

On the (im)Possibility of Reading: The Ontology of Technique as Explored through the Early Work of Peter Eisenman

The significance of the final form resides in its capacity to reveal its own origins.

— Peter Eisenman “The Futility of Objects”

CHARLES CRAWFORD

NewSchool of Architecture + Design

INTRODUCTION

Can a form in some manner “communicate” to a viewer the “intent” of its creator? In the 1970’s and 1980’s many notable figures explored this question, the question Jorge Silvetti once referred to as “the problem of communication.” Aldo Rossi proposed a language of reductivist purity; Michael Graves a return to the familiar language of classicism; Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown a version of Populism; and Peter Eisenman proposed an experiment in pure syntax, devoid of cultural reference.

This paper explores issues of ontology and technique and, hopefully, in that process, suggests a path by which we might connect both to tectonics.

With his early work, most notably the houses, the CSULB Student Center and the Wexner Center, Peter Eisenman conducted an experiment in communication, attempting to produce architecture of linguistic structuralism. This attempt to incorporate Chomsky’s theory of syntax into a language of art possessed an internal codification, which it was hoped would aide the viewer in “deconstructing” the process of composition. As Jeffery Kipnis writes, however, in “An Architecture Unbound:”

Rather than ‘exposing’ an essential structure of (all) architectural possibility in an unambiguously accessible announcement of purely formal intentions, the success of the work, its architectural potency, seemed, paradoxically, to depend on ambiguity, on a deflection of readable intent. The potency rested not, as hoped, in palpable internal logic, but in the conveyance of a ‘justified’ radicality. Had an essentialist structure for architecture free of empirical constraint been revealed, the effect would have been an immediate translation of intent from form.¹

Eisenman’s experiment, it is thus said, failed to communicate; this paper will attempt to explore this failure. It will do so first by exploring two ideas of the

American philosopher W.V.O. Quine: The "Indeterminacy of Translation" and the "Inscrutability of Reference" (Ontological Relativity). This twin thesis suggests that while direct artistic communication might indeed be impossible, an attempt such as Eisenman's can achieve limited "misreading." The paper will then use the works of Quine's protégé, Nelson Goodman's *Ways of Worldmaking* and *The Languages of Art* to show how "misreading" can be directed and enhanced, pushing reading 'from the realm of the impossible' to the (im)Possible.

W.V.O. QUINE: THE INDETERMINACY OF TRANSLATION

The twin concepts of the Indeterminacy of Translation and the Inscrutability of Reference, first suggested by W.V.O. Quine in 1968³ directly implicate any notion of direct artistic communication as fraudulent. Quine's was a study of language as a social art. As such, he was directly refuting Chomsky's notion of a "deep structure" inherent in language. Quine further refutes what have been termed "copy theories" of language in which meaning is seen as something like the written description hanging next to a painting on a gallery wall. The copy theory suggests that meaning is inherent or in correspondence with the object: we learn by reading, by copying the description in the presence of the exhibit. Chomsky goes even further, suggesting meaning is born within us, awaiting discovery (Eisenman's "deep structure" reference). Yet if we accept with Quine that language is a social art, certain "dispositions to overt behavior," then neither explanation is adequate; we bring meaning to the exhibit, Quine insists, not the exhibit to us.

Quine's "Gavagai" thought experiment illustrates this conclusion. The example -- a fictitious account of a linguist attempting to translate the language of a newly found tribe -- hinges on the difficulty such a linguist would face in individuating terms of divided reference, in this case the word "rabbit." "Rabbit," devoid of individuating terms such as "this," "that," plurals etc., can be conceived of in many ways. Besides "rabbit," the native expression "gavagai" -- the term uttered by the natives to the linguist each time a rabbit is present -- could mean "undetached rabbit part," "rabbit hood personified," or many other (admittedly obscure) terms compatible with the idea or presence of a rabbit. That the linguist would approximate individuating terms and develop a practical translation poses no problem for Quine; in fact, this is precisely his point. The linguist abstracts the native expression based upon his observations, forming what Quine terms an analytic hypothesis. The key is how the linguist has accomplished this.

