The Operative Criticism of Rem Koolhaas

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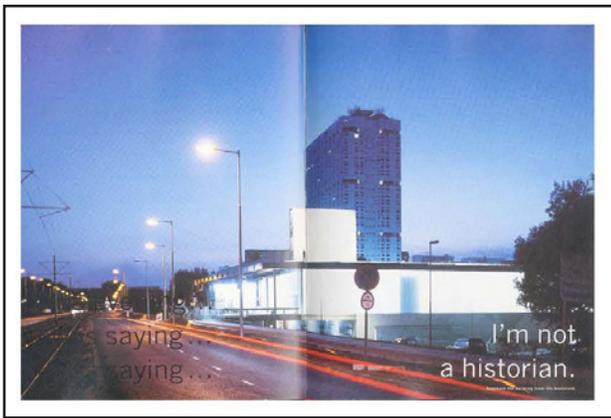
Figure 1: From *SMLXL, pp. 432-433*

INTRODUCTION

The evolution of criticality in the work of Rem Koolhaas/OMA can be fruitfully viewed in relation to Manfredo Tafuri's article "Toward a Critique of Architectural Ideology" (1969). This piece, revised and expanded in *Architecture and Utopia, Design and Capitalist Development* speaks to the possibility of an operative criticism that engages the ideology of capitalism. Tafuri's stated concerns with techniques of programming, analysis of defined economic sectors, and ideologies of consumption are shared by Koolhaas's work. The culture of congestion, irrationality of the skyscraper, the strategy of the void; Bigness, the Generic City, Junkspace; shopping, *Content* and the projects for Asia, Africa, and the Middle East: These engagements with the architectural and urban consequences of capitalist ideology in OMA work have accumulated, and taken

together set the parameters for criticality today. With these ongoing efforts, Koolhaas situates capitalism as today's new and sometimes terrifying sublime.

The relationship between the historian and the architect began in Manhattan at the Institute of Architecture and Urban Studies. It is personal, anecdotal, and historical, with evidence of subjects, citations, and images shared by their writings. Tafuri, who shaped the paradigm of criticality operating today, formulated his position by combining terms from art, language, and psychology. Koolhaas precisely and purposefully relied on those terms used by Tafuri to create and implement retroaction—an ironic refutation of operative criticism negating Tafuri's position that modern architecture could not be critical due to economic conditions for the production of buildings.

Koolhaas has in fact been precisely and strategically engaged in an ongoing historical and ideological project since the seventies. His introduction to the discourse on architecture's taste for power occurred during his studies at Cornell University, when he "became friends" with Michel Foucault.[1] A concern with the ideological function of architecture rests at the foundation of projects spanning from Exodus, or the Voluntary Prisoners of Architecture (1972) and Study for the Renovation of a Panopticon Prison (Netherlands, Arnhem, 1980) to CCTV Headquarters (Beijing, 2002-2010). From the outset, Koolhaas demonstrates an ethic founded upon skepticism of totalizing concepts and orthodox habits of mind. Recently, he has taken the notion of criticality to an extreme by resisting critical resistance in a kind of meta-criticality.[2]

The thesis is that the historian's end point is for the Dutch architect only the beginning. The objective is to establish a framework for assessing the stakes in Koolhaas's "operative criticism" and in the process to enable a reading of ongoing OMA work as a model for contemporary critical practice. Additionally, the examination of the contradictions and tensions within modern architecture begun by Tafuri may be helpful for understanding the field of global practice today. It is arguably essential in the context of the complex ethical issues raised by technological developments and environmental concerns now globally accepted, part of architects' search for activities to reinforce their social significance.

BEING CRITICAL

At the symposium held at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 2000 that revived pragmatist philosophy for architecture, philosopher John Rajchman asked architects to rethink criticality. The question is " how to see and to conceive new forces that exceed and problematize assumptions that normally function as transcendental. It becomes a question of how, in the sense of a priori or transcendental conditions…we may yet 'invent ourselves' and our worlds."[3] Rajchman recalls writing on the sublime work in modern art and literature that transgresses the limits of discourse. For Jean-François Lyotard, writing on the pictorial avant-garde of the sixties, the sublime is that which breaches limits in order to probe the assumptions and conditions of art. Its formula is "to represent the unrepresentable" of modern experience.[4] This sublime was neither nostalgic nor romantic; it belonged not to the (politically-engaged) hero but to the artist. As such, the sublime is a counter-concept to affirmative culture.

