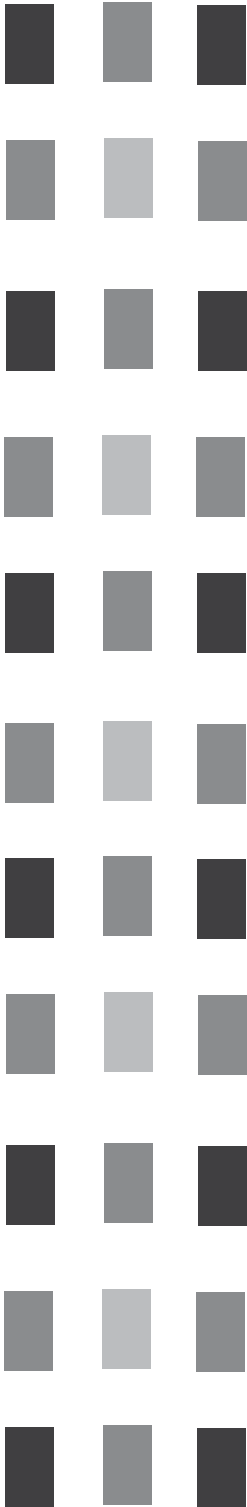# The Other Architectual Manifesto: Caricature

Emmanuel J. Petit

Architectural discourse has always made use of texts, drawings, collages, film and photos to derive and to communicate concepts. These media, in their turn, can each function in different modes, such as information, critique, speculation and so on. Caricature produces discursive effects, which have never been discussed within architecture, yet caricature has the freedom to combine in flexible ways the above mentioned modes and media. In contemporary media, the immediacy of communication and the political 'tone' of caricature have proven especially powerful: One can say, caricature is the new form of architectural manifesto.

This paper was triggered by my reaction to a text, which I found very disturbing, yet somewhat characteristic of the contemporary architectural discussion. The essay I am referring to is Rem Koolhaas's *Junkspace*, first published in 2001 in *Domus*, and then later in its current — more provocative – version in the *Harvard Shopping Guide* and in *October* Magazine.[1] In his essay, Koolhaas makes us reconsider the relationship between society's cultural activity and the expression of that activity in the physical environment. Deeply anti-utopian, Junkspace illustrates the discrepancy between architectural thinking after the Enlightenment, and the physical output of modernized building.

According to Koolhaas's definition, Junkspace is the built result of individually planned components, which do not coalesce in any sensible overall structure or form. Modernization has thus produced a continuous chain reaction, a proliferation of space, for the description of which Koolhaas found no other metaphor but "junk." He defines: "If space-junk is the human debris that litters the universe, Junkspace is the residue mankind leaves on the planet ... Junkspace is the sum total of our current achievement." Not only exposing the disillusionment with architecture, Koolhaas went further and made an accusation to architects: "It was a mistake to invent modern architecture for the 20th c. Architecture disappeared in the 20th c", and he goes on saying that "Architects could never explain space; Junkspace is our punishment for their mystifications." ... "our punishment for their mystifications." Koolhaas suddenly doesn't speak as an architect, but he considers himself a victim of a mistake made by architects ["their mystifications"].

Was one to find the text funny, or tragic, instructive, cynical, ironic, critical, overly realistic, or simplistic? – The text is probably all of the above, and by the same token, it is a caricature of modern architecture. *Junkspace* appears to be the temporary apotheosis of what the genre of the manifesto has turned into.

Before I continue to talk more specifically about *Junkspace*, allow me to go back in time, and try to find out how the "tone" of Koolhaas's text came about: In *Delirious New York* (fig. 1), Kool-

haas had already detected some shortcomings in the genre of the architectural manifesto. He explained that, "the fatal weakness of manifestos is their inherent lack of evidence."[2] For that reason, in 1978 he speculated that manifestos could be written retroactively, beginning with the physical data, and then coming up with a theory. The methods of manifestoes and the methods of caricature share a number of features. Both discursive genres are highly manipulative about the evidence they choose to use, and single out that part of reality, which is relevant to the particular cause. Both genres are willfully polemical, and convey messages in an assertive, simple, overstated and often figural, way. Both genres are political in that they address an audience with the intention to manipulate and impose a point of view. Yet, the essential difference is in the "tone." Charles Jencks stated that "the genre [of the manifesto] demands blood."[3] This is only partly true of caricature; rather than demanding blood, caricature specializes in humiliation. While the manifesto relies on serious and direct projective assertions, caricature distorts and misinterprets deliberately and openly what is already there, while being a little funny about its own considerations: this gives it the license to deviate. The tone depends on rhetorical devices within the text, but also on the kind of rhetorical montage of different kinds of media. The distinction can be illustrated by comparing Le Corbusier's *Vers une Architecture* with Venturi, Scott Brown and Izenour's *Learning From Las Vegas*.

