. In an analogous movement to politics, the artistic avantgardes now understood they could only survive the new condition by making the shift from *utopia* to *plan*. This, for Tafuri, was the central element of modern architectural history. Instead of the prefiguring of a new world, the avantgardes understood they had to take on the role of constantly intervening in, and organizing, reality. While for Tafuri the avantgardes were a complex and contradictory bunch, they were all faced with the same problem of finding the proper attitude to face the Metropolitan condition. As Tafuri wrote, the question for the avantgardes was "how to shake off the anxiety provoked by the loss of a center, by the solitude of the individual immersed in revolt, of how to convert that anxiety into action so as not to remain forever dumb in the face of it."<sup>11</sup>

As a consequence of the arrival of a new economic order that supplanted stable values by "action", anxiety over the Metropolis had to be exchanged for acceptance. If nobody could escape the condition of the Metropolis, than its contradictions had to be confronted in a productive way. Therefore, for example the Dadaist montages and collages were understood by Tafuri as a sort of repetition of the chaos of capitalist reality, but also importantly, as a means of reclaiming value from the ephemera of daily existence, exactly by a positive acknowledge-

ment of it. The avantgardes were part of the same fabric as for example the economist John Maynard Keynes: as Tafuri explained, in reaction to the changed condition, he started to make plans starting from the crisis and not positioned abstractly against it.<sup>12</sup> The challenge was no longer to stabilize economic conditions, but to work with conflict and contradiction, to manage the chaos of the modern world and make its crisis work for capitalism. As Tafuri wrote, it was necessary to work with the "negative... inherent in the system". It was necessary to manage the transitory, the temporary, the oppositional, and contingent. As Gail Day observes, "the plan" for Tafuri did not refer to a fixed model but rather to the process of constant intervention in the system, aiming to absorb capitalism's contradictions at ever higher levels. To study the role of architecture-as-ideology meant for Tafuri studying the different ways in which "the negative" was incorporated into the very process of social and economic development as capital's power. Again, it is remarkable that Tafuri stays very close to the existing narrative of modern architectural history when he states that the avantgardes are marked by their anti-historicism. It was this liberating movement that, according to Tafuri, allowed the avantgardes to "explode towards the future", to become activists and so to find a role within the emerging "planner-states" of the interwar years—the only possible way for them to survive.

### The future of Tafuri

What elements of Tafuri's program still have value today? Since Tafuri's rupture with the so-called "operative history", architectural history can no longer be an apology for the great masters. Since Tafuri defined architecture as an "ambiguous object", a piece of "Metropolitan Merz", architecture has lost its status as a monument: an isolated object and as such a fetish, an idol. Tafuri has proved the untenability of the contention that architecture is an incorporation of the Good, True, and Beautiful. From now on, to claim such



Manfredo Tafuri and the Venice School

### The Mandate of Intellectuals

The effects of capitalist development on cultural production led many Italian intellectuals to question their political mandate and to rethink the role of intellectuals in a capitalist context. It is no coincidence that this period saw a renewed interest in the literary format of the “critical essay”. The social and cultural changes provoked by the rapid modernization of the country aroused suspicion of traditional literary and artistic forms in which the mediating role of the author was not questioned. For this reason, the use of the critical essay format is strategic, and it was seen as the most legitimate form of cultural production because of its explicit self-referentiality as a critical form. The Italian translation in the 1950s of the writings of two quintessential critical essay writers, Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno, contributed to the interest in the literary form. For Adorno, the critical essay was the truly heretic and anti-institutional form of mediating the concept of public truth. As he wrote in “The Essay as Form”, the essay is the most radical dialectical form because of its explicitly mediated character. By making explicit its artificial construction, its self-reflective editorial nature, the essay acts from within the reified sphere of cultural production in which culture is administrated as an industry.<sup>9</sup> For this reason the essay, embodying the most artificially constructed and mediated form of writing, has the inherent possibility to become the ultimate form of criticism. According to Adorno, the function of the critical essay, by virtue of its format, enabled a theoretical interrogation of the way culture itself was produced and reified. For a philosopher, an artist, a writer, or a scientist, writing a critical essay meant to challenge intellectual work by transgressing the way culture was managed as system of production in terms of its *specializations*. It is interesting to note that Tafuri, more than any other architectural historian before him, from the beginning of his career had embraced the form of the essay precisely within this tradition. Already from his early essays and articles, Tafuri always problematized his critical perspective, making the essay not only a discourse on a particular object, but also

a position for architecture means to repress or deny his insights. Instead, architecture for Tafuri became a “technique of control of the physical environment”: an element of power in an environment dominated by other elements of power. As a consequence of viewing architecture as ideology, political and social factors are no longer a *context* against which architecture positions itself; “architectural ideology” is an *actor* in a complex fabric made up of other social, cultural, political actors. From the study of individual monuments, architectural history has moved on to study the dynamics of processes, institutes, and techniques. However, at the same time it is the core element of Tafuri’s program that remains most controversial today: his shift from “positive” to “negative” or, better said, from “heroic” to “critical”. Tafuri has provided an alternative for an affirmative architectural history and has thus confronted architecture with a considerable critical burden. It is significant that this criticality did not find a continuation after Tafuri. While after Tafuri other forms of architectural history have appeared—histories that, for example, redirected the exclusive attention on the architect to a study of more anonymous cities and regions—it is a question of whether or not these histories are not still written in an affirmative way, as heroic histories of the progressive conquest of man over earth and of culture over nature. In the same sense, after Tafuri, a number of architects have appeared that seem to live according to Tafuri’s parameters. In particular, we may think here of Rem Koolhaas’s delirious immersion in the urban inferno. Koolhaas seems the perfect exemplification of life in the Metropolis: this architect not only accepts the harsh reality of the Metropolis, he also faces the negativity of it, he meets capital head-on and tries to outwit it. However, the point of view from which one accomplishes such an action does make a difference: whether it is the legitimizing of late capitalism, as is the case with Koolhaas, or the development of a critique of it, as happened in Venice. Koolhaas still stands in the tradition of the modernist avantgardes: he

studies the most intimate structures of modernity and then declares himself an advocate of them. Following the modernist slogan *il faut être de son temps* he takes modernity at face value. Here lies a fundamental difference to Tafuri, for whom the cultural expressions of modernity were a form of ideology: a deluding veil, an illusion, something that could very well be quite different from what it pretended to be. What presents itself as very modern can easily be a tradition in disguise and vice versa. It is here that the shift is made from mere description, or even analysis, to critical analysis.

