

Theory as Ornament

Remarks on the Questionable Place of Theory in Architecture Today

This lecture was first given on June 18, 2004 at Delft University of Technology. Versions of it were given on February 28, 2005 Miami University, Oxford, Ohio and on March 30, 2006 as the keynote address at "A Symposium on the Question of Theory," Washington State University. In reworked form it was published as "Theory as Ornament," *Relearning from Las Vegas*, ed. Aron Vinegar and Michael J. Golec, University of Minnesota Press, 2008.

1

A week ago I was in Berlin for a symposium — the German *Architekturrundgespräch* sounds somehow much more weighty — on the place theory should have in our architecture schools.¹ The participants were asked how they understood "architecture theory," what it had to contribute to the production, appropriation, and analysis of architecture, and what place it should have in architectural education. This lecture develops some of the themes I only touched on in my contribution to that symposium.

The very fact that there should have been such a symposium at all strikes me as significant. Chemists don't arrange symposia with the title "What is chemistry?" Astronomers don't arrange symposia with the title "What is astronomy"? They seem to know what they are doing and why they are doing it. Artists, on the other hand, today are very much preoccupied with just what it is that they are doing, so much so that it has become impossible to establish a clear boundary that separates the production of art from theorizing about art. Theory has become part of art. Should it be? And just the fact that this question, is theory an essential part of art? should have become a central theme in any thoughtful consideration of the essence of art, calls itself for further theory.

The situation in architecture would seem not to be so very different? Is architecture not one of the arts, if an always already compromised and therefore impure

¹ That *Architekturrundgespräch* had been arranged by the TU Berlin and the BTU Cottbus, and took place in Berlin on June 9, 2004. My contribution "Die Architektur heute und ihre fragwürdige Liebe zur Theorie" was published as part of the *Rundgespräch zur Architekturtheorie, Wolkenkuckucksheim*, vol 9., no. 2 (March 2005) <http://www.tu-cottbus.de/theo/Wolke/deu/Themen/themen042.htm>

art — compromised because it cannot keep its distance from utilitarian building? It should not surprise us then that many architects today have become preoccupied with just what it is that they are doing, so much so that today it has become somewhat difficult to establish a clear boundary that separates the production of architecture, here understood as an art, from theorizing about architecture: its past, future, and essence. Today architecture theory is not just theory about architecture, but has become part of architecture. The current boom enjoyed by theory in our architecture schools is intimately connected with this blurring of the boundary that once separated theory and architecture. Such blurring calls for thoughtful consideration.

As the last sentences suggests, we are dealing here with what would seem to be a relatively recent phenomenon. It is a phenomenon theorizing about architecture has to recognize, question and try to understand if it is to address the place and practice of architecture in today's world. For some time now the architecture community has demonstrated an extraordinary receptiveness to theory, more especially to the theorizing of philosophers. I owe the invitation to speak to you today to such receptiveness. But just what need does architecture have for theory and its many words? Since I am a philosopher interested in architecture, this question poses itself for me especially in this form: is it obvious that architects should be concerned with philosophy? With Heidegger and Derrida, Hegel and Lyotard? In the past architecture and philosophy would seem to have done quite well going their separate ways, caring for the most part little about and knowing even less of each other's concerns and achievements. One may well wonder whether this is not the way things should be: what does philosophy have to contribute to architecture? Think of such questionable crossings of the gulf that would seem to separates philosophy and architecture as Peter Eisenman's continuing flirtation with philosophy, first with Chomsky, later with Derrida. Or of Jean Nouvel's thought provoking conversation with Baudrillard. Or of texts such as Sarah Kofmann's "Metaphorical Architectures" or Mark Wigley's *The Architecture of Deconstruction*. No discipline sure of itself will bother much with philosophy. The extraordinary receptiveness to theory, more especially to philosophy, in today's architecture schools betrays a deep uncertainty about the future of architecture that invites critical reflection. Such uncertainty keeps feeding theory.

2

Uncertainty about the present and future of architecture is not a recent phenomenon. In the Introduction to Hegel's *Lectures on Aesthetics*, which include what remains perhaps the deepest philosophical discussion of architecture that we have, we find these prophetic words, inviting us to understand the way architecture today has embraced theory as but another symptom of what Hegel understands as the death of art in its highest sense in our modern age, where such death, if we follow Hegel, should not be mourned, but accepted as a necessary consequence of humanity's coming of age.