Le Corbusier's analogy of architecture with the mass-produced machine – mainly the automobile –
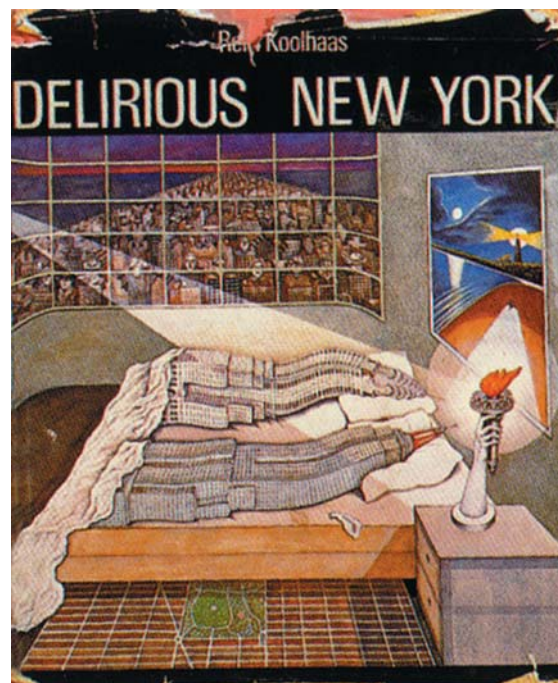
1 | *Cover of "Delirious New York", 1978*

was to decide between architecture and revolution in the concluding chapter of *Vers une architecture*. Exaggerations are commonplace in this book, as we know, but although nowadays, its dogmatic tone brings up a light grin on most people's faces, it is probably only a posteriori that we would think of these ideas as a caricature. It might be then that manifestos have the potential to turn into caricatures, and vice versa, depending on the state of the discourse and on the cultural context. The great pretensions and visions of *Vers une architecture*, have become difficult to sustain at least after Venturi's 'gentle manifesto,' as he called *Complexity and Contradiction* from 1966.

In the introduction to Venturi's book, Vincent Scully pointed out the difference in tone between these two books: "[...] Venturi is so consistently anti-heroic, compulsively qualifying his recommendations with an implied irony at every turn. Le Corbusier used irony too, but his was as sharp as a steel-toothed smile. Venturi shrugs his shoulders ruefully and moves on."[4] Venturi was depicted as the counter-part to the heroic modern architect, and *Complexity and Contradiction* was to represent the manifesto, which was to bring as big a change in architectural thinking as *Vers une architecture* had done before. But one could not really write a manifesto in support of 'ambiguity' without compromising one's stance against clarity. The clarity and the dogmatism that any manifesto entails would be counterproductive to a convincing case in support of an architecture of nuance, of contingency, of subtle inflection, a. s. o. . As a consequence, Venturi needed to find a different 'tone' with which to communicate his ideas.

In *Learning From Las Vegas*, Venturi, Scott Brown and Izenour, found their particular discursive tone by appropriating the figure of the "duck" from Peter Blake's book *God's Own Junkyard* as a characterization of modern architecture. In order to heighten the effect of ridicule, Blake had juxtaposed on one page a quote by Vitruvius – the serious ancestor of architecture, with a photo of a building in the shape of a duck. The quote by Vitruvius said: "Eurythmy is beauty and fitness in the adjustments of the members. This is found when the members of a work are of a height suited to their breadth, of a breadth suited to their length, and, in a word, when they all correspond symmetrically." (fig. 2)

Blake's comparison of a building to a duck was effective for the Venturis because overtly mocking and humiliating the achievements of the pioneers of modern architecture. Hence, the duck became the polemical core element of Venturi's critique and allowed him to explicitly capitalize on the effect of ridicule. It was common in portrait caricature for example to compare certain features of a person to the traits of an animal, or of an object. Once the duck set the tone, Venturi could also introduce the concept of the "decorated shed." The shed was still mocking, but in comparison to the duck, it seemed already "architectural"; therefore, this was an immediate recommendation for the architecture to come.