Any consideration of Tafuri’s legacy should also take into account the fact that his reception has been problematic. The reasons for this troubled reception are equally significant for the future of Tafuri. In the first place, there is the impact of Tafuri’s pessimism, which had a paralyzing effect upon many architects. Books like *Progetto e utopia* were mostly understood as dire assessments of the possibilities of architectural practice. At the same time, Tafuri himself has always rejected apocalyptic readings of his work. However, it is the engagement proposed by him and his Venice colleagues, and the way in which this is embedded in the political atmosphere of the Italian far left, that remains the most obscure element of Tafuri. This new conception of engagement had its roots in the journal *Contropiano: Materiali Marxistici*. In this journal, Tafuri collaborated with intellectuals like Antonio Negri, Alberto Asor Rosa, and Mario Tronti. In the late 1960s, *Contropiano* was one of the platforms for the development of the political concept of *operaismo* and it was this concept that was at the basis of many of the shifts of paradigm executed by Tafuri. For example, there was the insight that in the labor-capital relationship it was labor that drove productive development, forcing capital to respond with defensive measures. Such inversions of the existing *doxa* were typical for Italian *operaismo*. As Gail Day observes, it is important to see a book like *Progetto e Utopia* as part of this very specific framework and not merely as a Marxist-

inspired work that locates art and culture within the context of capitalist economy.<sup>13</sup> This is important because what was at stake in the circles of *operaismo* was not just an assessment of the Italian society after the war, but a precise view on the nature of modernity itself.

Tafuri’s message was not easy for historians either. In the middle of the 1970s, when Tafuri wrote his *capolavori*, postmodernism in architecture was heralding the return of history as a serious factor in design. However, at the same time, Lyotard wrote *The Postmodern Condition* (1979), waving goodbye to the Grand Narratives and a universal understanding of history. Tafuri also broke with the Grand Narratives of his predecessors Pevsner and Giedion. However, instead of consolidating the newly achieved self-consciousness of the historian by providing a clean-cut historical methodology, Tafuri did the opposite. Tafuri’s work is characterized by a scientific and existential restlessness. It is a constant query into the nature of architectural history that at no point results in a “solution” or a formula to be used by other historians. Tafuri did not offer a hold for architectural historians, no models to be copied. To a certain extent, historians were left equally clueless after Tafuri. As a consequence, “history” nowadays seems to figure as an empty vessel in debates on architecture. While history has long been bereft of universal significance, few people in architecture ask the question: what history are you talking about, what is your understanding of history? This is not only a pity for those of us interested in history. A discipline that does not know its past does not know its future either. This seems an adequate description of the state of affairs in architecture today. •

### Notes

1. Statement made by Ackermann during the conference *The Critical Legacies of Manfredo Tafuri*, Columbia University New York, 20–21 April 2006.
2. M. Tafuri, F. Dal Co, *Architettura Contemporanea*, Milano 1976. Translated by R. E. Wolf, *Modern Architecture*, 2 vols., New York (History of World Architecture), 1986, 3.
3. See Jon Goodbun, “The assassin”, *Radical Philosophy*, a journal of socialist and feminist philosophy, July/August 2006, 62–64.
4. See Rixt Hoekstra, “Lost in translation? Tafuri in Germany, Tafuri on Germany: a history of reception”, *Wolkenkuckuckshaus—Cloud-Cuckoo-Land*, *Journal for Architectural Theory*, vol. 12, December 2008. Manfredo Tafuri, *Kapitalismus und Architektur, von Corbusiers „Utopia“ zur Trabantenstadt*, ed. and translated by th. Bandholtz, N. Kuhnert and J. Rodriguez-Lores, Hamburg (Analysen zum Planen und Bauen 9) 1977.
5. *Ibid.*, 4 and 5.
6. Rixt Hoekstra, “Van tijdgeest tot kwelgeest”, *De Architect*, February 2007, 17–19.
7. Pier Vittorio Aureli, *The Project of Autonomy, Politics and Architecture within and against Capitalism*, New York, 2008. Andrew Leach, *Manfredo Tafuri, Choosing History*, Ghent, 2007. Rixt Hoekstra, *Building versus Bildung, Manfredo Tafuri and the Construction of a Historical Discipline*, Groningen 2005.
8. Cacciari, *Metropolis. Saggi sulla grande città di Sombart*, Endell, Scheffler e Stimmel, Rome, 1973.
9. Gail Day, “Strategies in the Metropolitan Merz: Manfredo Tafuri and Italian workerism”, *Radical Philosophy*, September/October 2005, 27. Quote from Cacciari, *Posthumous People: Vienna at the Turning Point*, Stanford 1996, chapter “Lou’s Buttons”.
10. Giulio Carlo Argan, *Walter Gropius e la Bauhaus*, Torino, 1951.
11. Manfredo Tafuri and Francesco Dal Co, *Architettura Contemporanea*, Milan 1976. Translated by R. E. Wolf, *Modern Architecture*, part I, 105.
12. Gail Day, *Strategies in the Metropolitan Merz, Manfredo Tafuri and Italian workerism*, 31.
13. Gail Day, *ibid.*, 33.

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on the subject itself, on the “author as producer” to use Benjamin’s words. This self-interrogative form in which the work is critical not through its message, but through its medium, through its construction, was Tafuri’s most fundamental critique of the architectural culture of that time, which was more anxious to deliver statements than to assess its own instruments of thought. But before arriving at this critique it is important to mention an intellectual that would have a great influence of Tafuri’s critique of ideology.

Between the 1950s and the 1960s the intellectual that more than anyone in Italy invested in the essay as the most radical form of critique of intellectual work within a capitalist society was Franco Fortini. A poet and an influential communist intellectual and for a short period close to the Operaists, Fortini produced his most important book, *Verifica dei poteri* (Verification of the powers), an anthology of essays published in 1965.<sup>10</sup> It is interesting to note that this book on several occasions was mentioned by Tafuri as a fundamental text in his intellectual formation.<sup>11</sup> The theme of the book was the relationship of culture, intellectual work and capitalist development. This relationship was analyzed by Fortini by questioning what he defined as the problem of the “intellectual’s mandate” (*mandato degli intellettuali*), i.e. how the role of intellectual work was determined by the class conflict within capitalist development. According to Fortini, within advanced capitalism, the mandate of (communist) intellectuals could no longer be defined by the theme of anti-fascism. In other words, the critical function of intellectuals could not be justified by a critique of the *direct* repression of freedom. The intellectual’s role no longer involved advancing the problem of freedom of speech, but rather now addressed the problem of intellectual freedom as new ideological form of the reality of capitalist development.

