

The Quasi-Object Aesthetics as a form of Politics

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Introduction

The philosophers Paul Virilio, Baudrillard and many others—again and again—stressed that we have to surpass the tyranny of images which dominate and simulate everything. Virilio prefers words. It is not good to show images he said, you better tell a story about it. These kind of re-active bi-polar logics not only escape reality—they voluntarily blindfold themselves from the world around them—and they misunderstand the potential of the image, or in other words that there are many different kinds of images, and imaginary categories. In fact they refuse to look, ignoring the complexity and multiple quality and problems of our world seen and experienced through images.

Polemical you can state that these re-active and negative and nihilistic theories have simply been surpassed by our digital age. Contemporary reality has proven them wrong.

In other words: we live in what I call a Society of the And. In this world (not flat as Friedman of the NYtimes wants us to believe) the old maps, instruments, and categories which helped Modernity to navigate in the 19th century all no longer work.

Society of The And

The dialectic logic of objectivity versus subjectivity, of the near versus the far, of fact versus value, of the city versus the countryside ensured that we could NOT understand reality as being both real AND virtual, human AND non-human, utopian AND dystopian, local AND global, heterogenous AND homogenous. The new paradigm of power in the Society of the And rules through differential hierarchies of the hybrid and fragmentary subjectivities.

What was in the past incompatible is now one:
Life – (And) – Style = (now) LifeStyle
Reality – (And) – TV = (now) realityTV
World – (And) – Music = (now) WorldMusic
Museum – (And) – Store = (now) MuseumStore
Food – (And) – Court = (now) FoodCourt, etc.
In the Society of *The And* we come across some-

thing which we could call the suburbanization of imagination. The experiential landscape has become a synthetic, fabricated nature. Actually, for us the synthetic approximates the natural. Films, TV, radio, magazines, advertising, computers—media is now indivisible from our experience.

Once upon a time, movies, TV, radio, etc., merely commented upon or reflected our experience. Now, however, our exposure to them is so constant—partly because their role in our economy is so integral—that, rather than merely commenting upon or reflecting our experience, these communication forms comprise much of our experience.

The second, more invisible but just as consequent experience of landscape that has imprinted on us our notions of truth and falsity is also, in a way, synthetic; a blend, or what I call the conjunction of the And. This synthesis is manifested in an actual, physical landscape, the suburb—neither city nor country but instead amalgam of the two: as we can experience it in the opening credits of the American series the Soprano's where Tony drives through the suburban landscape of New Jersey.

Our perception—they way we look and experience the world of objects has changed—not only through the way we produce more complex objects and surfaces through digital techniques— but by driving our car: seeing how the world passes by with music on our ipods through a jump-cut suburbanism (abc suburbia), or our travels through the world as tourist, not to mention the Spectacle—larization of reality, etc. which transform our imagination.

In short through migration: the one of the media (the one of images) and travel, our perception of reality as well how we construct reality has dramatically changed.

The mass, middle-class suburbs, like the synthetic landscape of pop culture, living in neither city nor countryside is a relatively recent (50 years) development. Imaginations informed by suburban experience are a very recent addition to our cultural life. But the fact is that today a large amount of the population worldwide is raised in suburblike conditions (poor and rich), and that starts to have a significant impact on the direction of our culture.

The planned naturalism (third nature), the managed, the neurotic landscape the awkward "in-between"—condition of the suburbs—this feels "right" to many of us, things that are two or three things at once, that are resolutely, calmly, weirdly impure—to us, these places feel like home. We are drawn to them. And we also create them.

The distinction between city and country blurs. To such imaginations, that the classical distinction between, say, the context of architecture and the context of entertainment—feels less than accurate, because its purity fails to correspond with the hybrid landscape we experience.

To make a long story short: in the place of the classical either/or city or country—the suburbanized imagination prefers the creation of cultural product-activity, gesture, and artifact—that is both/and, or that is “in-between”. It looks for, demands, and creates hybrids, blends and mongrels. Any context of itself is not enough. We are all of us post-collage.

Relational

With the Society of the And the dichotomy between nature and culture is definitely eradicated. We escape from the cave described by Plato in the *Republic*.