The metaphor of the decorated shed offered the Venturis the critical potential for a new form of manifesto: It suggested what architecture would have been and could have been, had it been liberated from the dominant architectural culture. Caricature was a convenient way out of the repression on this kind of buildings. In fact, in the *Passagenwerk*, Walter Benjamin created awareness of the critical potential of caricature by providing a quotation about the caricaturist Honoré Daumier: "Caricature, for him (Daumier), became a sort of philosophic operation which consisted in separating a man from that which society had made of him, in order to reveal what he was at bottom, what he could have been under different circumstances. He extracted, in a word, the latent itself."[5]

The duck was not at all showing what was 'latent' in architecture, but on the contrary, the lame duck was what architecture had become. But the decorated shed, on the other hand, was precisely a dormant form, which an architectural operation could bring forth from its repressed condition. The double function of mocking and revealing was thus
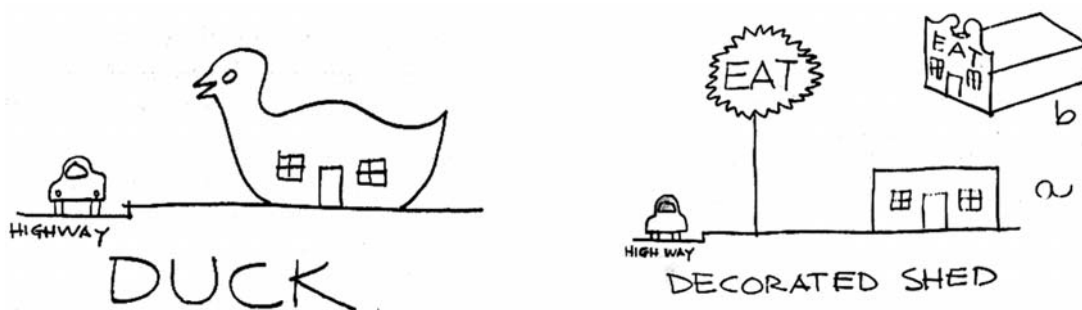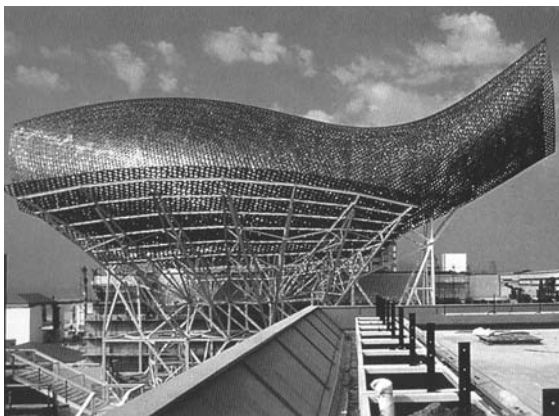

2 | *Sketch of duck and decorated shed from "Learning From Las Vegas"*

split in two different figures [the duck and the shed], and together, they produced all the discursive possibilities of caricature.

In contrast, the two functions of caricature appear in chorus in Frank Gehry's presentation of the "fish" in architecture (fig. 3). Being a man of fewer words than Venturi, Gehry introduced the fish as a built manifesto. Nevertheless, the rhetorical apparatus was not dissimilar to Venturi's. Gehry understood how the tone of caricature could take advantage of multiple media to produce an "Architectural Choreography," as Kurt Forster called it in his and dal Co's book on Gehry[6]: Gehry would even end up wearing a "fish-hat" on a stage in Venice,[7] as if the fish had literally erupted from his brain. Gehry's fish combines the double discursive strategy which was separated in Venturi's figures of the duck and the decorated shed: the fish too is a little funny and mocking, but it is at the same time already the actual new architecture. In that sense, the fish truly represented what was called the "latent" in Benjamin: Fish-like is what architecture could have been, had it taken a different direction than the anthropomorphic one, represented by the legacy of classical architecture. In the mentioned text, Forster quoted a short dialogue with Gehry, when Gehry declared: "Palladio faced a fork in the road, and he took the wrong turn. [...] He should have recognized that there's chaos.[...] He would have been a pioneer."

Gehry must have agreed with Venturi that the cultural circumstances of modernism made a lame duck out of architecture through censorship. But to renew its principles, Gehry turned his interest to a time prior to the classical architectural tradition; the fish might appear funny to us, precisely because we have been conditioned in that tradition. His manifesto speculated on the possibility that society had imposed the "wrong" turn on architecture.

What kind of discursive process is set in motion when modern architecture is presented to us as a caricature? ... as a duck, or as a fish, or now as Koolhaas's junk?

