

# Mute Icons

“Do not believe in the false dichotomies of language versus drama, realism versus fiction, novelty versus tradition. You will experiment these oppositions in your work till you overcome them”

—Paul Bénichou, Via Guillermo Martinez

Ever since Robert Venturi’s influential book *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, the word complexity has been in the horizon of architecture as a form of imaginative progress and cultural relevance. In the mid 80’s and under the influence of the post-structuralist work of Jacques Derrida, the Deconstructive project in architecture aimed to create visual complexity through formal collision, fragmentation and dislocation of existing canons. Either parts were autonomous or extracted from the origin of the whole; its reading was called into question and shattered, parts reigning as the only legible entity. During the 90’s and deeply influenced by the philosophical writings of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattary, theorists such as Sanford Kwinter and Greg Lynn tried to align architecture with science, especially those of biology, physics and thermodynamics. Form followed variegated and intricate fields, along with complex processes of deformation and transformation. Patrick Schumacher’s parametric version of complexity is not that different, while positioning architecture primarily as a vehicle of social communication accounting for various political, cultural and economic relationships.

Obsessed with so much control and technological perfection, our pervasive media culture of today has become so deterministic that refinement and sophistication is now a familiar commonplace. In architecture, we have come to realize that the reliance in only one system, prevailing rhythm or underlying aesthetic principle governing form, no matter how pure, fluid or convoluted it may be, is an inherent cultural tyranny and aesthetic reductionism that diffuses tension by suppressing dissent. Nowadays, we are witnessing a major shift in architectural discourse and design. Centered on but not limited to post-digital vagueness, this development brings with it a renewed interest in indeterminacy, incongruity and defamiliarization wherein the notion of dichotomy is in and of itself a form of complexity.

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Figure 1: *Collective Void*, Student Dormitory, Ponce, Puerto Rico 2011-2012 | A sectional zipper-like vertical void subtracted from a v-shaped mass constitutes the social space per excellence of the new Dorm building. Emphasized in its envelope by a recursive paneling subdivision heightened with tonal enunciations, allows the project to disguise its actual size and program, appearing mysteriously large in scale and monumental relative to its context.

More than ever before, we inhabit a field prone to dualisms, wherein oppositions, symmetries and strong categorizations persevere to become norms. While not everything is compatible and some contraries could and should not be balanced; there are maybe important oppositions to be debunked. A dichotomic approach in architecture involves engaging some of these long held dualities, accepting inconsistencies and working through constructive incongruities. Argentinean writer and Jorge Luis Borges scholar Guillermo Martinez suggests in the context of his literature, that by combining opposites, contrasts will not necessarily dissolve but rather become fuzzier...hence the object [book] entering into a more complex state of holism.

Implying both maintenance and subversion of existing conventions or genres [in Literature, Martinez artfully combines the fictional novel with the critical essay format], a present interest in constructive dichotomies stems from the possibility of challenging fixed aesthetic and stylistic notions of part to whole relationship. New speculative realities can engender novel authenticities as well as evolving audiences that can question the role and present status of the icon in today's culture and more importantly its subsequent architectural image.

If there is any doubt, this approach ought not be confused with the deconstructive idea of "collage" or a renewed version of Venturi's notion of "difficult whole" in which an assortment of multiple and disparate parts is then joined compositionally." I want to be clear: a dichotomic project tends unequivocally towards a unified whole. However, this is no longer the intensively cohesive, tectonically intricate or digitally parametric whole. Internal dichotomies can operate at organizational, formal, scalar, material and chromatic levels, but are also ontological in nature, since they also imply a mode of being.

### 1/ INDETERMINACY

Formal indeterminacy and instability of reading are mobilizing mechanisms that can subvert notions of typological and aesthetic fixity while requiring closer scrutiny. In its vagueness, indeterminacy involves the impossibility of easily reading and situating objects, both within their own context and in relation to other objects. Elusiveness or even complete disguise of size and scale, suppression or even subversion of conventional architectural elements or part to whole relationships leads to a productive formal vagueness. While contemporary practice tends towards strong formal categorizations and hence limited interpretation, indeterminacy avoids the dissolution of discrepancy allowing for multiple categories to saturate one whole. Form may be static or tensioned, rigid or inflected. To truly understand the complexity of one formal state, one must understand the differences between its attributes in relation to its counterparts.