In Plato's cave, the distribution of powers is divided into two houses. The first house brings together the totality of speaking humans looking to the projections of the real, who find themselves with no power at all, agreeing by convention to create fictions devoid of any external reality. The second house is comprised exclusively of real objects that have the property of defining what exists, but which lacks the gift of speech and interpretation.

Science has propagated this division of our reality into two separate worlds for centuries. On the one hand, the humanities focused on the “softer” dimensions of our existence—which social categories are projected onto an object—while on the other hand the natural sciences concentrated on the intrinsic, “hard” dimensions of the object. In social science, the object as a thing has no meaning in itself; it exists solely to be used as a blank screen on which society projects its ideals. To technical science, the objective powers of the thing are so strong that only they can lend essential meaning.

The research on either the “hard” properties of nature or the “soft” properties of an object naturally still have an application in practice, but the way these two worlds function in concert, forming a single, complex whole, goes often unnoticed (already Vitruvius made the mistake dividing architecture in Discourse or Construction). This division; in facts or projection is remarkable, to say the least, since we do not make that distinction between these two worlds in our daily reality; on the contrary, we have to operate on the basis of the relationships that the object allows and installs. Rather than dividing reality into humans and non-humans, objects or subjects, we have to start to think in relations and linkages when we want to understand and produce our contemporary reality.

a) Thinking in relations means that we don't ask what an object is (what the definition of architecture is, but look to what an object as agency could produce and mediate. It sounds perhaps simple, but once you do away with the issue of definition—you do away with the absolutism of truth. Rather

than excavating, or trying to understand what an image is, you look to what an image can produce, can do through its multiple interpretation.

b) Thinking in relations also means that you have to do away with consensus models; methods that are part of a functionalist affirmation of “objectives givens”, by a discourse of expertise that create clear and specialized divisions.

Surprising is that architects—and even more architecture historians—in many cases talk about the formal aesthetic effects of the object of architecture (both its object projection and materiality) without willing to look into the performances, or affects it establishes outside its own environment; of object discourse or regimes of functionalism. The desire of the user, inhabitant and public are not taken into account. In short the real has disappeared, is nothing but an alibi for architecture therapy (as we can find in the “autistic” work of Eisenman, Libeskind, Tschumi, Hejduk and others).

Once we look into the relational of an object we have to modify the way of perceiving and expressing architecture. Architecture—or an object as such—is than no longer something independent—or as politics something independent, but instead an architecture of relation can be political by modifying the visible. The capacities set in motion and not what they convey is what the real political issue is given our present.

Quasi Object

Now that you have a better idea of the circumstantial evidence (the suburbanization of the imaginary), what than is a Quasi Object?

1. With the Quasi Object: I emphasize the continuing interplay between objects and people. It is mentally easier to divide humans and objects, but we have to start to understand them as a comprehensive and interdependent.

To often we look to the world like: people are alive, objects are dead, people can think, objects just lie there.

This taxonomical division blinds us to the ways and means by which objects do change us, and it obscures the areas of intervention where Architecture can reshape things. For that reason I prefer to talk about the Quasi Object in stead of the classical object. Those Quasi Objects are both social and technical. As mentioned before agency is the key to understand and create them—how the quasi object establishes relations through aesthetics; and creates assemblages.

2. Secondly there is no return, we cannot but embrace the society of The And: The reality of the

Imaginary is unavoidable. In our information age there is no chance to effectively return to pre-historical conditions. When we want to communicate at large with society we have to—if we like it or not—deal with our contemporary society of images, advertizing, or in other words the everyday invaded by technoscience. Going back to the machine-age, or the functional artifact of wood and stone no longer works, we should instead deal with what has been called Gismo's (by for instance Banham).

Gismo's are highly unstable, user-alterable, baroquely multifeatured objects, commonly programmable, with a brief lifespan (such as the Ipod). Gismos offer functionality so plentiful that it is cheaper to import features into the object than simplify them. Gismo's are commonly linked to network service providers; they are not stand alone objects but interfaces. In this Gismo world new capacities are layered onto older ones.

Gismo's or quasi objects move from an artifact in our industrial age (First Modernity) to a gizmo world (remember the satellite in Umbria). It is a sudden explosion of information. Gizmo's have an aim to educate—and of course to indoctrinate by an often interactive dimension or address. A gizmo—as quasi-object—is luring me to become more knowledgeable about the product.

