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THE FOSTER-EISENMAN COMPLEX

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ABSTRACT

In *The Art-Architecture Complex*, Hal Foster claims that the nexuses between these two disciplines evolved to what he sees as a radical reversal of roles: Whereas, in his words, 'minimalists opened the art object to its architectural condition', contemporary architecture allowed buildings to be reduced to their superficial and imagistic condition – briefly, to mere appearance. The present paper takes Foster's claim as the point of departure for a detailed examination of the theoretical and epistemological foundations of his reading, while using the work of the architect Peter Eisenman as a counterpoint. My contention is that, in contrast with Eisenman's practice, and regardless of its uncontained commitment to 'the contemporary', Foster's critique remains deeply attached to the modern worldview.

Keywords: Art and Architecture Criticism; Contemporary Architecture; Contemporary Art; Hal Foster; Peter Eisenman.



'... architecture will always be presence. Whether architecture will continue to be legitimized by presence is what is really at issue'

Peter Eisenman (1997, p.19)

The nexuses between modern art and modern architecture are notorious. It would be literally impossible to account for the advent of modern architecture without mentioning its indebtedness to the avant-garde, namely Cubism, De Stijl, Italian Futurism and Russian Constructivism. As for the nexuses between contemporary art and contemporary architecture, these are far more enigmatic: What the architectural métier of architecture refers to as 'minimalism' has very little to do with what art critics usually define as the meaning of Minimal art. This is not to say that the topic is entirely absent to the architectural dialogue: every now and then discussions emerge - as for example when Otilia Arantes (1994) censured Josep Maria Montaner (1994) for his misuse of the category 'minimalist architecture' that is the architecture of Tadao Ando, Álvaro Siza, Paulo Mendes da Rocha, among others. What on the other hand seems to be in total absentia is the discussion about the nexuses between contemporary architecture and architectural criticism - as if the advent of so called 'post-modern condition' did not affect architectural criticism, only architectural praxis.

In what follows I attempt to show how seemingly critical accounts such as Foster's may conceal an unwillingness to underscore, and occasionally open to scrutiny, the foundations of current critical discourse. And the reason for such unwillingness, I would like to claim, is the fact that quite often these foundations are imbedded in typically modern worldviews - hence their inability to account for post-modern, meta-critical practices such as Eisenman's.

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'One sometimes becomes a critic or a historian for the same reason that one often becomes an artist or an architect - out of a discontent with the status quo and a desire for alternatives. There are no alternatives without critique' (Foster, 2015, p.14).

This utterance, made by Hal Foster in the introduction of *The Art-Architecture Complex*, heralds much of what readers will find in the pages of this book - namely this: like its closest predecessor (*Design and Crime*, from 2003), this book was conceived as an act of resistance. As such, it does not purport to be an overview of art and architecture in the past few decades, but only a critical take on the status quo of contemporary art and architecture.

What Foster means here by 'contemporary' are two distinct but directly connected things: (1) that which, in art and architecture, intends to go beyond modernism (i.e., according to Foster, that which corresponds to and/or expands upon the advent, in the 1960s, of Minimalism and Pop Art, and which, in the case of architecture, primarily means the pivotal postmodernisms of Reyner Banham or Robert Venturi); and (2) that which, within the broad spectrum of culture, reflects the advent of post-industrial capitalism.

On the architecture side, therefore, the highlight is on practices that best suit the overall logic and cunning of global capitalism. Understandably, the book pores over

the work of some of leading exponents of the architectural star system – namely, Renzo Piano, Richard Rogers and Norman Foster; Zaha Hadid and Frank Gehry; Diller Scofidio + Renfro and Herzog & De Meuron.

To architects unfamiliar with leftwing critique, Foster’s approach will seem both surprising and inordinate. The object of reverence and even worship in the métier of architecture, these characters are treated here as mere collaborators – as avatars of ‘global styles’ whose role, in the end, is none other than to reiterate and even leverage the ploys of contemporary capitalism.

Obviously enough, *The Art-Architecture Complex* is not limited to a more or less generic denunciation of the complicity purported to characterize these practices; considering the specificity of Foster’s approach (as underscored by the book’s title, the author intends to tackle something quite specific here - viz. the ties and contradictions between architecture and contemporary art), the stake here is to foreground the way by which each of these practices intersect with avant-garde art.