Art is and remains for us, on the side of its highest destiny, a thing of the past. Herein it has further lost for us its genuine truth and life, and rather is transferred into our ideas than asserts its former necessity, or assumes its former place in reality. What is now aroused in us by works of art is, over and above our immediate enjoyment, and together with it, our judgment; inasmuch as we subject the content and means of representation of the work of art and the suitability or unsuitability of the two to our intellectual consideration. Therefore the *science* of art is a much more pressing need in our day than in times in which art, simply as art, was enough to furnish a full satisfaction. Art invites us to consideration of it by means of thought, not to the end of stimulating art production, but in order ascertain scientifically what art is.²

Art in its highest sense, Hegel asserts, is a thing of the past. Simply as art, art can no longer give us a full satisfaction. To give us such satisfaction requires the aid of theory. And that most definitely includes architecture. Although temples and churches may survive as treasured relics, even the great works of the past leave us moderns dissatisfied unless accompanied by interpreting words. We feel a need to supplement what we immediately experience in works of art with theory. Theory, and theory here includes both the history and philosophy of art, has thus gained a new significance. But note the

² Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Introductory Lectures on Aesthetics*, trans. Bernard Bosanquet, ed., intro. and commentary by Michael Inwood (London: Penguin, 1993), p. 13.

difference between what Hegel here asserts and what I said in the beginning about theory having become part of architecture: Hegel here does not understand theory as part of architecture. Theory is about architecture. We need to distinguish between theory in architecture and theory about architecture, although the two do of course overlap.

In the cited passage Hegel speaks of art in general. But what he here says of art most definitely includes architecture, is indeed especially true of architecture, the art Hegel places at the very origin of art. As in this sense the first art, architecture is also the art that the progress of spirit has most decisively left behind. Today, Hegel claims, architecture, understood as an art as opposed to functional building, needs theory if it is to give us a full satisfaction. I would like to underscore that when Hegel here speaks of the need for theory what he has in mind is not theorizing that in some fashion serves the production of architecture, for example by analyzing the pressing problems our building should address or the means, materials, and technologies available to it. Not that Hegel would have questioned the importance of such theorizing. But when he is speaking of our need for theory he is thinking first of all not of building and its requirements, but of the appreciation of architecture as an art. To give us moderns full satisfaction even the greatest works of the past need to be illuminated by texts that interpret their significance by allowing us to understand how they once satisfied what Hegel took to be the highest function of all art: to provide, like religion and philosophy, not so much physical as spiritual shelter. Theory has to supplement what we see. Think of the way we rely on guides when visiting architectural monuments to augment and deepen our appreciation of what we see,

I said, “once satisfied,” using the past tense. For, if Hegel is right, we heirs of the Enlightenment look for spiritual shelter not to art, but to theory: we live in an age that has made thought the sole custodian of whatever principles should guide our lives and for that very reason we are bound to associate art in its highest sense with the past. Those, whose world has been shaped by the Enlightenment, no longer look to the art of the present for edification, but for aesthetic pleasure. Appropriate to our spiritual situation therefore would be an understanding of the work of art as an aesthetic object, that is to say as a source of aesthetic pleasure, of that disinterested satisfaction discussed by Kant in the *Critique of Judgment*. To this understanding of the work of art corresponds an

understanding of the work of architecture as a decorated shed: as a functional building to which an aesthetic component has been added: work of architecture = building + decoration understood in the broadest sense. But just as many artists have found it difficult to accept such an understanding of art, which would seem to reduce it to high-class entertainment, many architects have found it difficult to accept an understanding of the work of architecture as just a decorated shed. Or to put this point differently, many architects have found it difficult to accept Hegel's thesis of the death of architecture in its highest sense. That explains the eagerness with which some architects and architectural theorists have seized on Heidegger's scattered remarks on architecture, on his suggestion that the Greek temple, relegated by Hegel to a never to be recovered past, still lies ahead of us as a future challenge. Hegel would have dismissed such theorizing as born of nostalgia.

What prevents us from simply siding with Hegel here is that we lack his conviction that reason is able to provide us with all the spiritual shelter we need. For many of us, that dream, too, has been relegated to a never to be recovered past. But such disagreement does not mean that we can dismiss Hegel's claim that a work of architecture can give us moderns a full satisfaction only if we experience it as more than just another decorated shed, as a functional building that succeeds also as a beautiful aesthetic object. This requires us to supplement the material work with theoretical reflection. But if this is accepted, this means that architects, who refuse to understand themselves as no more than creators of decorated sheds, who remain unconvinced by Hegel's claim that architecture in its highest sense belongs to a never to be recovered past, who still aspire to being artists in Hegel's highest sense, should have attempted to appropriate what Hegel has to say about the essential insufficiency of the material work of architecture, by supplementing what they build with theory, by making theory actually part of the architectural work, transforming theory into a strange quasi-ornament, meant to elevate, as ornament was once able to do to do, buildings into works of architecture that would be more than mere decorated sheds.³ The work of Peter Eisenman provides a striking example. I shall have to return to it. And striking, too, is his presence in our

³ For the distinction between decoration and ornament presupposed here, see Karsten Harries, *The Ethical Function of Architecture* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT, 1997), pp. 28-81.

architecture schools, as a seemingly ubiquitous visitor, lecturer, and juror. Such popularity testifies to the love of theory so evident in many of the schools I have visited. Such love of theory, I would like to suggest, invites comparison with the love of ornament of a hundred years ago, invites also reactions that parallel Loos's condemnation of ornament. The widespread love of theory today demands consideration of the question: what need is there for theory?