Koolhaas inhabits and fosters discourse on the contradictions, limits, and extremes of architectural practice. (His sometimes-bizarre intellectual itineraries owe much to Surrealism.) As builder and thinker, designer and developer (in Lille), cult figure and avant-garde academic researcher (at Harvard), he explores the ability of the architect to affect change. Koolhaas articulates his perceptions of the profession and his place in it. Clearly, he feels the weight of professional limits. In reacting to them he buys into the model of architecture as critique and reiterates those limits in other forms.

OMA work is scene of a radical questioning of modernism. The notion of "modern architecture" is distorted, pushed to its limits (much like the Baroque exaggeration of Renaissance convention and following Dali's paranoid-critical deformations).

A part of Koolhaas's style is the ability to resist any critical approach that does not take his persona into account as an avenue for approaching the work. (Authors easily find proof for the trivialization of critical concerns in the neutral position ascribed to and voiced by the architect.) The shift of emphasis away from the work onto the act of its making and ultimately onto its maker had political ramifications for Tafuri, who argued that any speculation by practitioners concerning what architecture should be was merely a justification of their own work. Tafuri considered the building itself as a symbolic, aesthetic act that, since the early modern movement, would always fail to resolve its contradictions. Koolhaas, instead, seeks to enunciate the shifting parameters of what such a practice would entail in various contexts today. His buildings concretize specific moments in time and place, rather than one singular position in a period when modernism's unity of thought is replaced by postmodern subjectivity.

CRITICAL CAPITAL

For Tafuri, influenced by Marxism and the political climate of the 1960s and 1970s, architecture since the Enlightenment was an ideological instrument of social, political, and economic realities contradicting the utopian aims of the architect. Spanning from Piranesi to the neo-avant-gardes, history demonstrated the futility of architects' aspirations to shape the future or change social conditions:

> "It is hardly worth mentioning here that, in a capitalistic system, there is no break between production, distribution and consumption. All the intellectual anti-consumer utopias that seek to redress the ethical 'distortions' of the technological world by modifying the system of production or the channels of distribution only reveal the complete inadequacy of their theories in the face of the actual structure of the capital economic cycle."[5]

That is, architecture can only exist within the "natural" order of capitalist development. Architects'

contribution to making space could occur only within political and economic systems. From this diagnosis, Tafuri suggests critical engagement with architecture in terms of its production: "Once the true unity of the production cycle has been identified in the city, the only task the architect can have is to organize that cycle."[6] The possibility for critique is twofold, necessitating first the demystification of the systems supporting the discipline: "Reflection of architecture, as a critique of the concrete ideology 'realized' by architecture itself, can only push further, and strive for a specifically concrete dimension in which the systematic destruction of the mythologies sustaining its development is only one of the objectives."[7] (Koolhaas actively engages in the destruction of mythologies by taking on subjects that are rejected or overlooked, including shopping and urbanism in Africa, and seeking to identify their potentials.[8])

Tafuri continues,

> "From the criticism of ideology it is necessary to pass on to the analysis of techniques of programming and of the ways in which these techniques affect the vital relationships of production. For those anxiously seeking an operative criticism, I can only respond with an invitation to transform themselves into analysts of some precisely defined economic sector, each with an eye fixed on bringing together capitalist development and the processes of reorganization…"[9]

He concludes, "This is why the ideology of consumption, far from constituting an isolated or successive moment of the organization of production, must be offered to the public as the ideology of the correct use of the city."[10]

Techniques of programming, analysis of defined economic sectors, and the ideology of consumption--these are concerns found in OMA work. On program, Tafuri called for "The need for increasing integration of formal elaboration into the cycle of production"[11] This aspect is located in Fredric Jameson's summary of Tafuri's method:

> "The premise is that, at least in this society (under capitalism), an individual building will always stand in contradiction with its urban context and also with its social function. The interesting buildings are those that try to resolve those contradictions through more or less ingenious formal and stylistic innovations.

The resolutions are necessarily failures, because they remain in an aesthetic realm that is disjoined from the social one from which such contradictions spring; and also because social or systemic change would have to be total rather than piecemeal. So Tafuri's analyses tend to be a litany of failures, and the 'imaginary resolutions' are often described at a high level of abstraction, giving the picture of an interplay of 'isms' or disembodied styles, which it left to the reader to restore to concrete perception."[12]

For Jameson, Tafuri's analysis is abstract. He states that Koolhaas's activity concretizes Tafuri's abstract thought. That is, Koolhaas takes up where Tafuri left off.[13] OMA work integrates the formal with the social through the expansion of the modernist doctrine of function not through form but through program. Koolhaas discovered the potential of program to shape the social realm early in his career. Manhattan's skyscraper and grid, believed to have evolved from the optimization of land, building process, and cost, were actually sites of programmatic invention and fantasy that fostered complexity and difference. *City of the Captive Globe* (1972) encapsulates the idea of a place where different ideologies could coexist with no pretense of being universal.