The most famous essay in the anthology, titled “Astuti come colombe” (Cunning as doves), focused on the critique of cultural ideology as the latter was produced by progressive culture.<sup>12</sup> It is important to consider this article because its main thesis not only condensed the Italian debate about the role of intellectual work within

capitalist development, but it also provided Tafuri with the critical blueprint for his critique of architectural ideology. “Astuti come colombe” was originally published in 1962 in the cultural journal *Il Menabò*, directed by the writers Italo Calvino and Elio Vittorini, in an issue devoted to the theme of culture and industrial work. In the same issue there were essays written by Calvino and Umberto Eco, among others. For these leftists and “progressive” intellectuals, the factory became the new cultural epicenter of literary and artistic experimental practices. It was this new sensibility, mixing socialist reformism and artistic experimentation, that generated the avantgarde revival in Italy of which Eco’s Gruppo 63 became the most important manifestation. Avantgarde techniques such as collage, estrangement, and technological experimentation became the devices through which the members of Gruppo 63 attempted to sublimate the effects of industrialization on social relationships. It was precisely against this ideological use of cultural experimentation in order to mediate (and mystify) the effects of production on society, and especially on intellectual work, that Fortini directed his critique. The two poles that defined Fortini’s critique comprised, on the one hand, an analysis of the political economy of intellectual work, and on the other, an analysis of its aesthetic manifestation. Political economy was used by Fortini as a tool to describe the way capitalist affirmation within society manifested itself through its systematic cultural self-deception. This self-deception was, according to Fortini, achieved often by capitalism’s instrumentalization of progressive and socially committed culture. The use of aesthetics was a way to treat artworks not only as author’s products but also as artifacts that revealed in their concreteness of object the sensual features of capitalist integration. Drawing on political economy and aesthetics, Fortini constructed a critique that was neither aimed at a rational reform of capitalist development, nor at a romantic resistance to the effects of such development. The main objective of Fortini’s critique was to demonstrate how capitalist development was the source of a number of ideological manifestations that not so much

represented bourgeois power, but rather satisfied the good conscience of progressive intellectuals. Facing such extreme levels of cultural mystification in which modernization was reformism and reformism was the new progressive face of capitalist domination, Fortini’s conception of being critical involved becoming “cunning as doves and innocent as foxes”: meaning to constantly adjust the terms of criticism to the standard of the cunning of capitalist ideology and to not surrender to the easy narcissism of good intentions typical of reformist approaches. Moreover, for Fortini it was precisely a critical analysis of the seemingly most genuine attempts of social reform advanced by leftist movements and institutions that often revealed the true features of capitalist domination.

Tafuri’s critique of ideology took form from these premises. Before it would be applied to intellectual work in general, Tafuri’s critique, as it was formulated in his 1968 book *Teorie e storia dell’architettura*, focused on the way “theories” of architecture attempted to render the idea of modernity in terms of *progress*.<sup>13</sup> His critique consisted in showing how such a historical perspective was achieved by systematically masking the very cause of such progress, meaning the continuous state of cultural crisis provoked by the development of the modern culture. Tafuri first applied the critique of ideology to those traditions within historiography that have deliberately attempted to “ensure” modern and contemporary architects about the reformist origins of their historical mandate. Tafuri especially referred to what he defined as “Operative History”, a kind of history written with the specific and ideological goal of legitimizing the tradition of modern architecture.<sup>14</sup> Among the protagonists of operative history, Tafuri placed almost all the major historians of modern architecture such as Nikolaus Pevsner, Sigfried Giedion, and Bruno Zevi. If we place Tafuri’s criticism within the context of the critique of reformism as this critique was elaborated by Panzieri and Fortini, it appears clear that the object of his critique was not so much (or not only) the historical deformations made by these historians in order to fit architectural history into modern architects

agendas. What Tafuri really criticized was the ideology of reformism implicit in operative history, its pretension to solve the contradictions left open by the past towards a coherent agenda for the future. By instrumentalizing history as a source of legitimacy, operative history was not only reconfiguring the past to suit present conditions, but it also separated historical developments from their related contradictions and crises. By editing out these contradictions, operative history had helped to render as almost *natural* the political forces that have shaped historical processes. Though initially Tafuri’s critique of operative history did not have a class-critique form, it was the radical anti-reformism emerging from his book *Theories and History* that led Operaists intellectuals such as Alberto Asor Rosa and Massimo Cacciari to invite Tafuri to contribute to their journal *Contropiano*. Tafuri’s contribution coincided with the second year of his tenure at the I. U. A. V. (Istituto Universitario di Architettura di Venezia), and his contribution to the journal was expected to define the approach of his newly founded Istituto di Storia and the possibility of the anti-reformist critique of ideology within the discipline of architecture and urban planning.

#### Intellectual Work and Capitalist Development

Its editors conceived the Marxist journal *Contropiano*, published between 1968 and 1971, as the follow up to the Operaist journal *Classe Operaia*. However in comparison with the earlier journal, *Contropiano* was more essayistic and less devoted to direct political intervention. The journal sought to construct a working class culture engaging with the most advanced themes of struggle, such as the critique of socialist reformism. According to the editors of the journal (among them, but only for the first issues, was Antonio Negri), the most advanced level of class struggle was precisely what they called the “cunning of ideology”, meaning the subtle and self-deceptive cultural means through which capitalism insinuated itself into the institutions of the working class movement. Yet this radical critique of ideology was intended to be not an

Manfredo Tafuri and the Venice School

# The Task of Architectural History, Today

Andrew Leach

I wish to address three rather simple points that each, in their own respective ways, return to a theme that is integral to the fourth chapter of *Teorie e storia dell’architettura* (1968), Manfredo Tafuri’s famous diatribe against instrumental criticism and historiography. The first involves his definition of the modern era and the implications of that definition both for architectural culture and for the place of its historians therein. The second turns to the nature of the so-called crisis in modern architectural culture that Tafuri identifies over the period roughly covered in *Progetto e utopia* (1973), from the Enlightenment to the middle of the twentieth century. The role

of the architectural historian in this phenomenon remains a key issue. In fact, it becomes demonstrably pressing, directly informing the tone of the pertinent chapter of *Teorie e storia*, “La critica operativa”.

These issues lead us to a third: the proper nature of the architectural historian’s practice. This theme is a red thread running through Tafuri’s *œuvre*. As much as it would be futile to expect Tafuri’s writing to offer a permanent answer to the question it poses, we can nonetheless ask of him tools to unlock the present-day problematics of historiographical practices in architectural culture. This, in my view, is the enduring value of

*Teorie e storia*: the forthright, dogged and (selectively) rigorous appraisal of the architectural historian’s tools and tasks. In this book, his targets occupy a generational and institutional stratum barely in reach. Later reflections on this theme are, to an extent, emancipated from the programmatic contingencies of his fights with older architectural historians and polemicists in Italy. Over time he constructs different enemies, takes on different targets, but it is nonetheless possible to establish a line of methodological writings that revise and refine his earlier book, and which bring us finally to *Ricerca del Rinascimento* (1992).