Hegel, as I have suggested, would have us understand such attempts to make theory actually part of the architectural work in a futile attempt to hold on to the highest function of art even today as just another symptom of the death of art.

3

Following Kundera, I have spoken in the past of the unbearable lightness of much recent architecture. Following Hegel, I have suggested here that much art and architecture today seems naked unless dressed up in words by some interpreting text. It is in a need to cover such nakedness that efforts to make theory part of architecture have their foundation.

But has Hegel not shown that such modernist nakedness is not to be undone, that it has its foundation in nothing less than the progress of spirit, which is a progress of both reason and freedom, that as such it is a phenomenon to be embraced rather than deplored as a loss of some supposedly more authentic building and dwelling. Hegel would have us accept that the days when "the profoundest interests of human beings" found "expression in art" are over. And that they are over has its foundation in the spiritual situation of the modern age. "We are beyond the stage of reverence for works of art as divine and objects deserving our worship. The impression they make on us is of a more reflective kind, and the emotions which they arouse require a higher test and a further verification. Thought and reflection have taken their flight above fine art."⁴ The ruling understanding of reality, as it finds expression in our science and technology, which understands nature first of all as a source of materials to be used by us as we see fit, is of a piece with the inability of modern art to incarnate meaning in matter. The medieval

⁴ Hegel, p. 12.

understanding of nature as a book that speaks to us of our own life and destiny belongs to a never to be recovered past; from this perspective Louis Kahn's talk about what brick wants to be has to appear as no more than a far-fetched metaphor. Materials have lost their voice, have become mute.

Nietzsche had the same phenomenon in mind when he observed in *Human, All Too Human*: "Stone is more stone than it used to be."⁵ Once architecture veiled the stoniness of stone with meaning, but in this age of their increasingly technological production buildings have lost this aura. "We have outgrown the symbolism of lines and figures, just as we have been weaned from the sound effects of rhetoric, and have not drunk this kind of mother's milk of education from the first moment of our lives. Originally everything on a Greek or Christian building had a meaning, with an eye to a higher order of things: this aura of an inexhaustible significance surrounded the building like a magical veil." Beauty in such architecture remained linked with, but subordinate to a higher meaning: "Beauty entered the system only incidentally, without diminishing in any significant way the fundamental sensation of the uncanny sublime of what the proximity of the divine and magic had consecrated; beauty *softened* at most the *terror* — but this terror was everywhere the presupposition" — "What is the beauty of a building to us today? The same as the beautiful face of a woman without spirit: something mask-like."⁶ Modernity has reduced architecture to a matter of hiding functional sheds behind beautiful masks. Such an addition requires imagination and a good eye, but is it in need of theory?

But as Hegel also insisted, such an understanding of architecture cannot give us full satisfaction. The embrace of theory by architecture today recognizes this. We demand more: and today this means, we demand a more cerebral kind of satisfaction. Hegel, to be sure, would have questioned such an embrace of theory. He would have insisted that it is futile to expect art, and that includes architecture, to provide for such satisfaction. Ours is an age of reflection and by the same token an age of objectivity. The two belong together, for to demand objectivity is to be aware of the way in which particular points of view and perspectives limit knowledge. The pursuit of truth demands

⁵ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Menschliches, Allzumenschliches*, I, 218.

⁶ *Ibid.*

objectivity. This means that the locus of truth can alone be thought. The sensible has to be translated into thought if it is to yield truth. This is also necessary, if we are to find truth in art. But such translation must leave behind the sensible character of the work of art. It is for this reason that Hegel can say that art no longer fulfills our deepest interests. Today art must prove itself before reason if it is to be more than entertainment. To satisfy us, it has to become an occasion for edifying reflection. “Therefore, the science of art is a much more pressing need in our day than in times in which art, simply as art, was enough to furnish a full satisfaction.”⁷ The critic thus has come to rival and at times even to replace the artist. As Arthur Danto exemplifies so convincingly, reflections on art have become an essential part of the artistic life of our time. That so many of today’s artists should have studied philosophy on the undergraduate or even graduate level comes as no surprise.

Hegel, as I have pointed out, understands world history as the progress of freedom. The discovery and insistence on freedom has made it impossible for us moderns to find satisfaction in any merely finite content. To Hegel the current resurgence of regionalisms of all sort — think of Kenneth Frampton — would have appeared as but another and in the end futile expression of nostalgia. Convinced of the futility of all attempts to recover lost roots, Hegel thus concludes his account of the historical progression of art with a discussion of what he calls the “subjective humor” of the romantics. Although he was thinking first of all of novelists such as Jean Paul Richter, the concept has retained its relevance. Traditional art, Hegel suggests, was born of respect for the content with which the artist is concerned. Instead of subjecting such content to his or her will, the artist’s shaping of that content at the same time lets it unfold and develop according to its own essence. Romantic, and that means modern art for Hegel, is born of a different attitude: it betrays a “broken” or “indifferent” relationship to the external.⁸ Incapable of joining nature and spirit, object and subject in one harmonious whole, the modern artist accepts their separation. There is a sense in which we moderns have lost our place of the world. That loss of place is the price of a freedom that

⁷ Hegel, p 13.