The Manhattan projects are typological readings of program taken from a surrealist perspective. Strategies driving later projects include the infiltration of the private realm with a public route and the conception of program in dynamic fields or bands. Another approach appropriates existing structures and superimposes onto them multiple programs in a series of layers each with its own logic. In a significant recent development, program is deployed to *generate* form from the analysis of individual and group experience.

The redefinition of the social tasks taken on by classical (heroic) modernism, taken on by OMA through the amplification of the functional imagination, occurs today in a time when media technologies increasingly blur the boundaries between public and private, real and virtual, and as patterns of use and programmatic territories are destabilized. The form-giving potential of program is to be distinguished from the event spaces of Bernard Tschumi and the everyday urbanism of Margaret Crawford, which specify the activity not

Fig. 2: Left, Aldo Rossi, *L'architecture assassinée*, 1975 (Image from the cover of *Architecture and Utopia;* Right, Madelon Vriesendorp, *Dream of Liberty*, 1976, in *Lotus* 11 (1976)

Fig. 3: Left, René Magritte, *La Philosophie dans le boudoir*, frontispiece to Manfredo Tafuri, "L'Architecture dans le boudoir," *Oppositions* 3 (1974); Right, Image from Rem Koolhaas, "The Architect's Ball—A Vignette, 1931," *Oppositions* 3 (1974).

the container. OMA buildings are works on the contemporary notion of program and signs. As such, they have potential to hybridize the categories of duck and decorated shed.[14]

OPERATIVE CRITICISM

The controversial author of *Theories and History of Architecture* (1968) arrived to teach at the Institute in 1976, having declared the "eclipse of history," the "crisis of the object," and the death of modern architecture. He had coined the term "operative criticism" in reaction to architects who used history to justify their work. Operative criticism severed the connection between architectural thought--history, theory, criticism--and the production of buildings. In his eyes, the architect could not be a thinker, since his capacity to affect change was limited to "the moment in which he remains anchored to his little discipline: questions of design." Only the historian who was autonomous, who did not speak in support of a particular architecture, could create new possibilities for contributing to real change.

It is not unlikely that Koolhaas, in the process of establishing his architectural identity saw the established, influential historian as an intimidation and a provocation. The young research fellow wanted to distinguish himself but was uncertain about where he stood. He doubted Marxism, yet he and the Italian historian were both Europeans joined by their interest in America. Koolhaas would refute Tafuri's apocalyptic view in *Delirious*

New York, elaborating upon the infinite field of potential for modern architecture that was Manhattan between 1890 and 1940. His rejoinder to operative criticism was retroaction, a method in which an event is registered only through a later occurrence that recodes it. Retroaction enabled him to view Manhattan as a "catalogue of models and precedents: all the desirable elements that exist scattered through the Old World finally assembled in a single place."[15] It positioned the author as a thinker who declared that city "the twentieth century's Rosetta Stone" and modern architecture its "new religion." This attitude, taken at a time when the city of New York was plagued by controversy and scandal, an urgent situation due to high unemployment, financial crisis, and inadequate housing, contrasts with Tafuri's writing on the problem of New York architects not building.[16]

Tafuri viewed the history of modern architecture as a mythology stemming from the refusal of the modern movement to historicize its own existence. Operative criticism was his term for the incorrect use of history by those who read the past in order to predict the future and in the process reproduced erroneously established values. Operative criticism "accepts the current myths, immerses itself in them, and evaluates architectural production by the yardstick of the objectives that have been achieved but that it proposed itself."[17] Early historians of modern architecture, e.g., Leonardo Benevelo, Bruno Zevi, and Siegfried Giedeon, used the past to validate the activities of architects in the present. This history "in the service of architecture"

was an inaccurate. Practices (such as Archigram) justified their position on a vision of the past based on the reduction of history to popular myths. Contemporary architects who based their work on these histories and practices created new myths. The critic's task was to demystify these procedures. (Tafuri made the distinction between criticism as historical demystification and as political activity.)