Put simply, the first chapter of *Teorie e storia dell’architettura* argues that architecture’s artistic emancipation is enacted through a series of intellectual gestures of which Alberti’s presentation of the architectural customs of the ancients in *De re aedificatoria* is one, and of the intellectual differentiation between reality and its representation in *De pictura* is another. This form of represented ancient knowledge, programmatically differentiated from the realities of the city, is evidenced in Brunelleschi’s design for the dome of Santa Maria del Fiore. These moments of the mid-fifteenth century introduce a distinction between *architecture* and *not architecture*. In other words, architecture is intellectually separable from the fabric in which it sits, the medieval urban setting of the Renaissance architect’s practice, because of those values it brings to bear upon the art of building that are not intrinsic to the act of construction.

In *Architettura dell’umanesimo*, published in 1969, Tafuri locates the source of this distinction in an intellectual device that he names architectural ideology, a formulation appearing more prominently that year in the widely read “Per una critica dell’ideologia architettonica”. As we shall see, the same temporal concept of the modern inflects both of the specific periods described in these two pieces of writing, which is subject, in turn, to a theory of architectural culture in the long modern era, and which appears in its crudest form in *Teorie e storia*. Tafuri argues

in *Architettura dell’umanesimo* that architectural ideology, in the sense of values that determine or shore up architectural production, is inextricable from the representation of the past as history. The tendency of history towards narrative renders this process easier, and those histories written under the clear agenda to find lessons in the past anachronistically corresponding to values proper to the present lend architecture both solid groundings in its artistic past *and* legible directions for its future.

While *De re aedificatoria* is, in one sense, a re-statement of the ancient building codes, it does not explicitly purport to direct architectural production. Nevertheless, the values that Tafuri attributes to the treatise define limits for the architectural arts in historical terms, by deference to the great inheritance of Helleno-Roman Antiquity. This early understanding of Alberti’s role in the foundation of architecture as an autonomous concern—with its own knowledge and history—is not far from Burckhardt’s understanding of how the Renaissance “happened”. Indeed, as early as 1978 we can find evidence that Tafuri explicitly reconsiders this thesis to account for a more cynical Alberti—the Alberti of Eugenio Garin—that he exercised most publicly in his aggressive introduction in 1984 to the Italian edition of Carroll William Westfall’s *In This Most Perfect Paradise* (1974), which appeared as *Invenzione della città*. This more complex portrait of Alberti—of *Momus*, *De Iciarchia*, and the *Intercoenales*—allowed for an instrumentality tempered by skepticism. It was this Alberti who made his way into *Ricerca del rinascimento*. This single, if important, example suggests that the details of Tafuri’s theory of history that we find in *Teorie e storia* and in *Architettura dell’umanesimo* do not survive the following decade without intelligent revision.

However, the significance of Tafuri’s early assessment of Alberti and thus of the terms of architecture’s artistic autonomy lies in its presentation of a series of relationships: between historical knowledge, the perceived (though

end in itself, but the premise to the political counter-plan—the *contropiano*—to the plan of the capital. According to the editors of the journal this counter-plan would have consisted in the working class appropriation of the most advanced bourgeois culture within modernity, especially the bourgeois intellectual tradition that Cacciari, in a famous article published in the same issue of Tafuri’s “For a Critique of Architectural Ideology”, defined as “negative thought”.<sup>15</sup> For Cacciari, the tradition of negative thought consisted of a line that runs through the work of thinkers such as Nietzsche and Max Weber. According to Cacciari, these thinkers showed how the bourgeois mentality had already accepted the irresolvable value crisis brought by the development of modernity (and capitalism), and made of such acceptance not a passive position but an effective *will to power* over capitalist development itself. For the editors of *Contropiano*, what was to be done was a reinvention of such a form of power—negative thought—as working class political culture. This inevitably meant an extreme critique of leftist culture itself, and especially of how leftist progressive resistance to, and reform of, capitalism had inevitably fallen into the hands of the capitalists as the most effective weapons of dominance over the working class. It was precisely within this context that Tafuri constructed his critique of architectural ideology. If Fortini showed Tafuri how to resist the temptation of reformism, the editorial project of *Contropiano* provided the Roman historian with the terms through which anti-reformism could be translated into working class critique. Within this context, Tafuri wrote “For a Critique of Architectural Ideology” with the aim of tracing the ideological connotations of the origin of modern architecture. According to Tafuri, modern architecture, and especially its avantgarde movements, could be described as ideological prefigurations of the upcoming effects of capitalist development. In so doing, architectural culture had a precise role in *naturalizing* these effects and making them socially and culturally acceptable.

The more architectural culture would raise the bar of radical experimentation, the more it

would provide the following cycle of capitalist development with its cultural attributes. And yet, once a cycle of experimentation was surpassed by a newer cycle of development, then its architectural and urban products were left behind as “form without utopia”, meaning a form devoid of any reformist urgency. It was in this latter stage that, according to Tafuri, architecture was simply a useless object for capitalist development, and not even its “utopian” ideological weapon. The conclusion that Tafuri drew from his analysis was that, in terms of class struggle, it was useless to work on newer projects and plans. What was needed was instead to radically re-think the role of the architect and the planner as intellectual *workers*. This meant to shift the critique of ideology from the level of the architectural and urban project to the form of intellectual work itself.

The essay “Intellectual Work and Capitalist Development”, published a few months after “For a Critique of Architectural Ideology”, attempted to expand the critique of ideology at this level of analysis. In this article, Tafuri argued that in order to go beyond the ideological understanding of intellectual work, it was necessary to define the link between the cycles of capitalist development, the economic reorganization that each cycle imposed on the division of labor, and the ideological mediations produced by intellectuals. According to Tafuri the most crucial mediation produced by intellectuals in the first half of the twentieth century was to elaborate the acceptance by the established class—the bourgeoisie—of the fundamentally *irrational* form of capitalist development. If socialism and reformism obstinately maintained the intrinsic rationality of capitalism once under the governance of progressive politics, the most advanced bourgeois theorists such as John Maynard Keynes understood that the only way to govern capitalism was to make its fundamental irrationality productive. This potentially productive irrationality was the working class’ rebellious initiative that by constantly threatening capitalism, forced capitalism to adapt and adjust its terms of organization. Facing such a dynamic process and after the great crisis of 1929, capital-

ists understood that economic development was not only a matter of scientific management, but also of political initiative, i.e. the *will to power* over development itself.