⁸ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Aesthetik, Jubiläumsausgabe*, ed. Hermann Glockner (Stuttgart: Frommann, 1937), vol. 13, p. 237.

increasingly is at home everywhere and nowhere. With this place loses the aura it once possessed. Modern art, as a result, has to fall apart. On one hand we have representations of external objects in all their mute contingency and evanescence; “the ideal disappears from art.” On the other, we meet with arbitrary expressions of the artist’s free subjectivity. “Today the artist is no longer bound to a specific content and a manner of representation appropriate only to this subject matter — art has thereby become a free instrument, which, his own subjective skill permitting, the artist can use equally well on any content, whatever it may be.”⁹ A new freedom that draws on all that history and nature have to offer goes along with a new rootlessness. More and more art turns into harmless, but also quite insignificant play. Measured by humanity's true interests, art comes to seem increasingly besides the point, superfluous, at best a pleasant diversion. As the creative subject attempts to put itself in place of the absolute, artistic creation becomes a mere “play with objects, a displacing and inverting of the material.”¹⁰ Caprice dissolves substance. But the lightness of such production is hard to bear. We long for something substantial and so we turn to theory to restore lost substance.

4

It is thus not surprising that for some time now a felt need for theory should have spread through the architectural community and especially our schools of architecture. Kate Nesbitt, in the introduction to her widely used anthology *Theorizing a New Agenda for Architecture: An Anthology of Architectural Theory 1965-1995* interprets the proliferation of such theorizing as a reaction to architectural modernism, to an architecture that by the 1960s “had been reduced to formulaic repetitions of the canonical works of the Modern Movement.”¹¹ And no doubt: architecture had become uncertain of its way. Such uncertainty invites philosophical reflection, invites theory.

⁹ *Ibid*, p. 236.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, vol. 13, p. 226. “Subjective humor” is closely related to romantic irony, which Hegel and following him Kierkegaard associate above all with Friedrich Schlegel.

¹¹ Kate Nesbitt, editor, *Theorizing a New Agenda for Architecture: An Anthology of Architectural Theory 1965-1995* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1996)., p. 12.

The modern movement did of course produce its share of theory. Countless programs and manifestos testify to both, a refusal to accept the decorated sheds of the nineteenth century as the fitting architectural repression of the modern age and a refusal to surrender what Hegel called art's highest function. A striking expression of this twofold rejection is Feininger's cover for Gropius's Bauhaus program, showing a Gothic cathedral in modernist forms. The Wagnerian text invites comparison with Heidegger's Nietzschean call for a modern Greek temple in "The Origin of the Work of Art."

But was the Modern Movement not right to define itself in opposition to the decorated sheds of the nineteenth century? Could not that reason that gave us our science and technology and with them an altogether new freedom, also provide a humanity come of age with all the spiritual shelter they needed, shelter that found its architectural expression in naked walls and right angles? Was more than reason needed to provide human beings with a "focusing purpose"¹² that once again would unite them in a genuine community, without requiring them to surrender their freedom, where many a modern artist and architect could conceive of such a reconciliation of freedom and community only in terms of a socialist paradise? Dreams of such a paradise have been shattered over and over, had to be shattered because the very idea of such a reconciliation, is, as Schopenhauer would have put it, a wooden iron. Translated into America and recast as the International Style, architectural modernism left behind the ethical pathos that originally supported it and degenerated into what amounted to just another and increasingly boring form of decoration. We cannot blame such translation from old Europe to the United States for such degeneration: The modern movement had to end in uncertainty because of the incoherence of the modernist project. Such uncertainty called for a re-examination, called for theory.

During this time of reexamination of architecture (and of cultural modernity), the influence of extradisciplinary paradigms increased, notably literary paradigms such as semiotics and structuralism. Communication theory and phenomenology presented additional ways to approach the crisis of meaning within architecture. In response to the loss

¹² See T. J. Clark, *Farewell to an Idea: Episodes from a History of Modernism* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1999), pp. 8, 11.

of socially-motivated engagement with the world, Italian Marxism and the Frankfurt school offered political critiques of architecture. No single theory dominated the discourse as academic architects borrowed new thoughts from other disciplines. This pluralist, revisionist period can be general characterized as postmodern.”¹³

In her introduction Nesbitt places special weight on the publication of Robert Venturi’s *Complexity and Contradiction*, published in 1966, which is said to have “radically changed attitudes to modern architecture.” In this estimate she followed one her mentors at Yale, Vincent Scully, who prides himself in having had the wit, in the introduction he wrote for that that book, to have called it “the most important writing on the making of architecture since Le Corbusier’s *Vers une architecture*, of 1923.”¹⁴ The publication of *Complexity and Contradiction* as “the first of a number of occasional papers concerned with the theoretical background of modern architecture” — to quote Arthur Drexler — was given a comparable significance as placing us on the threshold of a new epoch.