Koolhaas also considered the canonical histories of modern architecture to be mythologies. He believed that postmodern references to history were superficial, opposing both the contextualism of Colin Rowe and the historicism of Leon Krier. In *Delirious New York* Koolhaas formulated the history of Manhattan as a fiction, revealed by the unconscious mind and constructed from an amalgam of historical fragments set in new combinations. He called his technique of systematized assemblage retroaction, a method allowing him to dispose of the pasts established by the objectifying scholarship of architectural history--"the fact that all facts, ingredients, phenomena, etc. of the world have been categorized and catalogued, that the definitive stock of the world has been taken."[18] Retroaction "ties the loose ends left by the rationalism of the Enlightenment finally together," enabling him to negotiate between his use of history and the autonomy required by his desire to be modern.[19] It was "conceptual recycling" that "proposes to destroy ... the definitive catalogue, to short-circuit all existing categorizations, to make a fresh start-- as if the world can be reshuffled like a pack of cards whose original sequence is a disappointment."[20]

Tafuri invoked anthropomorphism to support his claim for modern architecture as a language whose content, or interior, was void, just a series of ideological corpses. His 1974 article entitled "L'Architecture dans le boudoir" is a reference to René Magritte›s Surrealist painting *La Philosophie dans le boudoir* showing an animated dress and pair of shoes. The architect's only remaining task was to assemble the exterior marks or visual aspects of that language into assemblages that could invoke only loss of meaning:

> "He who wishes to make architecture speak is thus forced to resort to materials devoid of all meaning; he is forced to reduce to degree zero every ideology, every dream of social function, every utopian residue. In his hands, the elements of the modern architectural tradition are

all at once reduced to enigmatic fragments--to mute signals of a language whose code has been lost."[21]

In contrast to the notion of modern architecture as a series of ideological corpses, Koolhaas's article that appeared in *Oppositions* alongside Tafuri's establishes Manhattan as a living form of modern architecture. "The Architects Ball—A Vignette, 1931" shows a photograph of New York's architects dressed up as the skyscrapers they built. For Koolhaas, the celebration is didactic: "This ceremony is Manhattan's counterpart of the CIAM Congress on the other side of the Atlantic."[22]

Yet Koolhaas's technique, retroaction, echoes Tafuri's method of architectural criticism (founded on the "surreal play of tensions between the universe of signs and the domain of the real.") Koolhaas uses Dali's paranoid-critical method, a part of the tradition of modern art to which Tafuri refers when he writes:

> "To work with leftover material, with the garbage and throwaways of our daily and commonplace existence, is an integral aspect of the tradition of modern art as if it were a magic reversal of the informal into things of quality through which the artist comes to terms with the world of objects. No wonder then that if the most heartfelt condition today is that of wishing to salvage values pertinent to architecture, the only means is to employ 'war surplus' materials, that is, to employ what has been discarded on the battlefield after the defeat of the Modern Movement."[23]

Over a decade later, Koolhaas would echo Tafuri— in an interview, speaking of a "magic reversal," he invokes the myth of King Midas, who had the power to turn everything he touched into gold:

> "Our intentions could be synthesized in how to turn all that garbage of the present system to our advantage. A kind of democratic King Midas: Try to find the concept through which the worthless turns into something, where even the sublime is not unthinkable."[24]

Tafuri was an important force in architectural discourse. He once referred to Koolhaas's work as "cynical play."[25] He did not recognize the retroactive manifesto that was also a mythological history and a part of the poetic tradition of language that enacted

operative criticism and called it retroaction. The allegory "Story of the Pool" in *Delirious New York* captures the dynamic motivating Koolhaas, the way he used the same tools of language, art, and history to steer Tafuri's discourse in the opposite direction to subvert his position:

"Arrival of the Floating Pool: After 40 years of crossing the Atlantic, the architects/ lifeguards reach their destination. But they hardly notice it: due to the particular form of locomotion of the pool—its reaction to their own displacement in the water—they have to swim toward what they want to get away from and away from where they want to go."[26]

