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“EXPERIENCING ABSENCE: Eisenman and Derrida, Benjamin and Schwitters”
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I.

He wants architecture to stand still and be what he assumes it appropriately should be in order that philosophy can be free to move and speculate. In other words, that architecture is real, is grounded, is solid, doesn't move around - is precisely what Jacques wants. And so when I made the first crack at a project we were doing together - which was a public garden in Paris - he said things to me that filled me with horror like, “How can it be a garden without plants?” or “Where are the trees?” or “Where are the benches for people to sit on?” This is what you philosophers want, you want to know where the benches are...

Peter Eisenman, in conversation about his collaboration with Jacques Derrida, at the ACSA Forum “Architecture and Deconstruction”, Chicago 1987¹

A certain evinced anti-humanism distinguishes the emerging orthodoxy in architectural theory. While I have no problems with a theory of subjectivity which is not humanist, or which stands in critique of humanist concepts of the subject, I find statements such as Eisenman's complaints about Jacques Derrida bizarre. To speak of sitting, of shade, of genre; is not necessarily to assume the existence of some general space of correspondence between things architectural and things human. I do not believe that it can be shown that an account of the experience of buildings is impossible because of a history of relatively diverse theories of anthropomorphism with relatively similar metaphysical pretensions. I cannot imagine, and Eisenman's projects are no help here, what architecture which eschewed predicating an experience of itself would be like. But such an argument about how to think of the experience of buildings without supposing a nature of such experiences has not really been made. The metaphorical death of a concept, the humanist body, has been reified, historicized as the symptom of our contemporaneity. We already live with its ghost, the absence of which can be felt in any “theoretical” architectural project as a moment of reversed apotheosis.

¹ Quoted in Ann Bergren, “Architecture, Gender, Philosophy”, *Strategies in Architectural Thinking*, ed J. Whiteman et al, MIT, 1992, pp 8-47, p 10.

Eisenman's criticisms of Derrida over their collaboration in the design of a garden at the Parc de la Villette in Paris² won him a response in the form of "A Letter to Peter Eisenman" published in *Assemblage* in 1990.³ Derrida does not mention (nor retract) his demand for "benches for people to sit on", but sets out to show Eisenman the sorts of problems he encounters by insisting on the erasure of these descriptions of things people might want, might do, of the places they might find themselves. He asks Eisenman what he thinks of God, of glass, of homelessness, of space travel and telephones. Although the letter is a rather fanciful, extravagant and digressive censure, it rewards a serious reading. I think it useful to read Derrida's letter as a general rebuke to the facile anti-humanist position taken by some current architectural theory and in particular the failure to understand the double bind involved in critiques directed at the human experience of building as such. In the little opera of critical acclaim for buildings supposed to have been designed to deconstruct the subject, it seems to have been irresistible to give a significance, even a presence, to absence. So it is a rich moment when Derrida, says "that you [Eisenman] believe in it, absence, too much".⁴ Derrida accedes to Eisenman's opposition to a concept of experience as a primordial ground for architecture, but insists that the architect should nevertheless be able to answer the question; "What does architecture (and primarily your architecture) have to see and do with experience..."⁵ Eisenman cannot do this because he is unable to conceive experience except as a unified field opposed to thought and knowledge. Interspersed with Derrida's questions, apologies, and insults are lengthy quotes from Walter Benjamin.⁶ These function to make the letter cohere, as Benjamin has investigated most of the questions Derrida asks. Clearly Derrida feels that Eisenman should read some Benjamin. In the decades before World War II Benjamin wrote of modernist art as the sort of programmatic shift in the concept of subjectivity which Eisenman claims now to be effecting as its de-construction.

My essay is not intended as a critique of Eisenman's buildings or writings, but rather attempts to produce from Derrida's witty diatribe a working agenda for thinking about the experiences of architecture. In first section I merely attempt to map a out what it might mean for Eisenman to "believe in absence too much", and why it is in many ways convenient and prestigious, rather than eccentric and critical, to have difficulties with presence in architecture.

² The project has been published by Eisenman as a special issue of *A+U*, titled *Peter Eisenman*, 1988. Derrida's early and more positive musings on the project are published as "Why Peter Eisenman Writes Such Good Books", in M. Diani, and C. Ingraham (ed.s), *Restructuring Architectural Theory*, Evanston: Northwestern U P, 1989. It is not my intention, nor am I in a position, to describe the actual discourse between Derrida and Eisenman. Jeffrey Kipnis gives a description in his "Twisting the Separatrix/", *Assemblage*, 14, 1991, pp30-61.

³ Jacques Derrida, "A Letter to Peter Eisenman", *Assemblage*, 12, 1990, pp7-13.

⁴ Derrida, "A Letter to Peter Eisenman", p7.

⁵ Derrida, "A Letter to Peter Eisenman". p 13, my emphasis.

⁶ Derrida quotes from *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, [London: New Left Books, 1977], and an untranslated essay hereafter referred to as "Experience and Poverty" [Walter Benjamin, "Erfahrung und Armut" *Gesammelte Schriften*, Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1972-. II.1 pp 213-219]. Both Julian Roberts and John McCole, give a crucial role to this essay in explicating Benjamin's thought on technique. [Julian Roberts, *Walter Benjamin*, London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1982, p185 and 181-192 passim. John McCole, *Walter Benjamin: The Antinomies of Tradition*, Ithaca and London: Cornell U P, 1993, p1, p189.]