In that perspective, the problem with the architecture of Zaha Hadid, for example, is not so much the option for emulating the aesthetics of the ‘historical avant-gardes’ (something that Foster, a major champion of the notion of a ‘neo-avant-garde’, in principle would never reproach) (Foster, 2014); rather it is the fact that she made her architecture a neo-avant-gardist farce. More specifically, Hadid’s crime was to convert the dynamic and material constructivism of Tátlin into a mere representation of the notions of dynamism and materiality. To Foster, this is indeed what happens with the buildings designed by Hadid: they ‘do not convey movement so much as they represent it – they are precisely ‘frozen motion’ – and, more than a multiplicity of mobile views, they set up a sequence of stationary perspectives’ (Foster, 2015, pp.103-104).

Foster contrasts Hadid’s fake neo-avant-gardism with the work of the New York firm Diller Scofidio + Renfro (DS+R). Unlike Hadid, DS+R allegedly made ‘a lateral turn’ (Foster, 2015, p.117), i.e. a turned focused not on the recent past, but instead in what was being made on the visual arts since the 1960s, with an emphasis on minimalism and post-minimalism.

The choice was productive, Foster concedes. Nonetheless, the loose ends are many; the main one was having remained ‘in the ambiguous position of much postmodernist art – that it to say, in a deconstructive position that, as it spoke within the conventions and institutions that it sought to question, often shaded into complicity with them’. More specifically, Foster claims, DS+R adopted an ambivalent stance regarding the ‘effects of new media and technologies on space and subjectivity’ – something which, in practice, turned their buildings into a ‘mediated blend of screen-space’. In doing so, DS+R committed what Foster regards as a mortal sin, no less: not engaging ‘corporeal experience very deeply’, thus contributing to the proliferation of ‘an already pervasive culture of special effects and faux phenomenologies’ (Foster, 2015, pp.118-119)¹.

The censure evinces what, in Foster’s view, is at stake when it comes to discussing the art-architecture complex as of today: the decline of experience – more specifically, of a phenomenological experience² diametrically opposed to the (seductive, spectacular, illusionistic) effects that characterize contemporary imagistic culture. To Foster’s mind, this is indeed the distinguishing feature of current

¹ According to Foster (2015, p.209), ‘In phenomenology the world is bracketed in such a way that what is primary in our experience comes to the fore’.
² As opposed to a ‘phenomenology [which] is shot through with pictures’ (Foster, 2015, p. 151).

architecture: a shameless acceptance of the superficial and the imagetic, to the detriment of the spatial, the materic, and the tectonic. As evidence of this state of affairs, Foster cites the proliferation of so-called architectural 'skins' – undeniably one of the distinguishing marks of architecture in the past few decades.

According to Foster, in making this choice for the superficial and the imagetic, contemporary architecture incurred a double and abominable deviation: on the one hand (i.e., from the perspective of the historical development), it ignored some of modernism's main achievements, especially the emphasis on the tension (pivotal to the work of Le Corbusier) between the phenomenological experience of real space and the superficial, optical effects of façade plans and elevations (in the words of Colin Rowe and Robert Slutzky, the tension between 'literal' and 'phenomenal' transparency)³; on the other hand (that is, from the perspective of postmodernist art practices), contemporary architecture has turned its back on what, especially with minimalism, has become the central motivation of the neo-avant-garde avant-garde – the 'structuring of materials in order to motivate a body and to demarcate a place' (Foster, 2013, p.141).

Foster's predilection for minimalism (to the detriment of Pop Art and most of all Conceptual Art) is not fortuitous, therefore. For, as he believes, it is due to minimalism the feat of turning the ideal object (i.e., amenable to a contemplative, sublime aesthetical experience) into a phenomenological object, that is one that can only be seized in the contingency of the World of Life. In fact, Foster (2015, p.132) claims, if minimalism had performed a reduction to basic geometrical shapes, this was only 'to prepare a sustained complexity, in which any ideality of form (which is thought to be instantaneous, even transcendental, in conception) is challenged by the contingency of perception (which occurs in particular bodies in specific spaces for various durations)'.

Thus, Foster's central thesis is that the art-architecture complex could be summarized today by a radical, and wholly regrettable, reversal of roles: Whereas, in Foster's words (2015, p.8), 'minimalists opened the art object to its architectural condition', contemporary architecture allowed buildings to be reduced to their superficial and imagistic condition – briefly, to mere appearance.