While Venturi’s book did have an enormous impact, we must keep in mind that by then the modernist paradigm had already been undermined in more than one way. Thus just two years before, the Museum of Modern Art had published Bernard Rudofsky’s *Architecture without Architects: A short introduction to non-pedigreed architecture*, which “a whole generation of architects took ... as its point of departure for the attempt to escape from modernist formalism.”¹⁵ There is of course a striking difference in tone, and more especially a strikingly different assessment of the importance of theory. Rudofsky dreams of an architecture firmly embedded in age-old ways of dwelling and building. Such a dream is also a dream of building that had no need for theory. Venturi is of another mind, belongs to another generation: especially significant is the way he invokes in his Preface T. S. Eliot’s discussion of analysis and comparison as tools of literary criticism:

¹³ Nesbitt, p. 12.

¹⁴ Vincent Scully, “Note to the Second Edition,” Robert Venturi, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1966), p. 12.

¹⁵ Andrea Bocco Guarneri, *Bernard Rudofsky* (Vienna, New York: Springer, 2003), p. 121.

These critical methods are valid for architecture, too: architecture is open to analysis like any other aspect of experience, and is made more vivid by comparisons. Analysis includes the breaking up of architecture into elements, a technique I frequently use even though it is the opposite of integration which is the final goal of art. However paradoxical it appears, and despite the suspicions of many Modern architects, such disintegration is a process present in all creation, and it is essential to understanding. Self-consciousness is necessarily a part of creation and criticism. Architects today are too educated to be either primitive or totally spontaneous, and architecture is too complex to be approached with carefully maintained ignorance.¹⁶

Analysis and comparison are here said to be essential both to the appreciation and the creation of architecture. With this theory becomes part of the work of architecture in such a way that many a recent work of architecture seems somehow naked and mute without it, like a shed stripped of its ornament. To fully appreciate a building such as Venturi's Guild House in Philadelphia, we have to understand how this building with its six stories plays with the urban vernacular, a modernist formal vocabulary, and the tripartite organization of a palazzo. To appreciate this building as a major work of architecture we need to supplement what we see with theory. The same could be said of the work of Peter Eisenman. Words here serve to give meaning to the building, and not just or even primarily in the form of conspicuous signs, but as thoughtfully placed markers that invite the knowing to engage in playful theorizing.

In its self-conscious embrace of theory *Complexity and Contradiction* belongs with Andy Warhol's *Brillo Box* of 1964. Here is a work that, following Duchamp, to whom I shall have to return, calls into question the identification of the work of art with what presents itself to the eye. As Arthur Danto points out, the question, why is Warhol's Brillo-box art while that in the supermarket is not? could no longer be answered by the object alone; it required philosophy. Theory here becomes an essential part of the work of art. And in this Warhol had a precursor in Philip Johnson, the *eminence grise* of

¹⁶ Venturi, p. 13.

architectural postmodernism, to whom Venturi owed so much. Charles Jencks' interpretation of the significance of Johnson's *Glass House* of 1949 deserves careful consideration:

This work was consciously designed to exaggerate the principles of modern architecture to a provocative extreme: the effect was contemplated and perfect. Not the interpenetration of space, but a totally see-through house; not a machine-made office, but a machine-made cottage; not asymmetry alone, but combined with symmetry. A transparent mirror was placed on a carefully manicured lawn of green. The building was provided by Johnson with an 'explication de texte' so that the Modern Movement could follow the allusions (among the twenty-seven were – Le Corbusier, Van Doesburg, Malevich, Mies, Ledoux and Schinkel). These historical programme notes published in the *Architectural Review* were helpful for a full architectural experience, but the real significance of the house was as a social gesture. All of a sudden architectural journalism had become part of the object. Marshall McLuhan, Tom Wolfe, and Robert Rauschenberg were pre-empted here. The social celebration of architecture through photographs was suddenly as significant as the building. Soon Rauschenberg could 'paint a portrait' by merely saying : "This is a portrait of Iris Clert, if I say so.' But Johnson was the first to realize the implications of a sophisticated audience and new means of communications for the architectural tradition.¹⁷

I would like to underscore Jencks' observation that "All of a sudden architectural journalism had become part of the object." The way that theory today has so often become part of architecture is here prefigured. In such cases we can speak of "an architecture of the built word."

¹⁷ Charles Jencks, *Modern Movements in Architecture* (New York: Doubleday Anchor, 1973), pp. 206-207.

“An architecture of the built word” — I use this expression, having in mind Tom Wolfe’s characterization of American abstract expressionism as an art of the painted word, which I invite you to use as a kind of lens through which to look at some recent architecture, for example the architecture of Venturi or Eisenman.

