

In Good Faith

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Man and Mouse, Katharina Fritsch, 1991-92



Positive Corner, Juan Muñoz, 1992

1 Opportunistic practice

ONE FORM OF architectural practice which has gained increasing currency as a conceptual position could be called neo-functionalist or opportunistic. This position assumes that our period represents a fundamental shift away from 400 years of humanist development, that architecture as a liberal art is an outmoded definition of the discipline, and that practice must take closer notice of the workings of the global market economy if it is to continue to be relevant.

Opportunistic practice holds that the processes that enable the expansion of economic, infrastructural and communication networks must be paralleled by contemporary architectural practice. In becoming descriptive of these dynamic, large-scale processes, architecture gains a renewed legitimacy. The architectural forms that are generated by new kinds of organizational and topographical programmes, forms that are only now becoming imaginable through the use of vastly more powerful computers, will be substantially new, and, because of their unprecedented programmatic origins, will be independent of known architectural syntax.

This position could also be called guilt-free or descriptive. New programmes are seized as an opportunity to develop new forms at exponentially expanding scales of operation. Inevitably this results in an architecture of attenuation and complexity, where horizontal and bifurcating plates are somehow seen as expressive of optimized programmatic systems and the potential for non-cartesian space made possible by new descriptive tools. Although this formal development positively exploits its autonomy from questions of construction, alongside this unsubstantiated privileging of non-cartesian spatiality is an enthusiasm for as-yet undeveloped synthetic materials.

In the same way that the neo-liberal global market economy is environmentally unstable in its insatiable need for expansion and new markets, the architecture of late capitalism is equally unsustainable. As the market economy requires that we replace consumables at an ever increasing rate, its architecture exaggerates the obsolescence of existing structures. As the economy invents previously unnecessary new markets, architecture follows with strategies of demolition and expansion. In exploiting cheap land outside urban areas, this architecture can become ever larger and more cost effective. The development of territories that were previously "underused" generates the need for new infrastructures, which con-

sumes yet more land. In the context of Europe there seem to be clear alternatives to this kind of progress, for example, in the densification of existing settlements. Applied to the territories of developing economies these expansionist arguments are more compelling; but they must not be blindly followed if the environmental catastrophe of Soviet industrialization is not to be repeated.

2 Critical practice

There is another form of practice that could be called critical or reflexive. This form of practice does not align itself with the neo-liberal economic hegemony. By working within a traditional liberal arts context, critical practice is able to pass comment on the status quo, as art practice has done for the last fifty years. In small ways this practice can put forward ameliorative strategies and paradigms that might suggest what could come after the global market, and might remind us of the things that are excluded in that social model.

Critical practice, which is more fully developed in art than in architecture, is not so obsessed with new forms as is opportunistic practice, but rather tries to exploit the latent potential of the known. A work like Robert Smithson's "Spiral Jetty" is powerful because of the way it brings together a familiar form and contemporary means of production. It exposes something new, in this case the operation of dumper trucks moving earth, that suggests that many other equally banal actions could have unexpected, latent potential. Like much of Smithson's work, *Spiral Jetty* suggests that quite subtle shifts in our perception can open up disproportionately wide areas of potential within existing conditions.

A neo-liberal economy prefers a neo-functional architecture which is satisfied with cultivating its own small patch within the system, rather than work which is a critique of the system itself. Apart from a small number of (mostly European) architects, the ambition of practitioners has been more and more fully defined by forces outside of the discipline. This is in sharp contrast to art practice, which despite mercantile and institutional pressures, and perhaps because of its much smaller scale of operation, has been able to remain a viable critical practice.

Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture by Robert Venturi began to make the connection between a sensibility like Smithson's and a new, inclusive kind of architecture. The subsequent marginalization of



Agglomerative brick warehouse in London



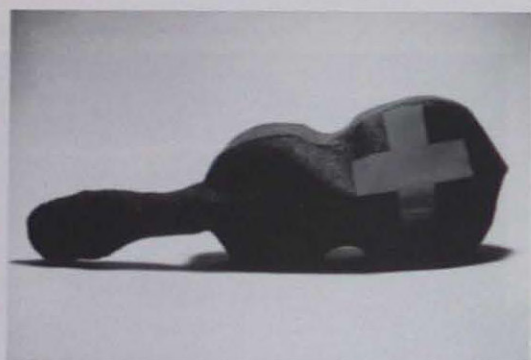
Spiral Jetty, Robert Smithson, 1970



Cement Factory in Rugby, England



View from Atlanta Airport



Cello, Joseph Beuys, 1967



Sinks, Robert Gober, 1985

Venturi's position, even within his own practice, is not so surprising.