A good example of this type of reversal is the architecture of the duo Herzog & De Meuron. With a background of direct contact with 'neo-avant-garde' practices, these architects occasionally gave in to the aesthetics of the superficial, the immaterial, and the atmospheric; in doing so, they relinquished their early commitment to matter, body, and place, producing instead an architecture in which matter turns to image, active perception turns to passive reception, and places turn to non-places.

As becomes clear, the inordinate emphasis *The Art-Architecture Complex* imparts to the work of sculptor Richard Serra is not without reason: as Foster sees it, Serra's work embodies all that is most powerful and resistant about both contemporary art and contemporary architecture – viz., the commitment to the matter-body-place triad. In effect, Foster (2015, p.167) claims, as early as the late 1960s it was already clear that Serra's sculpture stood on three basic principles: (1) the principle of material transparency, i.e. based on the properties of materials (hence not only his choice of raw materials such as lead and steel, but particularly the precept that these should be tensed up through 'pertinent procedures'); (2) the 'phenomenological' principle, i.e. the option for a sculpture that 'exists in primary relation to the body, not as its representation but as its activation'; (3) the 'situational' principle, according to which 'sculpture engages the particularity of place, not the abstraction of space'.

³ Rowe and Slutzky, 1963.

II

Were this text exclusively focused on the dilemmas and contradictions of contemporary art and art criticism, I would find myself obliged to underscore the numerous flaws of Foster's reading – namely when it comes to the definition of Minimalism.⁴ Since this is not the case, from now on I will turn my attention specifically to the architectural shortcomings of Foster's approach. They are several and also very meaningful, the main one being the flagrant omissions that characterize this book.

I am not referring to the fact that Foster operates with too restricted a number of architectural practices; nor to the emphasis given to practices that best suit his line of thinking (which ultimately endows them with a scarecrow-like air). No, first and foremost, I am thinking about the way Foster shunned the task of accounting for the practices and discourses which, as I see it, best represent the current state of the art-architecture complex – beginning with the works of Peter Eisenman and Rem Koolhaas.

This is not to say these architects are not accounted for in *The Art-Architecture Complex*. They are. However, their presence here takes on an unmistakable alibi-like air – a preventative defense against eventual accusations of neglect. Consider the case of Koolhaas. Even if he is mentioned a dozen times throughout the book, Foster never addresses what is really matters in his work – for instance, the way it challenges the immediate connection that functionalism had established between program and form. Instead, Foster (2015, p.32-33) limits himself to short, anecdotal remarks – even to platitudes such as 'the profile [of the Chinese Central Television siege] is motivated by the program, especially in the penultimate level that contains a great spiral of ramped bookshelves'.

Eisenman's case is even more problematic. For his presence here is not only precarious; it is contradictory. Indeed, although Foster admits that more so than any other contemporary architect Eisenman carried out an unprecedented 'displacement of the subject' (patent in the way the 'authorial subject' is neutralized, particularly in his earlier projects), he never gives Eisenman's work the attention it deserves (Foster, 2015, p.105).

For someone who claims, and solemnly so, that what is 'at stake here are not mere preferences in design but important implications for subjectivity and society alike' (Foster, 2015, p.155), this is a serious omission.

And that is not all, for Foster is obviously aware that since the mid-1960 (i.e., at the exact point when Minimalism emerges), Eisenman has based his theoretical work on the dialogue with avant-garde art (particularly Minimalism and Conceptual Art). Which means to say that – whether Foster likes it or not – the work of Eisenman incarnates the art-architecture complex to an extent that possibly trumps any other contemporary practice.

Eisenman's theoretical oeuvre confirms this. Let us consider, for instance, 'Notes on Conceptual Architecture: Toward a Definition', an essay Eisenman published in 1971. As emphasized by the text's title, Eisenman main reference here is one of the most emblematic texts from 1960s aesthetic discourse: 'Paragraphs on Conceptual Art', published by Sol LeWitt in 1967. Moreover, as the reader soon realizes, Eisenman

⁴ I did that in Leonidio, 2015.



(1971) is particularly eager here to converse with minimalism's leading artists and theoreticians – namely, Donald Judd, Robert Morris, and Lucy Lippard.