Published in 1975, Tom Wolfe’s *The Painted Word*, captured well how the art world by then had changed. Wolfe writes of having been jerked alert by something he read in a review by Hilton Kramer of the work of seven realist painters: “Realism does not lack its partisans, but it does rather conspicuously lack a persuasive theory. And given the nature of our intellectual commerce with works of art, to lack a persuasive theory is to lack something crucial — the means by which our experience of individual works is joined to our understanding of the value they signify.”¹⁸ Something analogous can today be said of works of architecture: As ornament was once supposed to do, theory today helps to alleviate what, following Kundera, we can call the unbearable lightness of too much recent architecture. Presupposed by such love of theory is a legitimate sense that something is missing in much that gets built today.

In his review Wolfe seized on the words, “to lack a persuasive theory is to lack something crucial.” They opened his eyes to the fact that, despite its claim to have freed itself from literary meanings, modern art had in fact “*become completely literary: the paintings and other works exist only to illustrate the text.*”¹⁹ Was it not words that really mattered? Wolfe’s essay concluded with an amusing and to some no doubt reassuring prophecy:

... in the year 2000, when the Metropolitan or the Museum of Modern Art puts on the great retrospective exhibition of American Art 1945-75, the three artists who will be featured, the three seminal figures of the era, will be not Pollock, de Kooning, and Johns — but Greenberg, Rosenberg, and

¹⁸ Hilton Kramer, quoted in Tom Wolfe, *The Painted Word* (Toronto, New York, London, Sydney: Bantam Books, 1976), p. 4. See also Karsten Harries, "The Painter and the Word," *Bennington Review*, no. 13, June 1982, pp. 19-25.

¹⁹ Wolfe, *The Painted Word*, p. 6.

Steinberg. Up on the walls will be huge copy blocks, eight and a half by eleven feet each, presenting the protean passages of the period ... a little “fuliginous flatness” here ... a little “action painting” there ... and some of that “all great art is about art” just beyond. Beside them will be small reproductions of the work of the leading illustrators of the Word from that period, such as Johns, Louis, Noland, Stella, and Olitski. (Pollock and de Kooning will have a somewhat higher status, because of the more symbiotic relationship they were to enjoy with the great Artists of the Word.)²⁰

Wolfe delighted in poking fun at artists who had become mere illustrators of “the Word.” There is the suggestion that in becoming such illustrators they averted their eyes from what Leonardo da Vinci and those who followed him had discovered and developed, betraying the grand tradition of western art. How different, Wolfe suggested, was the example set by science, which built on what the past had achieved!

But Wolfe’s mention of Leonardo raises an obvious question: why single out a Renaissance painter? Does the Renaissance stand here for a decisive break in the history of art, a break away from the hegemony of the Word? Medieval painters at any rate were painters of “the Word,” now capitalized with greater justice, for “Word” here meant not the words of some critic or theorist, but Holy Scripture. This replacement of Scripture by the critic’s words demands further consideration. But I want to underscore the obvious: from the very beginning Christian art and architecture served the Word. Such service is part of such art. Nor did the Renaissance put an end to that tradition. Think of the art of the Counter-Reformation. Modern art’s turn away from the Word would seem to be the exception rather than the rule. And if in the sixties we meet with a renewed interest in words, in theory, should this not be interpreted perhaps as a return to the mainstream of western art and architecture?

In this connection Duchamp deserves special recognition as the artist who more decisively than any other prefigured the postmodern return to the word. Was he not right to challenge that emphasis on materiality, on the physicality of painting, which he

²⁰ Ibid., pp. 118-119.

thought Courbet had introduced into modernist painting? It is not difficult to come up with architectural analogs. Duchamp does indeed invite description as an artist of the Word, although confronted with his *Fountain* we may well want to strike the capitalized singular. The “aesthetic appeal” of the object, at least as that expression has usually been understood, is limited. It gains its meaning mostly as a gesture directed against the accepted and expected. This makes it interesting.

Duchamp himself spoke of a provocation. The title, so interestingly at odds with what it names, underscores such provocation. But to be provocative, this work of art requires spectators that both recognize this piece of plumbing and presuppose that art has certain boundaries. Duchamp’s *Fountain* challenges these boundaries. Like so much modern art and architecture, this is art about art, presupposing and inviting theorizing about art. More especially, it challenges an approach to art that has celebrated the unique artwork’s physical presence. What it asserts instead is that what matters is not the physical object, not its special aura, but the fact that it was chosen and the ideas governing that choice. When Rauschenberg later asserted that he could ‘paint a portrait’ by merely saying “This is a portrait,” he only gave us another variation on a theme by Duchamp. For the Word of God such art substitutes the words of the creative artist. The question is whether such words can restore to art what it lost.