For Tafuri, intellectuals such as Max Weber, Keynes, and Joseph Schumpeter understood that the will to power over capitalist development engaged the positive side of capitalism (economic development) together with the negative side (class struggle), by accepting the negative force, not as a collateral effect of development, but as its most powerful trigger. For Tafuri, this productive way of dealing with crisis was the most remarkable achievement of bourgeois thought because it was no longer based on idealism, but on the principle of crisis used as dynamic means for development and power. Following Cacciari’s model of negative thought, Tafuri identified Weber’s value crisis as the core of modern politics and the most effective answer to the consequences of capitalist development. Through the example of Weber, Tafuri claimed that within the permanent cultural and political instability provoked by capitalism, intellectual work could only survive by rejecting any *a priori* (and thus ideological) position and accept the radical *de-sacralization* of its status and means of production.

It is for this reason that those in the field of architecture that read Tafuri *outside* of the specific cultural and political project in which he formulated his critique of ideology, concluded that his analysis could only lead to a “death of architecture”. Yet it is precisely by re-contextualizing Tafuri’s critique, which means to understand that the critique was done within a project where what was a stake was not architecture as a discipline, but the possible relationship between cultural disciplines and class struggle, that it is possible to understand how the conclusion of architectural critics about Tafuri’s critical project was wrong. In fact, the passionate precision with which Tafuri attempted to come to terms with the problem of intellectual work within capitalist development showed that the task for intellectuals, and for “architects as intellectual workers”, was very clear. What was needed, he contended, was to seriously historicize the processes and forms through which the content of

intellectual work was always structurally linked with the conditions posed by the evolution of political economy. It is precisely for this reason that Tafuri (as Fortini) saw, in the activity of historical inquiry (precisely what the avantgardes always rejected as preconditions of their projects), the most powerful tool for questioning and interrogating the effects of capitalist development on intellectual mentalities. To historicize intellectual mentalities meant that the political site of struggle was intellectual work itself in terms of its qualifications, its ways of being specialized and the way, in every cycle of production, capitalism always defined a new mandate for the social role of intellectuals.

For Tafuri, such analysis, before leading to any action, was supposed to provide a non-ideological form of understanding the possibilities for (intellectual) action. In this sense it is interesting to note how today, Tafuri’s reflections come unexpectedly (and paradoxically) very close to, on the one hand, the neoliberal slogans such as “creative work” and “creative class”, and on the other hand, to the post-operaist discussions about cognitive work as the center of the post-Fordist mode of production. But while these positions have completely accepted the productive status of knowledge, Tafuri focused his attention on the pressure points on intellectual culture within capitalist development. This problematization was so radical that we might conclude that the true aim of Tafuri’s critique was not so much the *will to power* in the traditional form of party politics (which, at the end, remained the goal of the editors of *Contropiano*), but more a *will to understand*, a will to deeply disentangle the historical processes through which intellectual subjectivity was made. But the will to understand was also used by Tafuri as the antidote to the architect and the critic’s narcissism of good intentions (and here it would be interesting to rethink Tafuri’s critique vis-à-vis the emerging contemporary bottom-up reformer—the *social activist*), which, in fighting the world, never questions the mandate of her struggle. Above all, this *will to understand*, which Tafuri never expected to be satisfied, but only used as a trigger for his research, was implicitly

Manfredo Tafuri and the Venice School

artificial) boundaries of that independent practice and its adherent knowledge base, as well as the kinds of interactions possible between architecture as intellectually circumscribed by its own values, and an extra-architectural reality, with which it conducts an increasingly isolationist intellectual negation. For example, his 1968 essay “Il mito naturalistico nell’architettura del ’500” (in *L’arte*) demonstrates that architectural ideology is not the sole domain of Albertian, rationalist architectural theory. Naturalist debate, in its explicit opposition to the architecture of reason, responds to an ideology of architectural production on its own terms and thus renders itself equally distant from that the reality to which it purports to draw closer by dint of its truthfulness. Even though in subsequent years Tafuri implicitly admits that many of the specific references and actors upholding his case for architecture’s fifteenth century emergence as an intellectual discourse—distinguishing the art of building from the act—are more complicated than he first portrays them, his abstract theory of the place of history in architectural culture in the long modern period remains largely unrevised.

In turn, his argument for the historian’s place in architectural culture depends upon the schema of *Teorie e storia*, reinforced by his historiological theory of architecture’s disciplinary trajectory through the late modern age, as charted in *Progetto e utopia* and in those books that subsequently elaborate its case. And just as the finer-grained details of the argument of *Teorie e storia* are revised in subsequent years, so too does Tafuri open his own position to reflection. In his 1977 essay “Il ‘progetto’ storico” Tafuri questions his *own* plea for the complexity of history, asking how a form of analysis that claims to be critical can undermine the tendency to simply ape criticality through language, specific subjectivities or the choice of historical themes, problems and cases.

These observations lead us to another. Tafuri calls the modern age, in the preface to the *Ricerca*, an “era of representation”, naming among the historian’s tasks the job of working up the

waters of the past rather than smoothing them over. He thus defines the limits of an enduring concern with the complex interactions between the knowledge of architecture’s past and the values that circumscribe them in the post-Feudal age. The long rise of capitalist society clearly has a central place in his disciplinary philosophy. Architecture’s increasing reliance on its own terms of reference preside over its steady withdrawal from the forces that appear as subtitles to Tafuri’s two most important later works on the Renaissance: religion and science, with reference to Venice; patronage and the city, drawn from the *Ricerca*. When, in 1973, together with Ciucci, Dal Co and Manieri-Elia, Tafuri demonstrates the thesis of *Progetto e utopia* through the American city’s betrayal of architecture’s irrelevance to the organization of urban structures in *La città americana*, the authors do no more, in one sense, than explore a late example of a phenomenon that remains central to Tafuri’s concept of architecture’s artistic autonomy. This theme, too, pervades Tafuri’s discussion of Bramante’s role in the construction of an urban utopia in Julian Rome, published during that same year in *Via Giulia* with Luigo Salerno and Luigi Spezzaferro.

But where does the historian fit into this schema? And why is the idea of “crisis” bound so tightly to Tafuri’s theorization of the historian’s place in late modern architectural culture?

His views on the architectural historian’s tools and tasks, found at the end of *Teorie e storia*, grows directly out of his judgment of a form of historiography that aids architecture’s intellectual insulation from the broadly defined condition of extra-architectural reality. One of his terms of reference is undoubtedly capitalist society, but he is equally critical of the status of autonomous architectural knowledge in the Soviet Union, as evidenced in the multi-authored study *Socialismo, città, architettura* (1971). Suffice it to say that the same kinds of distinctions here distance architectural ideas and ideology beyond architecture as distinguish Santa Maria del Fiore from the urban fabric of fifteenth century

Florence. Both cases involve representational relationship ascribing historical values to abstractions that directly inform architectural practice: theory, as we might use it in its scientific sense. That architectural ideas might no longer govern architecture’s place in the world is a symptom found with greater recurrence towards the end of this historical trajectory.