But 'Notes on Conceptual Architecture' evidences much more than Eisenman's willingness to dialogue with 1960s avant-garde art; the text makes clear how original, and in a sense marginal, Eisenman's approach is. Two particular aspects are noteworthy in this respect. Firstly, it springs to attention how young Eisenman resists accepting the Conceptual/Mental versus Perceptual/Phenomenological antinomy. Eloquently, Eisenman warns that '[b]ecause the distinction between deep and surface, conceptual and perceptual, has not been clearly made, there remains a confusion between aesthetic and formal considerations'. Thus being, he concludes, 'a problem remains as to what role these formal and essentially syntactic considerations must play if there is to be a *conceptual aspect to architecture in built form*' (Eisenman, 1971, p.27).

The second aspect (directly tied with the first) concerns Eisenman's reading of 1960s American art, especially of Minimalism. For Eisenman's conception of minimalism is radically different from Foster's; to his mind, minimalism operates a displacement from a 'primary experience which is visual and sensual' towards a 'mental and intellectual and therefore presumed to be conceptual' experience, and not the other way around (Eisenman, 1971, p.13). Which means to say that, just like Joseph Kosuth⁵, Eisenman interprets minimalism from an anti-phenomenological perspective⁶.

Eisenman's particular interest in the work of Sol LeWitt (to the detriment of Donald Judd and Robert Morris, arguably the primary ideologues of minimalism and post-minimalism, respectively) seems, in this sense, at once logical and strategical. Why? Because more than in any of his minimalistic peers, in LeWitt's work antinomies such as Conceptual versus Perceptual and Mental versus Phenomenological are always called into question. That is, in LeWitt's work these domains come together in a way that defies categorical polarizations. That Eisenman sees LeWitt's work this way becomes clear when, admonishingly, he states:

'Rosalind Krauss says that the LeWitt boxes and grids are not meant as physical things but as intellectual integers whose real existence is mental. She says that his implied argument that meanings are mental entities which somehow attach themselves to real objects is philosophically naïve. If the argument is phrased that meanings are 'only' mental entities rather than 'can be' mental entities, then she seems to have a valid position' (Eisenman, 1971, p.25).

The passage is rather telegraphic and certainly warrants quite diverse interpretations; its key point, however, seems unequivocal to me; it concerns the constitution of meaning, more specifically the connection between a mental entity or event (i.e. an artist/architect's intention to produce something, in this case, an art object or a building) and the meaning this thing eventually acquires for its viewers. Ultimately, therefore, what is at play for Eisenman is the contemporary (i.e. neither classical nor modern) pertinence of artistic and architectural regimes of production eager to explore the connections between subjective intention, intellection processes,

⁵ '... from my perspective, minimalism should ultimately be perceived as 'pre-conceptualism'' (Kosuth, 1988, p 240).

⁶ Eloquently, Eisenman (1971, p. 26) asserts that 'It would seem that the idea of conceptual art would be to reveal something new in the mind, through the physical form, rather than to explicitly reveal the concept, not through the form, but 'as' the form. This idea would present a problem for the work of Judd and Morris which again does not try to distinguish between a surface and a deep structure within the object'.

and phenomenological experience. Significantly, intentionality constitutes perhaps the primary theoretical problem of 'Notes on Conceptual Architecture'. The text's conclusion, in particular, makes this quite clear:

'In summation, this paper has proposed a taxonomy that initially distinguishes between pragmatics, semantics, and syntactics. Further, a distinction has been made between the perceptual and conceptual aspects of each category. This distinction was defined in each case by determining first the primacy of intention, and second, the means used to articulate this intention. [...] In general, the conceptual aspect is defined by an intention to shift the primary focus from the sensual aspects of objects to the universal aspects of objects. This conceptual aspect to be primary must be made intentional, that is, the result of an a priori design intention, and further it must be accessible through the physical fact— whether the primary intention is semantic (concerned with meaning) or syntactic (concerned with formal universals). And, finally, a further distinction was made in the conceptual syntactic domain—between those aspects which relied on formal universals to provide the conceptual aspect, and those aspects which relied on a code or notational system' (Eisenman, 1971, p. 23).