Unfortunately, Venturi's assertion that architecture inevitably signifies many things rather than just a few was taken by the profession as a call to re-evaluate the history of architectural forms. As soon as post-modern classicism could be codified and applied to conventional practice, it was already out of style. For academics, Venturi's inclusivity threw wide open what could validly be discussed in the schools. This has resulted in a lasting legacy of ever more arcane subjects of study being taken up in preference to what had previously constituted the core of the discipline of architecture.

Venturi's call for an architecture of inclusion is worth revisiting, with a stronger emphasis on construction and emotional presence to protect this discourse from being reduced to one purely of appearance or style. If architecture is to be an effective critique of the extremes of contemporary development, it needs to engage more fully with the enormous emotional range held within our existing places of inhabitation.

The post-modern condition cannot be avoided. It can be viewed as a wave that once mounted is completely in control of the surfer's ride. Or, our situation can be recognized and engaged with on conventional artistic terms, where a heightened sensitivity allows us to cut ever more closely to the *staus quo*. The artist is not a helpless surfer and even more than science, art imagines and conceptualizes the concrete fact of the contemporary condition.

3 Emotional content

When Joseph Beuys was reconstructing the practice of art in post-war Germany, his work was intentionally inexplicable, rejecting a priori theories as a valid basis for art. Instead he drew on emotional and intuitive forces deep within himself in order to articulate this condition of starting anew and to connect as directly as possible with the viewer. The seeming irrationalism of the work could be seen as a direct critique of the productivist ethic of the post-war era, which itself could be seen as an extension of the war-time economy. Far from being naive, this work was a powerful critique of the quasi-religious status that science and progress had achieved. The work had an open, environmental quality that articulated a new relationship between viewer and artwork, one which predicted a wider and deeper audience for new art.

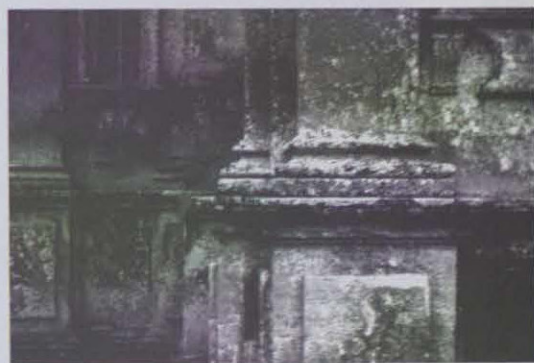
There is a group of contemporary artists whose work develops Beuys's attempt to prioritize intuitive forms of intelligence. The work of artists like Robert Gober, Katharina Fritsch and Juan Muñoz use the human figure and objects from everyday life. But rather than use these forms with any explicitly iconographic intent, as is the case in historical figurative art, this work attempts to operate first and foremost at an emotional level. The image in this work, with its strong associations to childhood, appeals to common experience, so that one forms a strong feeling about the work almost as soon as one sees it. In common with much conceptual sculpture, this work attempts to operate primarily by way of the object, seeking to short-circuit any didactic or literary readings. However, unlike the work of artists such as Donald Judd who have also tended to deny associative readings of their art, the work of these younger artists intentionally contains a surfeit of emotional content, which emerges simultaneously from the image and from the fabric of the artefact.

4 Vernacular

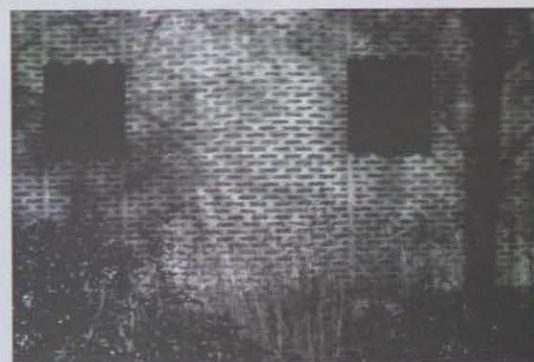
Vernacular buildings operate in a similar way. Vernacular constructions are not architecture. Unlike architecture they are not a self-conscious act. They do not exist through formal abstractions independent of construction. The vernacular is not about appearance but presence. It is a physical artefact which contains within itself the continuously evolving social and technological situation in which it was built. Moreover, even a fragment of their material constitution is sufficient to produce a substantial emotional effect.

Vernacular constructions are increasingly difficult to define. The globalization of technology and information has made the local a more complex condition. However, the ad-hoc manner in which forms are built up in the vernacular, through agglomeration and adding, the slow and steady way in which technologies are taken up into a tradition, these things are still worthy of study, not to create a "new vernacular," but to give a higher priority to the emotional experience of buildings and to develop an understanding of how fabrication can hold emotional intent.

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Wall at Longleat, England



Sigurd Lewerentz: Brick Wall, St Mark's Church, Stockholm, 1959



Log Wall, Finland



Shacks outside Atlanta