In turning now to “La critica operativa”, we should note an important, but often overlooked, part of Tafuri’s discussion. Instrumental historiography, he allows, is intrinsic to the intellectual moves that render architecture an art with its own knowledge, techniques and “problems”. However, while the projection of values upon fifteenth century Tuscany, extracted from a contemporary knowledge of Hellenic-Roman Antiquity, gave license to ideas proper to architecture itself, rather than to construction, politics, religion, and so on, these ideas *continued* to hold sway in other fields.

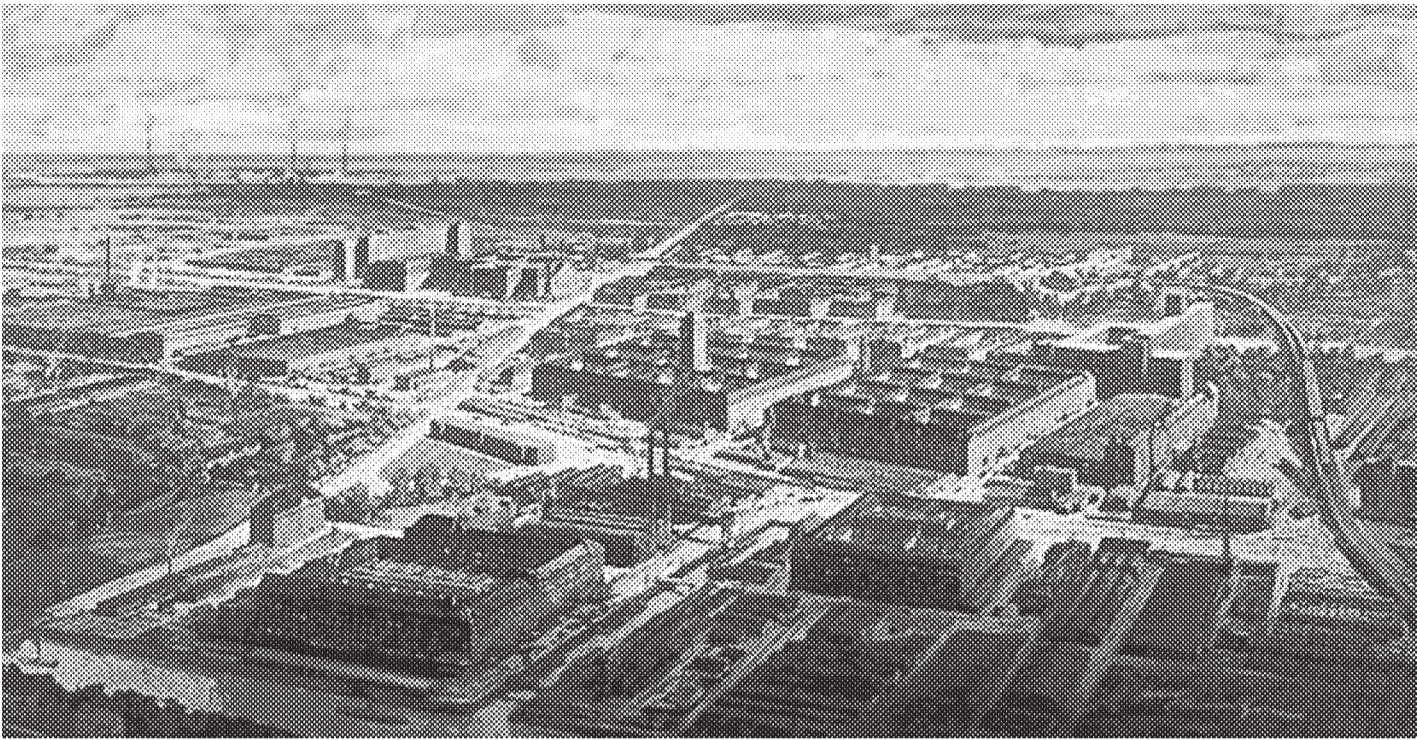
Instrumental historical representation poses no problem to architectural culture so long as an exchange *external* to architecture subjects those ideas to some form of intellectual audit. The claim made by *Progetto e utopia*, *Socialismo, città, architettura*, or *La città americana* is that architecture’s irrelevance to the world around it meant *not* that its theoretical production dwindled, *nor* that it shrunk back from considering its own position in the world around it. Rather, the problem, as Tafuri poses it, lies in the self-ratification of the importance of architecture to precisely those problems over which it no longer holds sway of any kind. We can argue, consequently, that this is one of the primary motivations for Tafuri’s pessimistic elucidation of instrumental historiographical traditions and his exposure of their place in this long process.

We should recall that Tafuri is *not* averse to operative practices in architecture per se. Indeed, he appears to position this outlook as fundamentally architectural. Those historical practices feeding directly or indirectly into architectural production, or viewing history in such a manner

that appears to eschew any responsibility to the realities of the past, are thus operative by definition because they force historical abstractions better describing the values of the present than those of the specific past at stake. At the very least, they filter those past values through the present, rendering them contemporaneous as anachronisms.

Of course all history does this to some extent, Tafuri’s included. It is difficult to read his 1967 essay on Jacopo Barozzi da Vignola without seeing it as a product of a clunky hold on the language of Marxist historiography, nor his history of Renaissance Venice without noting its deference to *Annales* or to Freud in its structure and aims. The key difference between this *baggage* in Tafuri’s writing and the goals of the operative historians is that Tafuri purports to hold himself aloof from interference with architectural production. His disciplinary ideology remains a problem of historical practice, but theoretically isolated from architectural practice and architectural ideology. Whatever holes we can pick in Tafuri’s position as it plays out in his own work, the schema offers an important theory of the historian’s stance in architectural culture.