Now from the standpoint of the intention that underlies the artistic/projective action, Eisenman's caveat to Krauss' argumentation seems particularly relevant. For his interest in the connections between an a priori design intention and intellection/experience of the physical fact underscores a significant divergence vis-à-vis the foundations of one of the most influential interpretations of contemporary art – an interpretation whose foremost ideologue is Krauss, and one of the leading inheritors is Foster. Which presumptions are these? As per their most accomplished formulation (the essay 'Sense and Sensibility. Reflection on Post '60s art', published by Krauss in 1973), basically this: (1) that all intention originates from a subjective, inscrutable mental space – in Krauss' words, 'the artist inviolable self'; (2) that consequently, all art derived from the notion of intention will always be (i) solipsistic and self-referential (in the sense that it will never retain any tangible and therefore verifiable connection with what supposedly originated it, and that its meaning will never transcend an act of imagination confined 'to the mind of each isolated spectator'); (ii) prearranged (in the sense that it will always be the re-presentation of something formulated beforehand in the subject's conscience); (iii) conservative, in the sense that it will always reproduce a pre-defined and tendentiously conventional formal/spatial model of some sort.

It is noteworthy that it was based on these presumptions that Krauss based her argument that the avant-garde art that emerged in the USA in the early 1960s could be divided into two opposing fronts – viz: (A) the anti-intentional/progressive front constituted by both minimalist art – the art of Frank Stella and Donald Judd, Dan Flavin and Carl Andre, and also of the first Robert Morris – and the non-conceptual section of post-minimalism – i.e. the post-minimalism of Serra and Bruce Nauman, Mel Bochner and Dorothea Rockburn, Michael Heizer and Richard Tuttle; and (B) the intentional/conservative front constituted by Conceptual Art (the art of Joseph Kosuth, On Kawara, and Douglas Huebler, among others.)⁷

One understands why Krauss, like Foster, chose Serra as an avatar of her conception of the *non-conservative* section of contemporary art: more so than any of his post-minimalist peers, Serra had always rejected any sort of a priori design intention and committed himself entirely to the body. Not any body, to be sure, but a body entirely

⁷ In fact, according to Krauss (1973), the meaning of minimalist art does not differ in essence from the meaning of post-minimalist art, since both had purportedly relinquished all forms of intentionality.

aloof to all forms of subjective intention; a body which, in practice, does not avail itself to doing anything else except testing the properties of matter, investigating the possibilities of its own gestures in interacting with matter under the effect of gravity, seeking to define 'the topology of the place, and the assessment of the characteristics of the place, through locomotion' (Serra, 1973, p.14).

III

But it can be misleading to emphasize the affinities between Foster's and Krauss' readings (in particular, the huge distrust both critics show for the Conceptual/Mental domain – a distrust always accompanied by a more or less unlimited faith in the virtues of the Phenomenological experience). For there is something in 'The Art-Architecture Complex' that sets it apart from the highly ingenious reading Krauss makes of the art of the 1960s and afterward – viz., an undisguisable unwillingness to develop, expose, and eventually test out the presumptions of his reading of the contemporary, especially the presumptions that underpin the imagistic/virtual versus real/phenomenological antinomy. In effect, notably when compared with Krauss' highly elaborate theoretical constructs, Foster's argumentation begins to resemble a short-circuit: instead of the complex articulation of *conceptual-intencional-subjective-solipsistic-aprioristic-inscrutable-illusionistic-conventional-conservative*, Foster bases his theses in the supposedly self-evident sequence: *imagistic = virtual = illusory = acritical*. It is a compromising shortcut; it suggests that, faced with the challenges and predicaments of such complex theoretical construction, Foster opted for a moral judgment – or, worse still, of moralist indictment. Personally, I believe this is what Foster effectively did when he implied that the path followed by Serra is *evidently* correct; that such a choice in fact constitutes a *practically ineluctable* option against all that is acritical/conservative in the contemporary world – especially that which he dubs (and quite infamously so) 'the vicissitudes of the imaginary' (Foster, 2015, p. 155). In doing so, Foster obliterates a significant number of questions – for instance, the problems and limitations that characterize the phenomenological path (which is actually presented here as being problem-free). One of the risks is that the incautious reader, and above all the neophyte, will end up believing that, as Foster implies, Serra simply solved the problem of intentional/projective action (in his own words, '[h]ow might one proceed differently, sculpturally')⁸; and that, consequently, his work constitutes an uncontroversial model to be followed by artists (but also by architects) intent on acting/designing in a non-conservative way.