The art historian Ernst Gombrich and the psychoanalyst Ernst Kries collaborated on a research to write a history of caricature,[8] discussing the relationship between the formal features of caricatures and the psychological effect they induce. Caricature would produce images, which are 'overcharged,' as it were, and thus not merely depict and imitate reality, but be more true to life than life itself. Gombrich explained that portrait caricature "shows how the soul of the man would express itself in his body if only matter were sufficiently pliable to Nature's intentions."[9] Such a portrait was to be more straightforward about the traits of a person and thus more candid than the image that the person would convey him- or herself on a daily basis. Therefore, caricature did not attempt to ennoble the representation of reality by beautifying it with a mask of 'arts and craft', but it would expose the raw ordinariness of its subject.

We know this line of reasoning from Venturi's Guild House, for example, which was to be "Ugly and Ordinary," as was the claim in *Learning From Las Vegas*. The slightly degrading intention of such rough representations was to trigger a social response: "unpretentious," "cheap," "boring," "old-fashioned" – all words taken from the author's description of their own building in *Learning From Las Vegas*; in one word: realistic ... not 'artsy.'

Gombrich and Kries also maintained that caricature was a graphic form of wit, in which metaphors are taken literally. Think for example of OMA's Hotel Sphinx from *Delirious New York*. Once a literal comparison has been established, it was impossible to see the actual object or person with an "innocent eye," as it were, without also thinking of the association that had been made. That


3 | *Fish roof structure in Barcelona, by Frank Gehry*
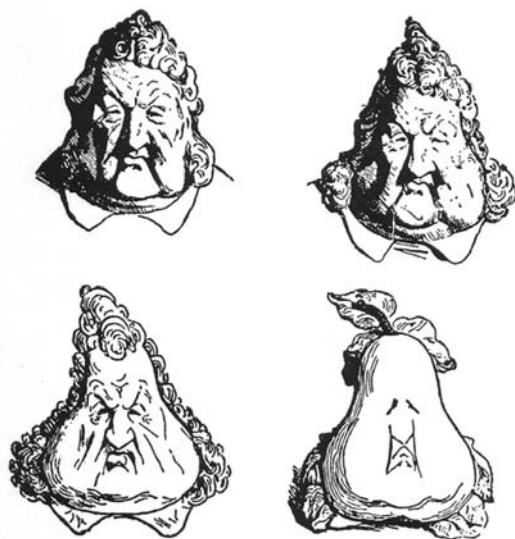
4 | *Transformation of Le Roi Bourgeois by Philippon*

was perceived as so problematic when Philippon, editor of the first comic weekly La Caricature, drew a series of sketches, transforming Louis Philippe, le Roi Bourgeois (1830–1848), into a pear (fig. 4). The pear, so Gombrich and Kries, will always leave an ambiguous veil of doubled meaning when looking at a portrait of Louis Philippe. It should not come as a surprise that the person who has always been looking for double meaning in architecture, Charles Jencks, also tried to connect the Guggenheim museum in Bilbao back to Gehry's fish, and to relate Le Corbusier's Ronchamp chapel to a duck[10] (fig. 5).

Moreover, in reference to Freud, Gombrich and Kries held that caricature was a form of rebellion against authority. A mocking position, according to Freud, is an end in itself, and also a way of lessening tension in the psychic apparatus of the subject.

Finally, caricature exploits the formal and hermetic possibilities of the medium it uses. Accordingly, a drawn line does not necessarily reference anything represented, but it is first and foremost, a drawn line on paper. Gombrich thus found an interest in the caricatures of Saul Steinberg, who in Gombrich's mind was an artist who understood best the philosophy of representation. Steinberg claimed that "What I draw is drawing, [and] drawing derives from drawing. My line wants to remind constantly that it is made of ink."[11]

I am coming back to *Junkspace*. In the text, Koolhaas grandly announced: "I've never talked openly about space before, so here it is." Elevating the expectations of the audience, he prepared the
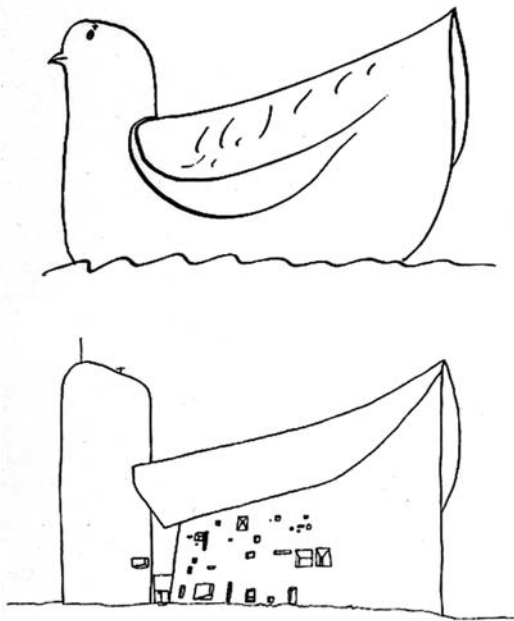
5 | *Duck metaphor of Ronchamp by Hillel Schocken in Jencks's The New Paradigm in Architecture*