A substantial aspect of the operative condition against which Tafuri rails can be attributed to a confusion of media. The problem with Sigfried Giedion’s *Space, Time and Architecture* (1941), he implies, is that there is no easy way for a layman to tell if it has anything at stake in its subject. It does the job of polemical architectural theory, upholds the tenets of the mainstream modern movement, but looks like history. Despite the signals, there is little to distinguish it, on the surface, in its first reading, as a work of operative architectural historiography, from a work that purports, at least in theory, to bring a measure of critical distance to its subject. Operative historiography, asserts Tafuri, predicated a crisis of knowledge, status, and meaning because it fails to touch base with that which is not architectural, with those forces that shape extra-architectural reality. In addition, it undermines critical



▲ Die Siemensstadt um 1930, Anton Scheuritzel. From *Siemens und die Siemensstadt*, Siemens AG, Berlin 1999

aimed at what Fortini would have called the recuperation of the *totality* of intellect, or in other words, the possibility of transgressing the disciplinary specializations and expertise imposed by the political economy of work and production. Tafuri demonstrated this transgression not in direct statements about interdisciplinarity or transdisciplinarity (two forms of intellectual work that Tafuri would have seen as the most advanced forms of ideological mystification within which capitalism administers cultural production) but by the wide spectrum of his analyses that combined politics, aesthetics, political economy, and architecture into one *critical* project aimed at defining the true terms of his *Beruf* as intellectual. ●

#### Notes

1. Manfredo Tafuri, “Lavoro intellettuale e sviluppo capitalistico” in *Contropiano* 2/70, 1970, 241–281. The first part of the article was published as the third chapter of *Progetto e utopia* under the title “Ideologia e Utopia”. The change of title has perhaps contributed to overshadow the theme of intellectual work in Tafuri’s historical project. See: Manfredo Tafuri, *Progetto e utopia* (Bari: Laterza, 1973), 49–72, trans. as *Architecture and Utopia: Design and Capitalist Development* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1976).
2. Manfredo Tafuri, “Per una Critica dell’ideologia architettonica,” in *Contropiano* 1 (1969), 31–79. Trans. as “Toward a Critique of Architectural Ideology,” in K. Michael Hays, ed., *Architecture Theory since 1968* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT, 1998), 6–35. As it is well known this article was developed as the book *Progetto e Utopia*.
3. For a critical account of Tafuri’s intellectual formation, a fundamental reading is Giorgio Ciucci, “The Formative Years” in *Casabella* 619–620 (1994), 12–25.
4. “Il piano del capitale” was the title of a fundamental essay by Mario Tronti published in 1962, in the *Journal Quaderni Rossi*. In this essay, the Roman philosopher who were to have a strong influence on Tafuri’s political analysis of architectural and urban history, attempted to analyze capitalist domination as a vast, integral, almost biopolitical, project that extended political sovereignty to all aspects of human labour. See: Mario Tronti, “Il piano del capitale,” in *Quaderni Rossi* 3 (1962), 45–71.
5. The Olivetti plant was located at Ivrea, Piedmont, where Olivetti promoted a campus in which the main facilities were designed by Italian modernist architects. The project was pursued as an attempt to reform industrial life towards a communitarian spirit, and for this reason it attracted many leftist progressive intellectuals that were hired by Olivetti as “cultural” producers. For a study on the Olivetti Town in Ivrea

see: Patrizia Bonifazio, *Olivetti Costruisce. Architettura Moderna a Ivrea* (Milan: Skira Editore, 2006).

6. Raniero Panzieri, Lucio Libertini “Sette tesi sul controllo operaio”, in *Mondo Operaio* (February, 1958), republished in *Mondo Operaio, rassegna mensile di politica, economia e cultura, antologia 1952-1964* (Florence: Luciano Landi, 1965), 880–903.
7. Raniero Panzieri, “Sull’uso delle macchine nel Neocapitalismo,” in *Quaderni Rossi* 1 (1961), 53–72.
8. For an overview on the development of Operaismo and after see: Stephen Wright, *Storming Heaven: Class Composition in Italia Autonomist Marxism* (London: Pluto Press, 2003). For an overview on the early Operaismo, and especially on its most influential figures—Panzieri and Mario Tronti see my *The Project of Autonomy: Politics and Architecture within and Against Capitalism* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2008).
9. Theodor W. Adorno, “The Essay as Form”, in Adorno, *Notes to Literature*, Vol. 1, trans. Sherry Weber Nicholson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991).
10. Franco Fortini, *Verifica dei poteri* (Turin: Einaudi, 1965).
11. See Francoise Very in conversation with Manfredo Tafuri, in *Casabella* 619–620 (1994), 36. Even in the early 1990’s, during his very last seminars that I had the opportunity to attend, Tafuri mentioned Fortini’s book as a very important event in the definition of his critical approach to history. It is important to note that at that time Tafuri was very reluctant to talk about his early work and earlier references, and yet he would still encourage students to read Fortini’s “Astuti come Colombe”.
12. Franco Fortini, “Astuti come Colombe”, in *Verifica dei Poteri*, 68–88.
13. Manfredo Tafuri, *Teorie e storia dell’architettura* (Bari: Laterza, 1968).
14. Ibid., 161–194.
15. Massimo Cacciari, “Sulla genesi del pensiero negativo,” in *Contropiano* 1, 1969, 131–201.

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## Manfredo Tafuri and the Venice School

history’s capacity to diagnose this condition, these genres of architectural history tending to look identical on the surface. And these obstacles together prevent critical history from having a productive effect in architectural culture, acting as its conscience.

In a move that mimics the classic high noon showdown, Tafuri suggests that operative historians go elsewhere, leave textual historiography, and abandon the field to a critical historiography that is ultimately concerned with destabilising the apparently solid values upon which architectural practice relies. He is not so naïve as to imagine a setting where architects do *not* defer to the past. However, he suggests that architecture and its operative discourse does so using explicitly operative media. He cites, in the second half of “La critica operativa”, the critical value of the image as explored by such post-War journals as *Carré bleu* and *Archigram*, or, indeed, in his own practice of critical montage as can be found in the early 1960s essays in *La città territorio* and in *Casabella-continuità*. So, too, he looks at the kind of operativity involving historical knowledge bound up in the evolving practice of regarding the city as a typological field. We need only look at Tafuri’s own urban practice in *lo studio Architetti e urbanisti associati* and in his interventions on behalf of *Italia nostra*, to understand that his suggestion endorses the flattening out of historical knowledge according to a present-day agenda, but in a manner that intends for its operativity to be understood, where there is no confusion with historiography-proper, where the agenda is not masked by an apparent neutrality to the subject.

The goal of this critical operativity is a future projectively conceived, but one that preserves historical complexity through an act of organization.

These details add up to the suggestion that Tafuri’s apparent denouncement in *Teorie e storia* of the instrumental historians of the modern movement is not predicated solely on a rejection of the past’s instrumental representation in the present. When he writes that the historian’s goals differ markedly from those of the instrumental

historians of the modern movement, he admits that operativity is not inherently wrong in architectural culture. His complaint rather pivots around the point that operative criticism fails to correspond to the type of historical knowledge that *he* envisages the critical historian delivering through its engagement with the present. This matter is less a point of preference than an index of Tafuri’s theory of the historian’s efficacy. He projectively claims for the architectural historian the capacity to force a break with the introspection governing the intellectual terms of architectural production, but not a break with architectural culture *writ large*. He appears, that is, to distinguish between ideologically bound knowledge and real knowledge. The former is the domain of architectural operativity and thus of an abstracted image of the architect; the latter belongs to architectural criticality and an equally abstracted image of the historian of architecture.