It wants me to recruit me to become an unpaid promotional agent, an opinion maker. To participate in this *Gizmo* world I need to think about things, talk about things, pay attention to things, be entertained by things.

3. With this the Gismo, dominance (and love) for gadgetry—we move from a functional kind of world to a Designed world. This is my third point related to the Quasi Object. Or in other words: Form no longer follows function but the shape of a building follows Design: the experience and imagination the object triggers in the mind of the beholder. Architecture becomes Design. Architecture becomes the Spectacle itself. And Gismo Design is there to stimulate imaginations and interactive experiences. Or yet in other words Design is applied today to script space, architects write scenario's, tell stories or let stories unfold (think of the many lifestyles, the theme parks, Dubai, the Jon Jerde practice: scripting shoppingmalls, etc).

Gismo's are not symbols of wonder, beauty or the representation of the world of kings (not even companies as Venturi & Scott Brown show), but are there as actual, corporeal physical presences. It is all about the now, the super present where fiction—the imagination—and the real meet.

In relation to what I just said we should no longer speak of ornament in architecture, but of graphics, (or even cartoon effects) in architecture. We no longer make use of Icons which represent a king or an institutions as such, but we make and Logo's

that mediate, which are (inter)active and perceptive.

Two kinds of Quasi Objects

The above explained state of affairs we have to cope with as architects and alike when we want to communicate with society at large. The image can be a mental (perception)-image, affect image and action image. Not style—the durability of the architecture object—as with the Venturi's is the issue, but the substance (trickering of subjective activities/experiences) is what matters; the experiences that move us and manipulate us.

With this statement we arrive at the second part of the article. What kind of Quasi Objects can you make? There are two kinds of Quasi Objects, one that generate consensus and another which is based on disagreement, or dissensus.

Commodification and Liberation Go Together

Late Marxism theory hates (I am simplifying here again) anything which has to do with commodification, the world of shopping, the world of the image, the one of advertising, our society of the spectacle and the one of the hyper real where everything has become a simulation. Marxist architecture or design retreats and escapes in secular worlds, defamiliarizes from what our live is made of, it creates autonomous spaces free of commodification and it hopes in these minimal spaces or other spaces to sharpen our critical awareness so we see the world in all its corrupt contradictions. (If you embrace this status quo or deny it all together you end up in nihilism.)

I instead like to step and be part of the world—not because if you cannot beat them you better join them (afterall commodification is everywhere) but because I believe the world of conventions we are made of (and the immediate) also allows and contains many opportunities. We cannot ignore the conventions we are made of, we better understand ourselves as complicit and incomplete (even schizophrenic), afterall in the immediacy of our real life we constantly negotiate on the bases of our conventions (that what makes sense) and enjoyments of new possibilities; arrive often at moments of liberation.

When commodification and liberation go together you can no longer believe in the idea of an autonomous space separated from our corrupt society, that kind of critical practice (pity science) is a dead end route. What it is about—and that you also saw in Dancing the Samba example (image)—is that you have to create heterogeneous conflict or frictions which are based on the characteristics of the Gizmo (such as the buildings by MVRDV, NL Architects, Lynn, Foreign office, Un Studio, Crimson, Spuybroek, etc).

The problem is that many practices who create Quasi Objects full of heterogenous situations don't travel further than what I called *Fresh Conservatism*.

I show you four contemporary dimensions that are to my idea Fresh Conservative in their heterogeneous conflicts.

a) The first one would be the *collection* or *catalogue*. Total immersion. Heterogeneous elements are lumped together. But they are no more in order to provoke a critical clash, not even to play on the undecidability of their critical power. It becomes a positive act of gathering as an attempt to collect the traces and testimonies of a common world and a common history. The equality of all items—works of art, private photographs, objects of use, ads, commercial videos, etc.—is thereby the equality of the archives of the life of a community.

b) The second one would be the *joke*. In the joke, the conjunction of the heterogeneous elements is still staged as a tension of antagonist elements, pointing to some secret. But there is no more secret. The dialectical tension is brought back to a game, playing on the very indiscernability between the procedures unveiling secrets of power and the the ordinary procedures of delegitimization that are parts of the new forms of domination—the procedures of delegitimization produced by power itself, by the media, commercial entertainment or advertising.