### 2/ MONOLITICITY AND RELATIVE AUTONOMY

"With the exception of monuments, architecture requires space for inhabitation. If the term monolith is taken literally to suggest material solidity, monolithic architecture would be impossible by definition. However, we understand monolithic to signify monolith-like, and hence to confer a sense of solidity and homogeneity on objects that are not and could not be integrally solid and homogeneous" - Rodolfo Machado and Rudolph El-Khoury<sup>1</sup>

A combined exhaustion with indexicality and the design processes associated with it, the perceived inefficacy of the "field" approach to building form, and



the failure of a single surface at producing substantive volume and architectural mass, induce a renewed interest in solid objects.

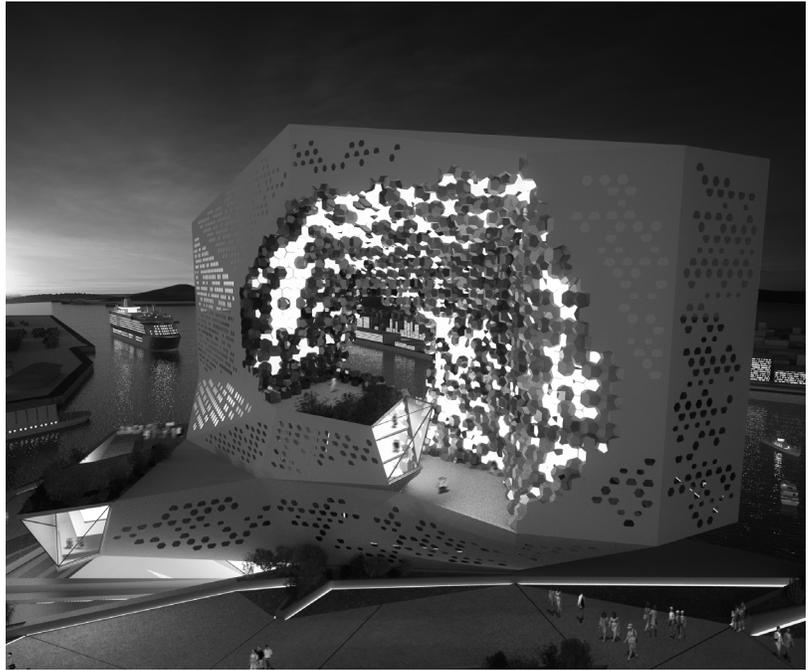
Very much under-theorized, the idea of “monolithicity”, as a means of suppressing formal legibility and an introverted approach to building in the city, is nowadays a viable alternative mode of cultural production. This is why mass becomes critical once again. In its representational and iconographic nature: latent muteness, scalar ambiguity and indifference to both program and context, the monolithic project deploys its relative autonomy<sup>2</sup> and its capacity for both resistance and resilience.

Monolithic architecture “exists in their most radical aspect as paradoxical representations: radical in the sense that they self-consciously elaborate their monolithic character into an aesthetic strategy and carry it out to its extreme realization; paradoxical, in the sense that they undermine their own fixity and solidity when their lapidary countenance stands as something totally other with respect to internal and external realities, program, and context.”<sup>3</sup> Interestingly enough, my generation’s interest in materialism was never able to account for the finitude and arbitrariness of building objects just like material or geometry alone could never account for the physical volume of building. This is the inherent paradox of the architectural object; that it can’t be reduced only to its material constituency, nor it can be completely detached from it either.

Monolithic forms exhibit and preserve the qualities of mass and those derived from it including weight, instability, discreteness, object-hood and autonomy. This architecture embraces a convinced rawness and discomfort in its posture towards both context and ground, stimulating either indifference or independence from it.