This scheme contains a judgment: operativity in architecture leads to isolation from that which matters to architecture, while criticality cuts through the ideological fug to find moments where representation and reality can connect. Operative criticism is bad because it presents ideology in the guise of historical knowledge; critical operativity is good because it rescues architectural ideology from self-ratification by connecting it to the real.

If the architectural historian is to agitate against the ease with which architects encounter the past, to recite a familiar idea from the end of *Teorie e storia*, but also from the introduction to the *Ricerca*, then this apparently *new* task, for which we can find some precedent practices elsewhere, builds upon a definition of crisis that applies both to historical knowledge and to architectural ideology.

To restate: Tafuri’s brief history of the long withdrawal of architectural ideology from the concerns of religion, science, politics, patronage, and so on corresponds with the long rise of historical representation as a device facilitating this withdrawal. This is the eclipse after which

the first chapter of *Teorie e storia* is named. Operative architectural history facilitates the crisis described in *Progetto e utopia*, illustrated by architecture’s absolute freedom within a system that no longer needs it, and does not at all miss it.

On the other hand, Tafuri’s brand of historical practice operates against history as narrative, according new value to the processes that unearth historical knowledge, and to the knowledge that such practices expose. There is a heady synchrony between Tafuri’s argument for the status of the fragment within history painted in broad strokes and the presentation of abstracted knowledge within the confines of the image, as Giovanni Battista Piranesi explores in the *Vedute di Roma* or in his depiction of the Campo Marzio.

This implies, as his later work suggests, something more than identifying new historical themes, and new historiographical perspectives. There is no such thing as a more accurate account of history, just one that is more tolerant of history’s own complexities. Within a very short time, a matter of two years or so, Tafuri undermines the historical contingencies of his own call in prefaces to the later editions of *Teorie e storia* or in his 1975 essay “Architettura e storiografia”, for the historian to expose, for instance, the mechanisms of architectural production and consumption. “Il ‘progetto storico’”, in contrast, confronts the premises of this call, asking how any historian can name the terms in which the past is properly known as history.

The critical value of research emerges out of this reconsideration of his own prejudices as a guiding principle for dealing with historical complexity. “Il ‘progetto storico’” opens his 1980 tome *La sfera e il labirinto*, but its main theoretical points pertain directly to the decade that follows rather than to the preceding decade in which most of its chapters first appeared. Research, as Tafuri describes it, has a deconstructive effect on knowledge. Careful scrutiny of existing and new knowledge, of the values with which it has been traditionally ascribed, of the usefulness of that knowledge to the present, each constitute the

terms of the historian’s confrontation with those words that Tafuri, citing Nietzsche, finds as solid as stones. The historian’s difficult task is to break bones over those words in an attempt to render the work of historians past as inert fragments, exposing them as a burden rather than a talisman of truth.

The irony of this point is that the deeper Tafuri pursued the complexities of the past in his own research program, and the more that this work took him to those moments in the long modern era that exhibited an apparently greater degree of complexity, the less his work was perceived relevant by contemporary architects and theoreticians. However defined or named, the “crisis” state in which Tafuri argued for the reconfiguration of critical practices in architectural culture is most evident in this phenomenon of his reception.

What some have termed Tafuri’s turn to history is nothing more, in this sense, than an accelerated program of historical practice along the lines of *Teorie e storia*, following imperatives embedded in *Progetto e utopia*, all tempered by his acknowledgement of the blind spots of that youthful analysis. That this appears distant, withdrawn, or irrelevant to the needs of contemporary architectural practice and theory is a paradox of this effort to understand the very roots of modern architectural culture and its relation to the present. ●


This essay reworks the author’s contribution to the conference *The Critical Legacies of Manfredo Tafuri*, convened by Daniel Sherer at Columbia University and the Cooper Union in New York City, April 2006.

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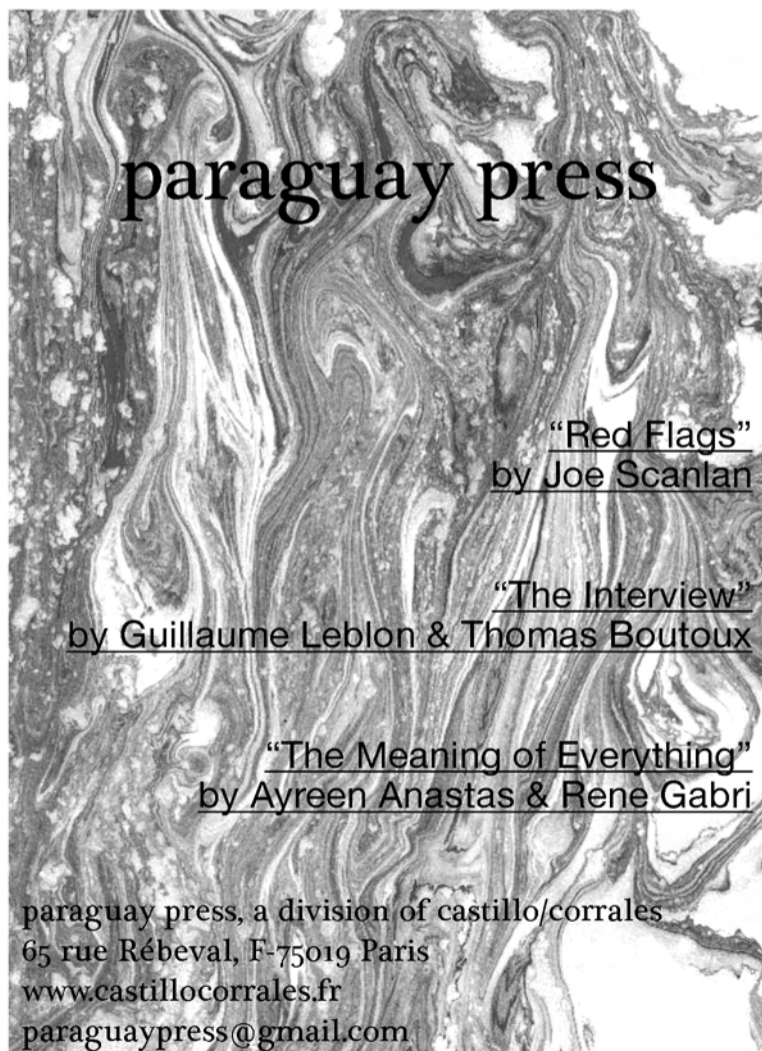
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