c) The third form would be the *invitation*. It is all about interactivity. Our "one-seater place" is invited to experiment new relations between community and individuality, proximity and distance. Such attempts were systematized in the concept of a "relational art": an art creating no more works or objects, but ephemeral situations prompting new forms of relationships. As the chief theorist of this aesthetic puts it "by giving some small services, the artist contributes to the task of plugging the gaps in the social bonds". Lars Spuybroek architecture, Jeanne van Heeswijk, etc.

d) The fourth form would be *mystery*. Mystery does not mean enigma. Nor does it mean mysticism. Mystery sets forth an analogy—a familiarity of the strange, without activating something outside architecture itself, in relation to the program. The schau-lager is a traditional museum with a mystery as front not knowing what it has to address beyond itself as mystery.

Image of same world under the projection,
nothing to discover than cliché beauty

So what else?

Just embracing the conventions in a cool or fresh manner is not enough, it is unclear where you liberate from (just a mystery is not enough), who and what is liberated in the above called examples, what secret is opened, which alternative? (we don't arrive in another world... not a better world).

I believe we are in need of another approach. You can call that—as I mentioned in the beginning—a return of the political, or an Aesthetics as a form of politics.

This aesthetics as a form of politics is based on dissensus, equality and the need to create new subjectives (de-individualization).

It involves a technique of distanciation including and based on the sensible or what you could call common sense. It must borrow from the separateness (disagreement) of the discipline of storytelling (film, etc) or the aesthetics techniques that create a sense or sensory foreignness that enhances political energies. You can think of Dogma films such as *Celebration* or *Dogville*.

Making architecture politically does it by setting specific forms of heterogeneity, by borrowing elements from different spheres of experience and forms of montage from different fields and techniques.

Bertold Brecht's theatre remains as a kind of archetype of political theatre as to the way he negotiated the relation between the opposites, blending the scholastic forms of political teaching with the enjoyments of the musical or the cabaret, having allegories of Nazi power discuss in verse about matters of cauliflowers, etc.

The main procedure of a political practice consists in setting out the encounter and possibly the clash of heterogeneous elements. The clash of these heterogeneous elements is supposed to provoke a break in our perception, to disclose some secret connection of things hidden behind the everyday reality AND provide alternative liberating solutions. It also does this on the basis of equality, not the master/teacher relation as we often know from spectacular or simulation architecture.

Political design thus means creating forms of collision or dissensus that put together heterogeneous elements on the level of the images and time-space sensoriums.

This third approach of dissensus is made possible by continuously playing on the boundary and the absence of boundary between architecture and non-architecture. This is a political approach that becomes possible by a continuous process of border-crossings between high and low culture, architecture and non-architecture, architecture and commodity.

As a kind of conclusion I will now "list" the ingredients of a political practice of dissensus.

The problem is not that we live the suburbanization of our imaginary. That condition in fact blew up the conception of the classical object and freed architecture from its autistic tendencies. The real question is: "what exactly" happened to the dissensual forms of progressive architecture or in other words how can we travel Beyond Fresh Conservatism? Or How can commodification/conventions and liberation travel together?

In other words most innovate architects who (already make Quasi Objects) don't go further than making Gizmo's. The limit of a Gizmo is that when you are confronted, or use a Gizmo you are always an End-User and have an overload of possibilities without direction, while I would opt for a Quasi Object I would prefer Things or And assemblages that have the following qualities:

1. You have to determine *who is the enemy*. One of our greatest enemies is the modern world of stupefying banality, routine, mechanical reproduction or automatism. Not the image is the problem but rather *the cliché*. We don't live a civilization of the image but of the cliché. As designers we have to help the people to look again. With television we have lost our ability to see. An image is always immediately clear what it is, it doesn't allow us to find a meaning as in cinema (no delay, to let us think, images that make us wonder/think)

2. With a return to *politics* in architecture I look for what you could call dialogical spaces or with another word for *reflexive spaces*.