The linguist, says Quine, "... has read our ontological point of view into the native language ... He has had to decide, however arbitrarily, how to accommodate English idioms of identity and quantification in native translation." ⁴ Thus the linguist, while having a working model of the native language, can claim "no fact of the matter" as to whether he has literally translated native idiom. The fact of the matter is that he can never honestly claim to know whether "gavagai" means 'rabbit' or 'undetached rabbit part.'

That would appear to be that for artistic communication, for what are paintings or buildings if not a "newly discovered tribal language"? In Quine's account the linguist has observable behavior to fall back on; architecture, however, cannot "behave" making communication that much more difficult. Some architects, such as Michael Graves, believe that the route out of (Eisenman's syntactic) inscrutability is semantics: the use of reference. But Quine attacks this course too:

Reference, extension, has been the firm thing; meaning, intention the infirm. The indeterminacy of translation now confronting us, however, cuts across extension and intention alike. The terms 'rabbit,' 'undetached rabbit part,' and 'rabbit

stage' differ not only in meaning; they are true of different things. Reference itself proves behaviorally inscrutable.⁵

This inscrutability of reference can be illustrated by considering a term such as "green," which can be either an abstract singular or a concrete general. The singular green refers to the color, while its use in the general is something like "the grass is green." By themselves the terms are ambiguous; there is nothing in the process of ostension that can differentiate the two. Only in the context of their use in a sentence can we see the difference in their reference. Yet, as has been pointed out, this process of individuation is itself inscrutable. In the case of the general, multiple direct ostension is required to behaviorally fix the reference; for the singular we resort to deferred ostension and find: "... a certain dimness pervading the home language itself."⁶

From this conclusion we can follow Quine, as he puts it, "all the way home," and discover that the inscrutability of reference is propagated in our very speech dispositions themselves. This does not render language meaningless, however, for built into it is a network of terms which act as a sort of mathematical coordinate system; this network is our frame of reference. For someone like Eisenman, that frame of reference would be plane, solid and void while Rossi would refer to program, site and client. Indeed, "Ducks" and "Decorated Sheds" could possibly be interpreted as a "frame of reference."

Reference is thus saved from utter meaninglessness by a sort of linguistic coordinate system; saved, that it is, provided we don't ask too much of it. When asked to explain a reference, Quine asserts we regress into a background language: "The background language gives the query sense, if only relative sense; sense relative to it, this background language."⁷ The background language, though, makes sense only relative to another background language and so on, potentially infinitely. But, as we saw earlier, in practice we stop this regression, recognizing the search for absolutes is futile. Instead of searching for such absolute we "acquiesce" in our "mother tongue" and accept words at face value. Similarly, when comparing what Quine terms "object theories" we follow the lead of the linguist and interpret the theory in our own terms.

Applied to Eisenman's work, we can see the text that accompanies the house as just such an object theory, while the transformational diagrams provide the background language with which to translate the "text." The "mother-tongue" for Eisenman was architecture itself, defined by him as plane, solid and void. Yet by denying the validity of "culturally derived meaning" Eisenman sets himself up: man communicates via culturally derived models.

If the Indeterminacy of Translation suggests the impossibility of modernist communication and the Inscrutability of Reference that of post-modernist communication, is reading possible at all?

MAKING

To succeed in art is to convey an experience in such a form that the experience is actively re-created--not 'contemplated,' not 'examined,' not passively 'received' but by response to the means, actually lived through, by those to whom it is offered.⁸

- Raymond Williams. *The Long Revolution*

The debate over artistic communication is possible due only to a misunderstanding of its nature; at issue is not communication, but making.

In a very literal sense, we make the world we live in. We don't read the descriptions next to the exhibits, we write them, and in the process, the exhibit is inexorably changed. This process of making as described by Williams has three components:

1. Making/Remaking:

Art is a process in which the artist re-makes himself¹ as he makes the object. It is a simultaneous form making in which the artist and the art affect and/or make each other.