The formalism we are interested in promotes an undeniable degree of autonomy. While the objects / buildings should participate fully in the socio-cultural and economic context where they are implanted, they also claim their autonomy as objects. Writing about Bunkers, Paul Virilio noted that these fortifications aimed

Figure 2: *Pristina Mosque*, Pristina, Kosovo, 2013 | Monumental in size, the solid appearing, texture-filled volume of the Prayer hall emerges from the ground below levitating just above the boulevard. Sitting awkwardly above an excavated plinth, the autonomous mass is formally distinct: its mute iconic posture seemingly indifferent to both its ground beneath and the adjacent context.



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to be so confounded within their own mass that they didn't have foundations like regular buildings. Suggesting solidity, impenetrability and independence from ground and context, the monolith constitutes an important urban irritant that allows architecture to continuously reassert its iconographic power and negotiate its autonomy.

To be clear, form isn't just the literal object but also the field of activities, cultural habits and social behaviors around the object. This should no longer be taken literally by architects and designers, however, to assume that the field epitomized by surfaces should physically become continuous with the object.<sup>4</sup>

### 3/ INCONGRUITY

After two decades of interest in formal continuity and incremental variation, discontinuities, ruptures, breakages, deep changes in kind and the combinations of multiple genres are now relevant characteristics to be pursued. Incongruity suggests the possibility that incompatibility, dissimilarity and contrast can exist within a complex whole. Incongruity also has the power of reestablishing true differences [differences in kind] as part of a nuanced whole.

In the last few years, we have been drawn to organizational regimes operating at the border of cohesion and order. For instance, the destabilizing randomness of a "pile" within a monolithic crystalline composition suggests a new kind of composite whole: unified in its heterogeneity, cohesive in its ambivalence and multiplicity.

This is not a return to collage, which is "an extensive practice wholly dependent on affecting incoherent contradictions within and against a dominant frame". While collage is based on a recombination of the known, we see current dichotomies as also fostering the occurrence of new. Describing incongruity in comparison with the postmodern notion of collage, Jeff Kipnis argued that this is a case of "coherence forged out of incongruity".<sup>5</sup> Intensive coherence implies that the properties of certain monolithic arrangements enable the architecture to enter into multiple and even contradictory relationships.

Figure 3: *Keelung Crystal*, Cargo and Passenger Terminal, Keelung, Taiwan, 2012 | The use of primitive-based rustication internally adjacent to a strong monolithic solid form creates an ambiguously monumental presence on the harbor: at times solid, smooth and monolithic, at others porous, textured and multifaceted.

#### 4/ ADJACENCY AND DISPARITY

Incongruity can be formed by the autonomous combination of disparate forms. While initially in opposition, various formal primitives can be unified as a single object. Despite its internal dichotomy, this object can still maintain recognizably and irreconcilable differences within interdependent regions. Only sharp ruptures, robust adjacencies and abrupt edge conditions can support these formal relationships. In these situations, the nature of the edge is fundamental, affording form potential figural qualities to be revealed in the process. Changes in scale, organization, size, shape and material are possible consequences of this disruptive procedure. Scalar shifts no longer reflect incremental variation across a variegated field or growth within one “complex” system, but instead, divergent effects and dissimilar relationships across contiguous and often disparate regions.

We should no longer seek comprehensive fusions or extensive transformations, which so long overpowered as essential features of architectural form. The unification of aggregate primitives and monolithic form is just one of the possible [mixed] genres emerging out of this notion.

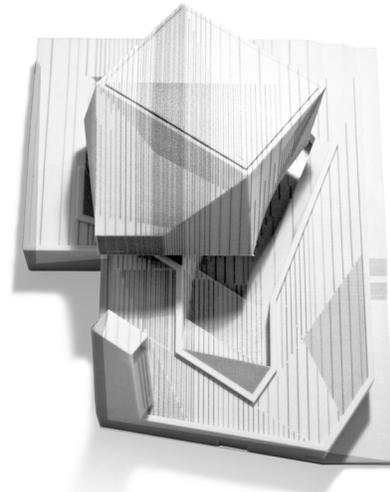
#### 5/ PHYSICAL ABSTRACTION

Digital media and technology continue to constantly evolve notions of material and space in architecture. With the idealized, controlled, and refined craft of advanced manufacturing processes, form becomes dominant over assemblage. Its materialization no longer bound by connections between parts, but rather by the physical abstraction of composites with its total concealment of traditional building processes. The immaterial qualities of the object suggests a concentration of technology, altering aspects of visualization, as well as materialization while reintroducing 2D and drawing as a form of abstract calculation. This layering of representational and material realities has the potential of creating a different form of complexity, incomplete in isolation, nuanced in its relation to the realities of a building.