More than any other artist, Duchamp deserves to be called the patron saint of post-modernism and no work better shows this than his monumental *The Bride Stripped Bare By Her Bachelors, Even*, usually called the *Large Glass*. I wonder whether there is another work of modern art that has invited more and more learned commentary, where the artist himself, prefiguring Philip Johnson, has taken a great deal of care to create a context for the work that not only invites, but almost demands such commentary. The famous Green Box (a facsimile edition of Duchamp’s notes, diagrams, and studies of the work, painstakingly reproduced to show even erasures and blots) promises the key to the enigma of this work. As Richard Hamilton observes, “Intimacy with all the texts and diagrams of the *Green Box* is the best, indeed the only, way to achieve true understanding

and enjoyment of the *Glass*.”²¹ Hilton Kramer’s pronouncement that for modern art to lack a persuasive theory is to lack something crucial comes to mind, although the *Green Box* offers us no such theory, but only hints that invite construction of such a theory. If we are diligent, our attempt to take up that invitation will involve not only just about everything the artist has created and written, especially his *Étant donnés*, but much more besides. It is fun to play with these connections and with the elaborate descriptions that Duchamp and many critics and art historians have given us of the workings of this “agricultural machine,” as he himself called it, to ponder the profundity of this wedding of eros and technology. Ever different maps and points of view invite us to continue the search, to lose ourselves in the labyrinth of our own imagination. But in that labyrinth we will not find the key that unlocks the secret. Together with the context provided for it, the *Large Glass* gestures towards the Word that will explain all. But there is no such word.

Duchamp, as I pointed out, wanted to get away from Courbet, from physical painting, from the pursuit of sensuous presence, wanted to return to an art of ideas. And no doubt, he succeeded. He, especially, invites description as an artist of the Painted Word. But where is that Word? Were we to find it, that play in which Duchamp’s creations invite us to join would end. We would get bored — as we so easily get bored by the work of his many imitators. Again and again Duchamp seems to place us on the threshold of some momentous discovery. In his discussion of the large glass Arturo Schwarz thus, having gone through a very imaginative, intricate analysis, replete with references to Jung and the alchemical tradition, finds in the separation of the bride and the bachelors a metaphor of the quest for the Philosopher’s Stone. “No work but the *Large Glass* has embodied the unattainable transparency of the Philosopher’s Stone. The story of the quest of the Philosopher’s Stone is a story of failures. But the men who bravely fail teach us more than those who briefly succeed.”²² This resounding conclusion

²¹ Richard Hamilton, “The Large Glass,” in *Marcel Duchamp*, ed. Anne d’Harnoncourt and Kynaston McShine (New York: The Museum and Modern Art and the Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1973), p. 60.

²² Arturo Schwarz, “The Alchemist Stripped Bare in the Bachelor, Even,” *Marcel Duchamp*, p. 97.

is puzzling in more than one way. The philosopher's stone sought by alchemists was supposed, not only to turn common metals into gold, but also to grant health, especially spiritual health. Is this work supposed to grant such health? Presumably not, for what it embodies is said to be "the unattainable transparency of the Philosopher's Stone."

Duchamp is described as a heroic knight embarked on a quest that must fail, although I wonder who is meant by those who are said to have succeeded, if only briefly, in this impossible quest. Did they find the philosopher's stone only to lose it again? Or was the longed for discovery of the stone a big disappointment? But perhaps we should not pursue this matter, since we are told that we have more to learn from the heroic failure of Duchamp and others like him. But just what does Duchamp have to teach us? And what significance does such teaching hold for architects?

By now Arturo Schwarz's interpretation has become part of the ever-expanding literature surrounding the *Large Glass*. We should not expect this literature ever to give us the Word the *Large Glass* illustrates. We will always be waiting for Godot. What matters is the aesthetic quality of the play of ideas, a play that can go on forever. This play is open only to initiates, and although the road to initiation is open to all, it takes an enormous amount of time and dedication. And what is the reward: the philosopher's stone? But what matters is the quest, not the grail. What matters is not the outcome, but the elegance of the moves made by the player. Hermann Hesse's glass bead game comes to mind, this play with the contents furnished by traditional religion, philosophy, and art, play in and with the ruins of western culture. The moves in that game establish ever-new clever combinations, which can be so clever precisely because the player is no longer responsible to the truth. Such play is essentially parasitic. If it seems significant, it is because its material, drawn from past religion, philosophy, and art once articulated what was felt to matter most. Even in their present ruined state traces of that aura remain: clever combinations of these traces still are able to create the illusion that one is on the threshold of some great mystery, when in fact we are on the threshold of a meaningless silence. Duchamp's turn to an "intellectual," "literary" art may be understood as a refusal to accept the end of art as Hegel understood it, as an attempt to return to art its highest

vocation. As I have suggested, any such attempt would have to place itself in opposition to an approach that understood works of art as first of all “visual products,” an approach that at the time could claim the support of aesthetics. There is, however, a decisive difference between an art ruled by the Word and the art now envisioned. Duchamp hints at this difference when he invokes chess, at which he excelled: this new art is like such a cerebral game; the beauty of its moves is to be grasped by the mind, not the eye. Should such a game still be considered art? The reception of Duchamp’s *Fountain* has demonstrated that the art world has become willing to apply the term “art” to creations that please, not because of their visual appearances, but because of the play of ideas they occasion. But the play of ideas is inescapably also a play of words. Words now become constitutive of the aesthetic object.