2. Art is Communication

Form is content; they cannot be separated. Communication is neither goal nor intention, but is art. To make, the artist must communicate with the object and the object with the artist.

3. Viewer as Creator

The viewer, to understand a piece, must be a creator in his/her own right. It is a process of making by the viewer in which he/she, in a sense, becomes the artist, re-creating the communication between subject and object. The act can end with this re-creation, or extend further to an act of making itself -- as when a critic "discovers hidden meaning" in the work that the artist was not consciously aware of. To illustrate these points, compare the following two apparently contradictory statements:

"I don't care what the public thinks, I build for myself."

"The success of the final form resides in its ability to communicate its intentions."

These two statements by Peter Eisenman illustrate the strange dualism of artistic communication explored by Williams. Namely, that it is generally the artist's intent to communicate only with himself (or better: with his object). Yet simultaneously, the object's public success or failure is related to its ability to communicate: its ability to create the desire and/or the ability on the part of the viewer to engage in the process of making/remaking. Thus the statements above support, rather than contradict, one another.

Others, most notably Benito Croce and Nelson Goodman, also suggest this definition of Art put forth by Williams.

There is an effort to both debase the elevation of art to a higher plane (Aristotle) -- an elevation that leads ultimately to skepticism -- at the same time they refute the claim that art is inferior to science (Plato). Writes Williams: "The emphasis that matters is that there are, essentially, no 'ordinary' activities, if by that we mean the absence of creative interpretation and effort."

The significance of recasting communication as making is that it results in an end run around the Indeterminacy of Translation. No longer is a literal translation necessary to validate communication; interpretation, art resulting in the creation of new worlds, suffices. Communication as Translation presupposes a direct correspondence between subject and object. And as the debate was formerly cast the only alternative was a rampant relativism in which meaning is impossible. Communication as making cuts across this dichotomy. As Goodman writes:

... the issue between monism and pluralism tends to evaporate under analysis. If there is but one world, it embraces a multiplicity of contrasting aspects; if there



1



2



3



4

Figure 1: COMPOSITION AND DECOMPOSITION

Figure 2: WEIGHTING

Figure 3: ORDERING

Figure 4: DELETION AND SUBLIMATION

are many worlds, the collection of them all is one. The one world may be taken as many or the many taken as one; whether one or many depends on the way of taking.⁹

MAKING READING

For what is Nature? Nature is no great mother who has borne us. She is our creation. It is in our brain that she quickens to life. Things are because we see them, and what we see, and how we see it, depend on the Arts that have influenced us.

— Oscar Wilde. “The Decay of Lying.”

The artist, no less than the scientist, is a world maker. Nelson Goodman, in *Ways of World Making*, suggests several of the ways in which both the artist and the viewer create new worlds. I shall list, briefly describe and illustrate each in turn.

COMPOSITION AND DECOMPOSITION

This is perhaps the most common form of world making. The scientist, for example, “decomposes” the table into molecules, the molecules into atoms, the atoms into electrons and protons. In the process a startling new world emerges, one in which this seemingly solid table is seen as being mostly empty space. Likewise, a musician assembles the ordinary sounds of traffic, construction, typing and rainfall into a symphony that alters our perception and understanding of these sounds, turning them from noise, to music.

WEIGHTING

Two worlds sharing common characteristics often differ in the emphasis they place on these characteristics. Weighing elements into relevant and irrelevant kinds is another method of world making. Two photographs of the same subject differ if, by overexposing and over developing, one emphasizes the grain structure of the film while another, developed normally, depicts the scene as found. Similarly, an Impressionist landscape alters our concept of light, while a Futurist interpretation focuses on motion. The famous – or infamous – depiction of Paris by Guy Debord depicts only those neighborhoods of the city that he frequented.