ground for polemics and shuttering disillusionment. I said before that this text was the apotheosis of caricature in architecture to date.

"Junk" – as a metaphor – has been popular in other fields than architecture: Indeed, when you skim through the art book titles, you will find that 'junk' was high currency in the late sixties. After the sixties, however, the word 'junk' almost completely disappeared from book titles. And then, in the early eighties, junk re-appeared with 'junk food,' closely followed by 'space junk' in science, and later, 'junk mail.' Also, throughout the nineties, finance has appropriated the word in the notion of 'junk bonds.' Architecture has caught up with that evolution, and Koolhaas finally gave us *Junkspace* in 2001. What is remarkable is that the artists loved junk; junk could be transformed into art; serendipitous combinations of junk fragments were seen as a renewed energy for the production of art. But everywhere else – and I named food, science, economy, communication – the metaphor of junk appeared in a negative way.

In order to understand the tone of Koolhaas's text, one needs to point out another text that Koolhaas must have been aware of when he wrote his essay, since the publication in question had provoked major political disturbance in both Europe and in the United States: *The World is Not For Sale, Farmers Against Junk Food*, published by the French activists José Bové and Francois Dufour, combined their protest against junk food with their revulsion against *globalization*. The book followed a farmers' demonstration led by Bové in 1999, during which the farmers destroyed a McDonald's shack under construction, and under considerable media coverage, eventually went to prison for that. José Bové explained in his book that "The demo took place and people, including kids, began to dismantle the inside of the building, taking down partitions, some doors, fuseboxes, and some tiles from the roof – they were just nailed down, and came off very easily; in fact the whole building appeared to have been assembled from a kit. The structure was very flimsy."[12]

Bové's description of the McDonald's building prefigured Koolhaas's description of junk space (fig. 6). Opposing the rebellious tone of Bové's manifesto against junk food, Koolhaas took the opportunity for an apathetic report of *Junkspace*.

Also within the architectural discussion, Bové's manifesto-like tone would have been found not only in favor of, but also against modern architecture: in 1980 Vincent Scully wrote that "Modern architecture is an environmentally destructive mass of junk, dominated by curtain-wall corporate structures which will continue to be built so long as modern bureaucracy exists."[13]

As if directly responding to these statements, Koolhaas nonchalantly remarked: "We think junk

8 | "Quo Vadis?" by Ironimus

6 | Mc Donald's being dismantled in a demonstration led by Bové

9 | OMA project for the World Trade Center in 2002

space is an aberration, a temporary setback, but that is a mistake. Junk space is the real thing."[14] Exaggerating the downgrading matter-of-fact features of physical reality, mocking every idealist attempt at planning or designing space, revolting against the establishment of both academic and corporate architectures, exploiting the confusion of formal resemblance between otherwise unrelated realms, *Junkspace* is the continuation of the architectural discourse relying on the tone of caricature. Junk is not better, but it is real!, the argument runs (fig. 7).

7 | OMA diagram for the World Trade Center

Koolhaas's caricature, which he depicts in *Junkspace*, has infiltrated his architectural projects. Recently, in September 2002, "The Office of Metropolitan Architecture" published a project for Ground Zero in the *New York Times*, where the tone of *Junkspace* is translated into a spatial diagram. As if the diagram was meant to illustrate an extreme condition of Junkspace, Koolhaas packed all kinds of architectural fantasies from the past twenty years on top of each other, independent of their ideologies. Remember that he had explained in his text that "Junk space is the sum total of our current achievement." A heap of obsolete utopias in the form of architectural junk from Tschumi's La Villette to Gehry's Bilbao, was to generate his proposal for Ground Zero. Curiously, in the beginning of the eighties, Ironimus – alias Gustav Peichl – predated Koolhaas's strategy in a cartoon called *Quo vadis?* (fig. 8), published in the German paper *Süddeutsche Zeitung*. Diverse fragments of projects were jammed together to illustrate the multiplicity and the confusion of architecture at the time -between Rossi's neo-rationalism, Venturi's pop iconography, Moore's classicism, Hollein's kitsch imagery, and Koolhaas's psychologism. In this cartoon, the architect holds on carefully to his burden, while standing at a crossroad of indecisiveness, and under the surveillance of the ravens, who on their turn, are perhaps waiting for the architect to drop some piece of architectural junk food. After twenty years, we see a similar diagram by Koolhaas. Only meanwhile, there is no longer a crossroad, and Koolhaas consciously proposes that there is no need to decide among the ideologies, as they can all be adopted at the same time. Junk space will absorb these ideologies in a smooth continuum, where any difference would be ludicrous, and resistance is already part and parcel of the equation.