With this it becomes necessary to rethink to Pevsner’s understanding of the work of architecture as a functional building lifted by an aesthetic addendum to the level of art. The nature of this aesthetic addendum has changed. What now matters is not beauty, but the introduction of markers into the work of architecture that will occasion interesting thoughts. Instead of that harmonious interplay of understanding and imagination in which Kant sought the source of aesthetic pleasure, we now have a play of reason that lets us judge the work before us interesting. To invite such play the architect needs to introduce markers into what he builds that precisely because unexpected provoke thought. The successful introduction of such markers demands a thoughtful architect, able to substitute for the Word that once illuminated western architecture, words sufficiently engaging to make us want to play along.

5

Following Kundera, I have spoken of the unbearable lightness of much recent architecture. Following Hegel, I have suggested that much art and architecture today seems naked unless dressed up in words by some interpreting text. It is in the need to cover such nakedness that efforts to make theory part of architecture have their foundation. In many of our architecture schools theory appears as a strange kind of ornament. But without the support of something able to take the part of that Word that once presided over Western art and architecture such theory has to degenerate into

another version of Hermann Hesse's *Glasperlenspiel*. Such play cannot provide the demanded orientation. The transformation of theory into a strange kind of ornament enthusiastically embraced by some of today's most talked about architects only confirms that architecture has lost its way. Such loss of way, as Aristotle knew, has to awaken theory, theory that needs to consider carefully the road traveled, inquire into turns taken and rejected, also into the destination, in order to help us decide where to go now.

Without careful consideration of the history of architecture, consideration that needs to be nested in an understanding of history more broadly understood, speculation about where to go will not be able to furnish more than high-class intellectual entertainment.

Consideration of that history will have to inquire into the origin of what I called the unbearable lightness of our modern building and dwelling. Such consideration has to embrace philosophy. Hegel, Nietzsche, and Heidegger, to name just three philosophers that figured in this lecture, recognizing this phenomenon, located its origin in the progress of reason, which is also the progress of freedom. But pure reason has proven unable to bind freedom. That dream of the Enlightenment has ended. Freedom, however, needs to be bound if it is not to degenerate into an increasingly arbitrary spontaneity. But what now is to bind it? Here I have attempted no more than call attention to the urgency of this question.

The direction in which we should look for an answer is pointed out by some sentences that conclude Hans Blumenberg's *Die Vollzähligkeit der Sterne*. Blumenberg there raises the question: Why did we travel to the moon? Is it too simple to answer, just because it is there and we now had the means to get there, because of that curiosity, that desire to know just for the sake of knowing that Aristotle makes constitutive of human being and that lies at the origin of all philosophy and science? If human beings by their very nature desire to know, then it is their own nature that calls them again and again beyond the points of view and perspectives assigned to them by whatever happens to be their place in the world, calls them away from what they once called home. The loss of paradise will be repeated over and over by human curiosity, which is but an expression of our freedom. The pursuit of truth, as I have noted, demands objectivity, but, as Blumenberg points out, such objectivity has to elide all that might let us take an interest

in that world, has to transform it into a "sphere of indifference *toward all*."²³ To this indifference of the world corresponds the loss of the knower's own subjectivity: both have their foundation in that self-transcendence of the mundane subject, which "completes itself by making the most difficult of all concessions that can be expected of it: to let its world become the world, to witness the transformation of its life-time into one of many life-times, into world-time, and as such alienated from itself."²⁴ To the extent that the world we live in today has in fact been shaped by this renunciation, it is anything but *gemütlich*. Our built environment testifies to this loss of *Gemütlichkeit*. The very word may well let many an up-to-date theorist dismiss what I have to say here as the words of a theoretical dinosaur. But the need for spiritual shelter will not be elided" one reason why just today we should listen to Blumenberg when he balances the astronaut's centrifugal longing with the centripetal desire to come home, which also aims at *Gemütlichkeit*.

In this connection Hans Blumenberg would have us remember that the earth, which once, because of its central position in a finite cosmos, was thought to provide human beings with a privileged place for the *theoria* of the cosmos, a place that allowed them to actually observe all that mattered, which then came to be understood as just another among countless stars, "as a result of the technology of space travel has unexpectedly 'shown' us a property that extends to us something rather like grace: that it is possible to come back home to the earth, if one has been sufficiently curious and self-assertive to leave it. Odysseus — once more and dressed in the space suit of a figure of humanity: To return to Ithaca — this much has not changed --requires and rewards the widest detour."²⁵ Accepting the Copernican revolution and what it led to, mindful of its profoundly ambiguous gifts, Blumenberg calls for an altogether new post-postmodern geocentrism. To thoughtfully respond to the call of the earth seems to me the central task that architecture today faces. Here is a bone on which architectural theory should be able to gnaw for quite some time.

²³ Hans Blumenberg, *Lebenszeit und Weltzeit* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1986), p. 306.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Hans Blumenberg, *Die Vollzähligkeit der Sterne*, 2nd ed. (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1997), p. 383.

t

Karsten Harries
Yale University