ORDERING

Measurement, scale, tone and pitch are all examples of differentiation by ordering. That ordering by measurement makes, rather than is made by, the world, is illustrated by the artist Marcel Duchamp. Duchamp dropped three strings, one meter each, from a height of one meter; he then recorded precisely their shape and constructed replicas in wood. Finally, he placed them in a wood and glass box, similar to that which held the first official meter stick. This perhaps too witty gesture is not only an example of world making itself, but serves notice that, as Goodman writes: “Whatever else may be said about these modes of organization, they are not ‘found in the world’ but are built into the world.”¹⁰

DELETION AND SUBLIMATION

The process of making something new out of something existing is often a process of eliminating some aspects and adding some new ones, such as with computer-enhanced imagery. This process digitalizes a picture (composition/decomposition) and can then eliminate unwanted elements, such as glare, smoke, dead flowers, even whole buildings. The computer then fills in the holes by approximating the images immediately surrounding them. Gordon Matta-Clark did something of this nature with his series of cutting and removing pieces

of abandoned houses. In a similar fashion, Louis Kahn demonstrated the traffic intensity of Philadelphia in a simple sketch without the need for words of explanation.

DEFORMATION

The voluptuous sculptures of Henry Moore or the more Spartan works of Giacometti seem an appropriate example here, particularly when compared to one another.

This is an illustrative, not comprehensive, list of methods we use for world making. It is a useful list, however, for it can be an aid to the viewer in understanding the “message” inherent in art.

Also useful is Goodman’s definition of the function of style. Style is not a suit. It is not something the artist picks up off a rack and discards the following season. Nor can style be seen simply as how a subject is expressed. Rather, style is a method of categorization and a means by which we can begin to analyze, interpret and understand a work of art. Style encompasses both content and form and, most importantly, a stylistic property symbolizes. The role of style in art then, is less a tool for the artist than it is something akin to an encyclopedia for the viewer: it is a method, which informs one how to begin the interpretation of a work.

An object or a work, then, can be said to be art by virtue of its functioning symbolically. As such, an object may function as art throughout its life, or only for parts of its life. The key to symbolization, Goodman tells us, is that it may come and go. The urinal on the men’s room wall is not art and it did not become so simply because Duchamp signed it and hung it in a gallery. The urinal -- that particular urinal, not all urinals -- became art when its function as receptacle ended and its function as symbol began. Art becomes, then, a symbol of its own making, the remaking of the artist, his world and that -- hopefully -- of the viewer.

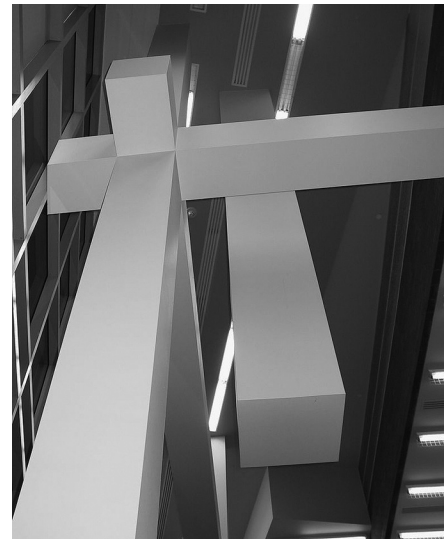
CONCLUSION: ART AS COMMUNICATIVE MEDIA

Throughout this work, Eisenman came to realize that the existence of an essential architecture, free of subjectivity, was itself an empirical presumption; consequently, no logic could be truly internal, no rational structure of possibility could be exposed in its own objectivity. Architecture was inextricably located in the mind of the reader.¹¹

– Jeffery Kipnis “An Architecture Unbound:”

If we can accept William’s argument then we can see that the act of making is itself an act of communication. We can then use Goodman’s study as a method of categorizing and interpreting acts of making. Is this then sufficient to overcome the Indeterminacy of Translation and to explain the supposed “failure” of Eisenman’s houses?