ENDNOTES

1.   Author interview with Rem Koolhaas. Koolhaas had a fair amount of intimacy with French thought by virtue of being in America and England in the 1970s. Hubert Damisch, French art historian at the Cornell Society for the Humanities, introduced him to Foucault, whose 1972 lecture in Ithaca was his second in the US. Founded at Cornell in 1971, *Diacritics* was one of the first academic journals to bring continental theory to the US.
2.   "The problem with the prevailing discourse of architectural criticism is [the] inability to recognize there is in the deepest motivations of architecture something that cannot be critical." Rem Koolhaas, in Beth Kapusta, *The Canadian Architect Magazine* 39 (1994), 10. Cited in George Baird, "'Criticality' and its Discontents," *Harvard Design Magazine* 21 (2004/2005) and Hal Foster, *Design and Crime and other diatribes* (London: Verso, 2002), 61.
3.   See also John Rajchman, "Thinking Big, John Rajchman talks with Rem Koolhaas," *Artforum* 33:4 (12/1994): 44-55, 96, 99, 102, 105
4.   Jean-Francois Lyotard, "Representing the Unrepresentable: The Postmodern Sublime," *Artforum* (1982); *The Postmodern Explained: Correspondence 1982-1985* (University of Minnesota Press, 1992); "The Sublime and the Avant-Garde," in *The Lyotard Reader*, ed. Andrew Benjamin (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), 196-211
5.   Manfredo Tafuri, "Design and Technological Utopia," in Emilio Ambasz, *Italy: The New Domestic Landscape. Achievements and Problems of Italian Design* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1972), 388-404
6.   Manfredo Tafuri, "Toward a Critique of Architectural Ideology," in *Architectural Theory since 1968*, K. Michael Hayes, ed. (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1989), 22
7.   Ibid, 33
8.   As does Robert Venturi, for whom Main Street is "almost alright."
9.   Manfredo Tafuri, *Architecture and Utopia: Design and Capitalist Development* (Cambridge, The MIT Press, 1976), xi
10.   Ibid, 83
11.   Manfredo Tafuri, "Toward a Critique of Architectural Ideology," in *Architectural Theory since 1968*, K. Michael Hayes, ed. (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1989), 31
12.   Fredric Jameson, *The Cultural Turn, Selected Writings on the Postmodern*, 1983-1988 (New York: Verso, 1998), 177
13.   "The crucial operation is the establishment of a mediation capable of translation in either direction: able to function as a characterization of the economic determinants of this construction within the city fully as much as it can offer directions for aesthetic analysis and cultural interpretation." Ibid, 182
14.   Peter Eisenman distinguishes these designations as representational and rhetorical aspects of architecture. Peter Eisenman, "Architecture and the Problem of the Rhetorical Figure (1987), in *Theorizing a New Agenda for Architecture, An Anthology of Architectural Theory 1965-1995,* Kate Nesbitt, ed., (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1996), 176-181
15.   Ibid, 7
16.   Tafuri addressed himself to American architecture and especially criticized the activity in New York centered on the Institute. See Manfredo Tafuri, "Les Cendres de Jefferson," *L'Architecture d'aujourdhui* 186 (1976), 53-58. Manhattan was a subject for the Swiss journal *Archithèse,* which devoted two issues on the history of Manhattan that treated the contribution of New York to the myth of the European avant-garde. This subject is part of *Delirious New York.*
17.   Manfredo Tafuri, *Theories and History of Architecture* (London: Granada Publishing, Ltd., 1980)
18.   Ibid, 241
19.   On the evocation of aura in *Delirious New York*, see Hubert Damisch, *Skyline: The Narcissistic City* (1996, Stanford University Press, 2001). The rebuilding of the Waldorf Hotel produced the "simultaneous existence on a single location at a single point in time of a number of other buildings... [This was] the Manhattanist strategy for the production of vicarious history, 'age' and respectability." *Delirious New York* (1978, New York: Monacelli Press, 1994), 111
20.   Ibid, 243, 238, 241
21.   Manfredo Tafuri, "L'Architecture dans le Boudoir," *Oppositions* 3 (1974): 48.
22.   Rem Koolhaas, "The Architect's Ball—A Vignette, 1931," *Oppositions* 3 (1974), 91-96.
23.   Ibid, 38.
24.   Rem Koolhaas, in Alejandro Zaera-Polo, "Finding Freedoms: Conversations with Rem Koolhaas," *El Croquis* 53, vol. 11 (1992), 19
25.   Manfredo Tafuri, The *Sphere and the Labyrinth*, *Avant-Gardes and Architecture from Piranesi to the 1970s*, trans. Pellegrino d'Acierno and Robert Connelly (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1987), 293
26.   Rem Koolhaas, *Delirious New York: A Retroactive Manifesto for Manhattan* (1978; New York: Monacelli Press, 1994)