That Foster has chosen not to pay Peter Eisenman's work the attention it deserves makes complete sense, on that account. After all from Eisenman's perspective (more specifically, as per his reading of 60s art), none of Foster's premises and contentions seem self-evident – quite the opposite. Which means to say that, if Foster deviated from Eisenman's work, he probably did so with the intent of obfuscating a work that challenges not only his outline of contemporary architecture, but first and foremost the foundations of his conception of 'the contemporary' – namely: (1) the idea that contemporary art and architecture can be characterized in terms of the opposition between, on the one hand, an imagistic/virtual domain regarded as unrealistic and conservative, and on the other hand a phenomenological domain considered essentially real and progressive; (2) that therefore the progressive choice among these two (and only two) alternatives can only be the option for the mundane/phenomenological, i.e. for the materic, the corporeal, the situational. To my mind, much of what Eisenman has been doing since the 1960s are attempts to contradict these precepts.

⁸ Foster, 2015, p.183.

Obviously, by saying this I do not mean to imply that Eisenman simply solved the numerous problems his work raises – in particular the problem of the connections between subjective intention, intellection processes, and phenomenological experience. As a matter of fact, one of the distinctive features of his work is precisely a high degree of hesitance – particularly regarding the efficacy of his ‘architecture machine’⁹, both from the perspective of intentional action (i.e. re the attempted neutralization of the subject that acts driven by subjective/projective intentions) and from the perspective of intellection/experience (i.e. of the eventual overcoming of what he sharply denominates the ‘metaphysics of presence’)¹⁰. And the first one to admit this hesitance is Eisenman himself, who, after nearly half a century of work, continues to wonder: ‘How do you install the experience of the body and keep the mechanism operating?’¹¹

But hesitance does not mean going backwards, let alone nostalgia. Incidentally, Eisenman has always refused – even at moments of great difficulty (for example when Derrida, rather surreptitiously, turned his back on him)¹² – to accept alternatives that suggested some sort of return to the pre-contemporary condition (which in his case means pre-deconstructivist). Eisenman made this much clear when he stated, with an uncommon dose of sarcasm:

‘Our only source of value today is a memory of value, a nostalgia; we live in a relativistic world, yet desire absolute substance, something that is incontrovertibly real. Through its being, architecture has become, in the unconscious of society, the promise of this something real’ (Eisenman, 2004, p.203).

It is unlikely that Eisenman had Foster in mind when making this taunt; and yet it fits Foster like a glove. For as far as I see it, Foster is clearly after this ‘unequivocal real’. And just like this quest led him to Serra (the most mundane of all mundane artists), it also led him to architecture. Not just any architecture, but an architecture which, by definition, is always literal and never virtual; which is construction, rather than mere representation; which, in opposition to the work of the architects that *The Art-Architecture Complex* concerns itself with, is made of literal transparencies, true phenomenological experiences, essential ties with specific places: in a word, an architecture that is always defined, and furthermore legitimized, by presence.

IV

And this is why, as I believe, Foster’s account of contemporary architecture is less concerned with the art-architecture complex than it is with the challenges and dilemmas of a certain conception of contemporary art, epitomized here by his own criticism. What challenges are these? Above all, those associated with the problem of how one positions oneself in the face of what Hans U. Gumbrecht (2010) refers to as the unresolved crisis of metaphysics. In *The Return of the Real* (a book published in the mid-1990, but which contains essential parts written over a decade earlier), Foster seemed to wallow in an epistemological limbo of sorts: on the one hand, he disclosed an unrestrained desire for ‘the real’; on the other hand, he simply could not conceal his own ill-being in face of the very notion of reality – at least those notions of reality which, deliberately or not, might evoke a minimally stable referentiality (i.e.

⁹ Eisenman, 1997, p.8.

¹⁰ See Eisenman, 1995.

¹¹ Eisenman, 1997, p.14.

¹² See Eisenman, 2007.

some sort of ontology). Hence, precisely his caveat about the limits of his own intellectual endeavor, destined to reclaim not just any real, only a subjective reconstruction of it (Foster, 2014, p. 46)¹³. Eloquently, in the final chapter of *The Return of the Real*, Foster (2014, p.199) inquired about the deconstructions carried out by Foucault and Derrida:

'Do these poststructuralisms elaborate the events of the postcolonial and the postmodern critically? Or do they serve as ruses whereby these events are sublimated, displaced, or otherwise effused? Or do they somehow do both?'