Interestingly enough, some of these advances push towards the technological “superflat”, a physical conflation of information, material and object into a single composite surface. Rather than ubiquitously celebrate itself on top of building, contemporary media can integrate with physical form and advanced material manufacturing so as to reveal its synthetic dynamism, challenging architecture’s readability and confronting us with the ambiguity, arbitrariness and subjectivity of experience. Furthermore, our mediated reality has become so three dimensional that if there is any role left for drawing today, it is precisely that of reintroducing projective abstraction in design culture and pedagogy. Casey B. Reas’ work demonstrates how recursive use of simple numerical code could lead to various projective expressions, suggesting endless hyperbolic worlds entirely condensed within a flat surface. Sometimes it takes a non-architect to substantiate the myriad design opportunities latently encapsulated within two dimensions.

#### 6/ FUZZINESS

Surface articulation and indiscriminate ornamentation has become increasingly formulaic and cliché, representing a contemporary sign of formal and aesthetic weakness. In order to preserve and further emphasize mass, contemporary projects should stop right before any trace of ornamentation and surface articulation became figurally apparent. That is why we are interested in projects with levels



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Figure 4: *Pristina Mosque*, Pristina, Kosovo, 2013  
| With a surface articulation that is closer to noise than ornament, the New Pristina Mosque flickers with a glitch-like graphic array of parallel lines; asserting the authority of mass while offering varying densities and visual intensities. Complicating perspective, the mis-registration of edges and distortion of planarity by fake shade and shadow, the fuzzy texture both enhances and obfuscate the reading of the building.



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Figure 5: *League of Shadows*, SCI-Arc Multipurpose Event Structure, Los Angeles, 2013 | Both volumetric and graphic, iconic and mute, the intent of the project is to assert ambiguity in its formal reading and ambivalence in its experience: a simple black outline when seen from outside and far away, and a more complex, texture radiating surface when seen from its interior at close range.

of texture, coarseness and grain. This notion entails a toned down approach to enunciation that could be almost confused with noise. Suggesting nothing, drawing and 2D become central again since it affords volume with a different form of expression, one that is elusive and penetrating, brutal and mute. Enough “noise” can irritate the surfaces of a mass disguising known and expected architectural features such as windows or fenestration while maintaining a form of vagueness and constructive indeterminacy.

Just as in the case of Louis Boulee who used to refer to his interest as “architecture of shadows”, drawing takes on new life. Shade and shadow take over in the form of texture. If as in the case of “Beton Brute”<sup>6</sup>, a manufacturing material glitch became a doctrine and later a style with the emergence of Brutalism, could there be style of the glitch?

## 7/ THE MUTE ICON AND THE CURRENT STATE OF THE FIELD

“Art exists [so] that one may recover the sensation of life, it exists to make us feel things, to make the stone stoney.” - Viktor Shklovsky<sup>7</sup>

Architecture seems at a significant crossroads nowadays. Haunted by vast processes taking place outside itself, since 9.11, the financial collapse, the exacerbation of global warming, cultural and sociopolitical developments such as the Arab Spring and Occupy, a new epoch of economic austerity, the often ill proclaimed but certainly perceived “death of the icon” era, the impulse for social responsibility, the celebration of practices of common sense and search for common ground: all point to a challenge to the most creative and projective aspects of both discipline and field, and certainly suggest a political realignment of its establishment. While context can’t be the only driver for architectural production or any form of artistic practice of cultural relevance, it is certainly an important factor to be considered and reckoned with.

The present status and contemporary role of the icon comes into a deeper scrutiny and its cultural relevance definitely under stress. While culture at large always needs icons, the question here is what constitutes a contemporary icon, and whether its image could sever its ties to former notions of iconicity.