Subsequent to Koolhaas's diagram, his actual project for Ground Zero takes the shape of compressed architectural rubble (as if Koolhaas had passed the architectural junk from the diagram in the trash compactor) so that all utopias find themselves intermingled in the form of a typical New York turn-of-the-century skyscraper (fig. 9). Of course, we have become familiar with this stacking of incompatible functions in a skyscraper since *Delirious New York*, but here, Koolhaas suggested a variation: the skyscraper is turned on its head.

It is difficult to miss the irony in this gesture. In a critical text about OMA's work, called "Psychometropolis,"[15] Tony Vidler proposed to read their work in the line of – what he calls a 'restricted modernism': modernism which is "conscious of its loss of positive ground yet intimately aware of its own procedures" (it knows it is 'bound to speak'). Adopting Kierkegaard's view that irony is "infinite absolute negativity," which means that irony is not merely an operation of turning meaning into its opposite, Vidler points out that OMA's irony will endlessly keep its critique of modernism in motion -and up-to-date, against any positivist interpretation of their work.

Precisely, caricature does not point towards utopia like manifestos do, but caricature insistently exposes more reality – always "unfulfilled." Architecture can probably not do without manifestos; but the loss of conviction that the architect's vision finds fulfillment will modulate the tone of manifestoes' media. For that reason, caricature has infiltrated all of architecture's texts, drawings, photos, discussions, and buildings. Koolhaas's fatalism exposes cynicism, although a cynical person would probably have lost the ability to create a capital-A Architecture like Koolhaas did in Bordeaux, and elsewhere!

Author:
Emmanuel J. Petit
Princeton University

Notes:

1   *October 100. Obsolescence*, Spring 2002, October Magazine and MIT Press, pp. 175–190.

2   Rem Koolhaas: *Delirious New York*. A Retroactive Manifesto for Manhattan, New York, 1994, p. 9.

3   *The Volcano and the Tablet*, in: Charles Jencks and Karl Kropf: *Theories and Manifestoes*, London, 1997, p. 6.

4   See introduction to Venturi's *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, New York, 1966, 1998, p. 10.

5   From Edouard Drumont: *Les Héros et les pitres,* Paris <1900>, p. 299; quoted in: Walter Benjamin: *The Arcades Project*, (*Passagen-Werk*), translated by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin, prepared on the basis of the German volume edited by Rolf Tiedemann, Cambridge, 1999, p. 740.

6   Dal Co, Francesco (*Frank O. Gehry*, English.): *Frank O. Gehry: The Complete Works/Francesco Dal Co*, Kurt W. Forster ed.; building descriptions by Hadley Arnold, New York, 1998.

7   *Il corso del coltello* (*The Course of The Knife*), spectacle he and his friends Claes Oldenburg and Coosje van Bruggen staged in Venice in 1985, Gehry is "Frankie P. Toronto".

8   See in: Kries, Ernst: *Psychoanalytic Explorations in Art*, New York, 1952; especially *The Principles of Caricature*, p. 189, and *The Psychology of Caricature.*

9   N. John Hall: *Max Beerbohm. Caricatures*, New Haven, 1997.

10 Charles Jencks: *The New Paradigm in Architecture. Multiple Coding*, New Haven, 2002, p. 32.

11 Ernst Gombrich: *The Wit of Saul Steinberg*, in: *The Essential Gombrich*, London, 1996. p. 539.

12 José Bové and Francois Dufour: *The World is Not For Sale, Farmers Against Junk Food*, New York, 2001, p. 6.

13 Vincent Scully in GA documents, summer 1980, p. 6.

14 *Domus* version of Junk Space 2001.

15 Vidler, Anthony: *The Architectural Uncanny. Essays in the Modern Unhomely*, Cambridge, 1992, pp. 189–198.