Seemingly, what was presented as doubt in *The Return of the Real* was taken for granted in *The Art-Architecture Complex*: the sense of deconstruction became simply that of complicity, cynicism, the renouncing of critique. Likewise, the idea of a critical stance is now restricted to the option (presented as self-evident and self-justified) of returning to things themselves, to the presence of things themselves, to the grace that eventually arises in the presence of things themselves.

That Foster ends up attributing to the presence of some of Serra's works the quality of 'grace'¹⁴ (a word that has been banned from the avant-garde vocabulary since Michael Fried, in his infamous diatribe of 1967 against minimal art, pronounced the statement 'presentness is grace') seems highly symptomatic to me; it indicates the amount of conservativeness that underlies Foster's supposedly progressive critical praxis.

This conservativeness is not new. In fact, it is intrinsic to the notions of 'neo-avant-garde' based on which Foster has built his alternative theory of contemporary¹⁵. With this *The Art-Architecture Complex*, however, it took on clearer – and much more radical – contours. For what this book ultimately reveals is in fact the high degree of nostalgia that underlies Foster's reasoning.

Nostalgia of what? Now, nostalgia of the modern reality – i.e., of an aesthetical and existential condition which, as 1960s art makes clear (*pace* Foster), is not tenable anymore (Leonidio, n.d.).

More specifically, Foster seems overrun with nostalgia of an age in which the avant-garde was driven by concrete causes (the quest for the 'world of life', the paving of the 'road to the future') which were acted out against concrete enemies ('idealism', 'illusionism', 'pictorialism', etc., etc.). In one word, what Foster misses is the same thing Fried could never find in minimal art: a 'compelling conviction'¹⁶ without which the modern spirit becomes homeless.

The end of this condition is experienced by Foster in eschatological terms – i.e., as the end of the world; like Fried and Krauss before him, Foster (2003, p.117) wound up incarnating what he quite accurately dubbed 'the frightening of art and criticism' – i.e. the fear that the conditions on which for more than a century art and art criticism had been practiced and valued might come to an end.

¹³ 'Repressed by various poststructuralisms, the real has returned, but as the traumatic real' (Foster, 1996, p.239. In its original formulation, this caveat was even stricter: 'Repressed by various poststructuralisms, the real has returned – but not just any real, *only the traumatic real*' (Foster, 1994, p.29).

¹⁴ Foster, 2015, p.185.

¹⁵ See Leonidio, 2015.

¹⁶ Fried, 1967.



What does one do in face of this terrifying scenario? One tries to demonstrate that, instead of the extinction of the modern condition, the contemporary world is actually a reconfiguration of it.

One evidence that this, in fact, is what drives Foster's critique is the emphasis *The Art-Architecture Complex* places upon the notion of 'virtual'. As aforementioned, this term is employed here as the opposite of the articulated notions of 'concrete', 'real', 'mundane', 'tectonic', 'materic', etc. This antinomy is certainly not absurd; yet the way it is employed here is somewhat shrewd. For as per Foster's critique, the notion becomes a contemporary, and natural, surrogate to anti-modern notions like 'ideal' and 'illusionistic'. The shrewdness lies in making believe that while the terms of the old antinomy ideal/classical versus mundane/modern may change, the antinomy itself remains ever current. Significantly, Foster recurrently describes the contemporary condition in terms of the old (i.e. modern) opposition between *the real world* versus *the idealist world* – as if implying that, like in the good old days of the avant-garde, our current predicament is still to confront 'old idealist models' (Foster, 2015, p.171). In doing so, Foster not only suggests the persistence of the modern condition (now reconfigured); he insinuates that today, like yesterday, the task of a neo-neo-avant-garde is to fight 'these persistent idealisms' (Foster, 2015, p.173), now incarnated into an endless array of virtualities.

The shortcomings of this updating of the modern condition into the space of 'the contemporary' are many. Let me highlight just one of them: how is one to account for practices that fit neither the original model (i.e., the modernist narratives), nor the reconfigured model (the neo-modernist ones) – as in the case, for example, of Robert Smithson's work?

Once again, Foster's solution brings Krauss to mind. For just like Krauss (1979) did repeatedly, Foster addresses the work of Smithson in eminently phenomenological terms – more specifically as per the purported emphasis his work gives to the notion of 'place'.