Challenging, and provoking at the same time is the notion of muteness, or the “mute icon”, a kind of anti-monument. No longer concerned with either narrative excesses of meaning and communication, nor with the shock and awe of sensation making, architecture can do what it does best: express its virtues through volume and mass in its most pure state without the anesthesia of excess and ornamentation. By suppressing what have now become expected aesthetic teasers, the mute becomes intriguing by its indifference towards context and a total apathy towards the body. A mute icon in architecture is at the same time object and building. As such, it requires a strong posture and with it, an attitude that is absolute and unstable, anticipated and strange, manifest and withdrawn.

The bunkers on the Atlantic Coast of France documented in Paul Virilio’s “Bunkers Archeology” are a perfect example of this notion: defensive architectures with object-like silhouette and rising directional posture; brutally raw, communicating absolutely nothing, completely autonomous from its ground and context yet completely reliant and embedded within them.

The mute’s appearance of monolithic impenetrability makes its experience elusive and strange, containing the ability to entice enduring attention by delivering

persistent irritation. Timothy Hyde argues for the legitimacy of ugliness and illegibility in architecture, stating, “the passive manner of irritation, or any ugly feeling, can only be overcome by a complete transformation of the situation from which that feeling emerges. In the absence of that transformation, irritation persists as a simultaneous pulling-together and pushing-apart of person and architecture.”<sup>8</sup>

By limiting its appearance, the mute icon demands closer scrutiny, its resistance conveys resilience and its introversion stimulates communication. Reyner Banham insisted that a Brutalist building should produce an affecting image, “something which is visually valuable”; and while classical aesthetics would presume this value to accrue in pleasure of something beautiful, for New Brutalism “image may be defined as quod visum perturbat –that which seen, affects the emotions,” with pleasure, displeasure, or, pointedly, an admixture of the two.”<sup>9</sup>

To make the stone stony again is to carve away the inscription already imprinted on it; it is to turn signs back into things, form into abstraction and building into object. To make the stone stony, architecture must appear strange and wonderful.<sup>10</sup>

## ENDNOTES

1. Rodolfo Machado and Rudolph El-Khoury, *Monolithic Architecture*, Prestel, 1995
2. The term coined “Engaged Autonomy” by Sarah Whiting “Engaging Autonomy”, SCI-Arc W.M. Keck Lecture Hall Los Angeles, CA, November 2013
3. Rodolfo Machado and Rudolph El-Khoury, *Monolithic Architecture*, Prestel, 1995
4. Recent trajectories in Speculative Realism and most importantly the significant contribution of Graham Harman’s theorizing of Object-Oriented Ontology, move away from the semantic communicative approach to “field” related parametricism or late post-modernism. Does the object help create the context, or does the context help inform the object? Harman argues that objects themselves have real qualities in isolation, regardless of human physical interaction or cultural interpretation, a call away from anthropomorphism. Graham Harman, “The Quadruple Object”, John Hunt Publishing, July29, 2011
5. Jeffrey Kipnis “Toward a New Architecture” *AD: Folding in Architecture*, Ed. By Greg Lynn, Academy Editions, London, 1993.
6. *Beton Brute*, pioneered by August Perret initially part of a group of modernists, coming to peak during the 60’s and 70’s during the Brutalist movement, translates directly as raw concrete, otherwise explained as architectural concrete left unfinished, exposing aspects of the pour visually in the finished product.
7. “And art exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone stony. The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects ‘unfamiliar,’ to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged. Art is a way of experiencing the artfulness of an object: the object is not important.” Viktor Shklovsky, “Art as Technique”, 1917.
8. Timothy Hyde, “Piles, Puddles, and other Architectural Irritants”, *Log 27* (2013): 73.
9. Mark Cousins, “The Ugly,” *AA Files 28* (1994): 61, quoted by Timothy Hyde in, “Piles, Puddles, and Other Architectural Irritants”, *Log 27* (2013): 73.
10. According to Aristotle, poetic language must appear strange and wonderful.



# HOW DO WE DEFINE ARCHITECTURAL RESEARCH TODAY?