Communication is inevitable, correspondence is not; as Quine pointed out, we bring meaning to the exhibit, not the exhibit to us. Thus an attempt, such as Eisenman’s, to develop a language devoid of culturally derived symbolization is doomed to misreading from the start: art communicates symbolically and man translates via culturally derived models. There is no lack of communication in Eisenman’s work. It has inspired a great amount of interpretation, study, criticism, admiration and disdain. Yet these projects continue to serve as textbook examples of the viewers’ role as maker/remaker. And while it may only be for the “informed reader” -- armed with a suitcase full of explanatory texts



5

Figure 5: DEFORMATION

and transformational diagrams -- that “an unambiguously accessible announcement of purely formal relations” can be seen, the work clearly communicates. It simply fails to communicate the architects’ intent to all but the dedicated and “informed” of reader. Indeed, both Eisenman (and Derrida) have previously noted that by its very nature, the architectural dialectic is rooted in an ambiguity that renders the process one more of discovery than deliverance, a study and not a lesson.

Quine’s Indeterminacy of Translation explains this failure, but far from dooming artistic communication it opens a door for the artist. Earlier an analogy was drawn between Quine’s “gavagai” example and that of the artist/viewer relationship. The work of art can be likened to that of a remote and previously unknown tribal language. The viewer of the piece, then, becomes the linguist, attempting to translate the “gavagese” of the image. Like the linguist, both the viewer and the artist must accept the relativity of the final translation; they must accept the ultimate ‘misreading’ of the work. But like the linguist, the viewer can develop a practical and working approximation of the piece; a sort of artistic-analytic hypothesis. This process occurs in the same way Quine outlined for translating an Object-Theory: by reference to, or regress into, a background theory.

The artist builds a language through metaphor, exemplification and expression. The viewer recreates the act of making through the same methods, utilizing the interpretive function of style while understanding modes of world making.

Whoever looks for art without symbols, then, will find none--if all the ways that works symbolize are taken into account. Art without representation or expression or exemplification -- yes. Art without all three -- no.¹²

With this insight of Goodman’s it can be seen that Eisenman, in his attempt to reduce and eliminate representation and building tectonics created a quite wonderful and sensuous group of exemplificative houses.

As Goodman explains, it is a difficult endeavor, an inexact science, this process of reading:

It involves making delicate discriminations and discerning subtle relationships, identifying symbol systems and characters within these systems and what these characters denote and exemplify, interpreting works and reorganizing the world in terms of works and works in terms of the world.

Much of our experience and many of our skills . . . may be transformed by the encounter . . .¹³

SOURCES

1. fin D’OU T HOU S. Peter Eisenman with Nina Hofer and Jeffery Kipnis. The Architecture Association, London. 1985
2. It should be noted here that while Eisenman’s first six houses can be interpreted as experiments in communication, Eisenman himself contests that this was his (primary) intention.
3. Ontological Relativity and Other Essays W.V. Quine. Columbia University Press, New York, 1969
4. Ibid, p. 3, emphasis mine
5. Ibid, P. 35, emphasis mine
6. Ibid, p. 46
7. Ibid, p. 49
8. The Long Revolution. Raymond Williams. P. 37. As reprinted in “A Reader: Aesthetics and Philosophy.” Graduate School of Design, Harvard University. John Whiteman, Instructor.
9. Ways of Worldmaking, Nelson Goodman. P. 2. Hackett Publishing Company, Cambridge, 1978
10. Ibid, p. 14
11. “An Architecture Unbound: The Recent Work of Peter Eisenman.” Jeffery Kipnis. P. 14 from the introduction to FIN D’OU THOU S. Peter Eisenman with Nina Hofer and Jeffery Kipnis. The Architecture Association, London. 1985. Emphasis mine
12. Ways of Worldmaking, Nelson Goodman. P. 2. Hackett Publishing Company, Cambridge, 1978 P. 66
13. Languages of Art. Nelson Goodman. Hackett Publishing Company, Cambridge, 1976 PP. 241-2

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: David*T, August 2, 2014, Flickr/Creative Commons

Figure 2: Sjoerd van Oosten, May 8, 2008, Flickr/Creative Commons

Figure 3 Adrian Lo, March 24, 2013, Flickr/Creative Commons

Figure 4: Peyush Agarwal, Sept 4, 2006, Flickr/Creative Commons

Figure 5: Randy P, May 4, 2003, Flickr/Creative Commons

Special thanks to Hillary Putnam, Kurt Hunker, Tyler Starow and Courtney Fromberg