In our fragmenting urban landscape, it is not politics that rules the day, but police. It is a consensus landscape of juxtapositions that is maintained by the police, by setting rules and bringing any situation that gets out of hand back to normal as quickly as possible. In essence, the concept of politics has ceased to exist in this landscape. The point of politics is creating widespread dissent, a culture of exchange, conflict and debate, rather than a police-imposed consensus. It goes without saying that the organisation and architecture of the city do not lend themselves to parliamentary politics. Constellations scattered across space cannot give voting advice, let alone convey messages about the social or political ramifications of problems. The organisation and architecture of the city is political precisely in the distance it preserves from those functions.

Architecture is political in how it frames projects in a certain kind of space-time sensorium, as this sensorium defines modalities of being together or apart, organising inside or outside, in the lead or towards the middle. The architecture of the city is political in the way in which it reveals things in its aesthetic and organisational syntax, or conceals them by means of specific articulations such as ori-

entation, suggestions of movement, directions and concentrations. In its method of distribution, the architecture of the city influences the sensorium of being, of feeling, hearing and speaking that together create the atmosphere and sensation of a constellation in space.

Brecht's goal was not to *be* popular in box-office terms but to *become* popular, that is, to create a new public for a new theatre linked to modes of social life, whereas commercial television's goal, at least from the point of view of its managers, is to be popular in the crudely quantitative terms of "ratings". It is about the notion of becoming popular rather than being popular, transforming rather than satisfying desire.

3. When you are after open systems which invite the user, are after becoming, how through habitation meaning can be established without a final conclusion, you opt for *stammerings* within a system. Stammerings reject a totalizing aesthetic where all "tracks" are enlisted in the service of a single, overwhelming feeling.

4. You can create stammerings by certain kinds of *foreign effects* which decondition the use and make strange the lived social world, freeing socially conditioned phenomena from the stamp of familiarity, revealing them as other than natural.

5. A work of architecture should not lead to contemplate the world but to *change it*, it should distribute and produce meaning in order to transform conventions.

6. The *dichotomy* of entertainment versus education should be overcome. Entertainment or laughter can be useful—is not only about consumption—while educational (seen as difficult) can be a pleasure too, is not boring. Conventions (Commodification) and liberation should go together, it is not a matter of either/or logics in space, the virtual versus the real, the near versus the far, the fictional versus the real, the object versus the subject, dystopia versus utopia, but about being-in-space which is intrinsically impure, full of And conjunctions and relations, instead of the verb to be (what architecture is), it should be about what you can do in actuality.

7. As we all experience there is no public anymore, people no longer exist, or not yet ... the people are missing. So we should not address or represent the people which is presupposed to be already there, but we should help in contributing to *the invention of a people* (after Deleuze). We have to give the people a voice by creating imaginary landscapes. We as architects should help to structure the platforms where stories can be told through a public sphere in the becoming.

8. What we shouldn't forget is a very necessary *Directionality* (that relates to *Urgencies*¹). It will take to long to discuss these criteria by means of an atlas of projects. But what I havent mentioned so far—with so many words—is that an open work—as just discussed by the different criteria—should have a liberating directionality too, it cannot just be open because than it can fall victim to the addiction of extreme reality (neoliberalism) as we have seen with the four dimensions of Fresh Conservatism I mentioned earlier. Certain societal issues

should be addressed—who is the enemy, what is missing for whom.

The issue is not to make digital architecture yes or no—that is not the dominant factor, the issue is how architecture can create political constellations of dissensus, equality and new subjectives in a world where our imaginairy is suburbanized through digital experiences and techniques. If we make digital architecture or not doesn't matter to much. What is at stake is how architecture can become political again in our digital condition.

Note:

1 We need for instance to counter the culture of sprawl, with megaforms/landforms—a new monumentality is needed of large scale with new forms of symbolism expressing our collectiveness as opposed to privatization, we are in need of new forms of parlaiment as part of a new to be invented public sphere. If the house is the optimum idea of paradise for many individuals—a kind of total immunity in a sea of nothingness—as in the many gated communities, we need to look for new forms of collectiveness, having neighbours not just like ourselves but different ones. We could benefit from the migration of cultures instead of being full of fear, different cultures should start to live and experience together, we should not fear, but see migration (we are a stranger ourselves facing the many changes in our own lifetimes) as an opportunity to meet the other, the unknown, the unexpected, the not easy, to experiment collectively with new forms of (radical) democracy in space.