To observers minimally familiar with the work of Smithson, the rationale sounds clumsy, for it conspicuously disregards the evidence that even when they take on a 'site-specific' aspect, Smithson's works never cease to be the opposite of that, i.e. exemplars of an art that is anti-specific, anti-situational and anti-phenomenological' (Leonidio, n.d.).

Since Foster, like Krauss, simply cannot afford to leave Smithson outside the boundaries of the contemporary, all that is left for him is to try to replicate what Krauss had already done, and reasonably successfully so: approaching Smithson's work in essentially phenomenological terms, thus associating his 'earthworks' with the situational operations of Andre, Serra, and Heizer (Foster, 2015, p.165)¹⁷.

The gesture is unconvincing, but it serves as a lesson. For if it is still the time to look into the art of the 1960s, it is equally the time to question post-minimalist readings of this art – readings which, as Joseph Kosuth (1991) claimed was often moved by obscure agendas; readings which, as Foster's critique make explicit, have a huge impact in the way we deal with contemporary architecture.

Once again, Eisenman's legacy proves to be timely and strategic. For the fact that he is an utterly first-hand observer (and furthermore an original and independent observer) allowed him to impart a very special approach to 1960s art, notably regarding the – extremely sensitive – theme of intentionality. Significantly, instead

¹⁷ For an insightful Reading of Smithson's work, see Owens, 1979.



of turning his back on the notion of intention (as Krauss¹⁸ vehemently advised in the early 1970s), Eisenman (1997, p.17) persisted in his quest for what he inspiringly called 'meta-intentionality'.

A circumstantiated analysis of this notion would require another paper. For the time being I will simply point out that, as Eisenman stated, such a notion puts him (the author) in the precarious space that eventually lies between the human and the inhuman – a space where modern subjectivity in general and critical judgment in particular become (in a *best-case* scenario) dysfunctional. Once again, it is worthwhile to resort to the words of Eisenman:

'my work is ultimately about conceptualizing other methods. That is why I started working with other methods because all we can do as humans is to draw axes and places. The computer conceptualizes and draws differently... I attempt to remain suspended between the mechanism and my own subjective responses so that I am not able to define critically what its mistakes are in terms of the total trajectory of the work' (Eisenman, 1997, p.13).

To what extent does Eisenman's meta-intentionality intersect with minimalism's account of intention? This is the sort of question that remains unanswered – and which *The Art-Architecture Complex* has refrained from tackling. In any case, it is clear that while it is true that from Foster's neo-modernist standpoint 'there are no alternatives without critique', it is also true that from an anti-modernist standpoint, 'critique' may not be the best of alternatives – perhaps just the opposite.

V

Much has been said over the past few decades about the emergence (since around the mid-1960s) of a 'new agenda for architecture' (Nesbitt, 2014). For the time being, this seems as encompassing as it is diffuse; it spans from semiotics to historicism, from environmentalism to feminism, from critical regionalism to deconstruction. Naturally, it also comprises the dialogue art and architecture. Not by chance, alongside more or less commonplace topics such as 'local tradition' and 'sustainability', the *métier* of architecture has come to deal more recently with notions such as 'field condition'¹⁹ and 'expanded field'²⁰. What is specific and interesting about the use of these notions is this: as their own champions recognize, they emulate the critical vocabulary of contemporary visual arts.

Obviously, there is not anything reproachable about architects employing notions and concepts imported from the discourse of the visual arts. My personal impression, however, is that as a rule, whenever an architect utters an expression like 'architecture's expanded field', s/he overlooks the fact (rather obvious, by the way) that this and other notions were originally coined in specific contexts, that is to say as a reply to specific (aesthetical, but also political) questions and dilemmas.

In embracing these notions at face value, these architects do more than simply showing a greater or lesser degree of epistemological naiveté – or worse still a greater or lesser degree of intellectual servility (which would imply that the current state of the art-architecture complex includes perhaps an inferiority complex from architecture vis-à-vis art); they also disregard the fact that the decontextualized

¹⁸ Krauss, 1973.

¹⁹ Allen, 2014.

²⁰ Vidler, 2014.



import of these notions can prove not only awkward, but unproductive as well. That is, in this case too a minimum amount of deconstruction (that is to say, of anti-epistemology) is not only recommended, it is actually a precondition for a freer and more productive exchange between art and architecture.

The elucidation of the current art-architecture complex must begin with this realization²¹.

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²¹ Many thanks to Francisco P. Lucena and Maria Palmeiro for their attentive reading and remarks.



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