Derrida suggests that we should be interested in Benjamin because of his sophisticated concepts of experience, and further implies that this is because of the historiographic constraints which high modernism continues to put on our present thinking in architecture. At the same time that Benjamin was writing on experience in the modern city and in art, Kurt Schwitters was experimenting with these issues with his Merzbau, or collage house. The Merzbau is something of a bravura exercise of the experience of alterity, the signification of absences, and the critique of constructivism. In the second section I will use themes from Benjamin's writing to set up a description of Schwitter's Merzbau as an exemplar of a spatial work with a critical relation to the field of the experiential and in danger of being recovered as a progenitor of "deconstructivism". In momentarily connecting Benjamin and Schwitters my aim is to follow Derrida's hint, which I take to be: that sophisticated, and critical concepts of experience were already implicit in the historical avant-gardes' formal manipulations and cannot therefore be traduced by the appropriative practices of some present "avant-garde" moment. Thus the Merzbau offers some useful parallels to the historico-critical project of "deconstructivism" in architecture.

II. Experiencing the Theory of the Absent Subject

Humanism supposes a normative, or even destined subjectivity which is coextensive with the self, which we share in the same way in which we share the human form. A post-humanist view is on the contrary that the subjectivities in which we participate are constructed culturally, are plural, and are varyingly specialised. Indeed analysis can show that it is in our apprehension of our bodies in culturally mediated life experiences that we are most aware and most under the power of the social constraints on the formation of selfhood.⁷ The body is thus not the inviolate base from which we engage in culture, but rather the surface on which social and cultural apparatuses inscribe the self. The conceptual problems of a humanism are also linked to its common ideological construction in foundationalist accounts of culture. This might lead to; ethnocentrism, a mystification of technical knowledges, and the production of a politically quietened culture of introspection.

A post-humanist position has been taken up in architecture and the visual arts with a certain amount of excitement. It suggests novel modes of apperception and a new space for claims to an avant-grade position. Equally current theory has prompted a sort of revisionist account of cultural history which would read art's fetishistic relation to the body as percipient deconstruction of humanism. Thus in architecture, anthropomorphism is becoming interesting again, not as a theory of fit between the environment and human needs, but rather as an insistence on the materiality of the body, which exceeds and stands in critique of such humanist notions.⁸ In terms of the discipline of architecture the problem with humanism is that the design

⁷ See for instance Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, Vol 1-3, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984-.

⁸ See for example Diana Agrest, "Architecture from Without: Body Logic Sex", in *Architecture from Without: Theoretical Framings for a Critical Practice*, Cambridge Mass and London: MIT, 1991, pp173-198.

of buildings comes to be seen as a semanticizing analogue of a general human condition, and not an autonomous sphere of praxis. Human experience might then be radically generalized and naturalized by architecture and architectural works might be reduced to being symptomatic instances of an transcendent general architecturalness, the partner of an essential humanity.

Up to this point the consequences of post-humanist thought in architecture seem entirely useful. A withdrawal from ideological roles has been planned, an interesting new phase of historical revisionism is opening, and an agenda for investigating a materialist account of experience is suggested. However, and as Derrida points out, a particular recursion threatens. Eisenman “believes too much in absence”. It has become unfashionable to discuss a design as the predication of phenomenal events, in case this might be seen to posit a humanist reciprocity of the intention of an architect and an ideal experience of the resultant building. To evince a disinterest in whether one can sit in the sun is to somehow helpful in giving the gloss of a theoretical sophistication. The pleasures of a deconstructive architecture are said to be “the pleasures of absence”.⁹ This could be understood as the result of moving from a refusal of the concept of a common and unitary subjectivity, to making that refusal a figure; constructing absence as the shibboleth of an architectural cliché.

The value put on absence has been widely and falsely construed as having the support of Derrida’s philosophical deconstruction of the speech/writing couplet. Derrida showed (among other things) that the value put on the presentness of speech only has significance in comparison to its lack in writing. Writing, although viewed as necessary but pernicious supplement to speech, thus has a certain logical priority.¹⁰ That is; speech can be described as writing *plus* presence. Derrida’s procedure shows that writing and speech, although an apparent opposition of concepts are in fact a split description of a single thing. Now there are many sorts of opposition in architecture which do or could deconstruct in this way. Eisenman mentions structure and ornament, a central knot in architectural thinking familiar to thinkers as diverse as Ruskin and Alberti. My essay here is perhaps about another, the opposition of knowledge to experience, a version of the theoretical/empirical couplet, within which architects have rehearsed every “theory” from geometry to semiotics, on the question of whether one could feel it in a building. But the short story of deconstruction in architecture is that it has been a lineal successor to the architectural “left” of the seventies. This is because the presence/absence opposition *is like* the familiar opposition of structuralist-quasi-marxist-rationalist to the communitarian-quasi-phenomenological-nostalgic “right”. In short, good, theoretical architecture is like writing, a cool distant apparatus of iteration, clean of intention and reception. Now to analyse an conceptual

⁹ Charles Jencks gives the title “The Pleasures of Absence” to his essay on deconstructivist architecture in his attempt to appropriate it into his classification of current trends and factions. *Deconstruction: Ominibus Volume*, eds Andreas Papadakis et al, London: Academy, 1989, pp 119-131.

¹⁰ Jacques Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena: And Other Essays on Husserl’s Theory of Signs*, Evanston: Northwestern U P, 1973, and *Of Grammatology*, Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins U P, 1974.

antimony and then chose one side as the valued position from which to engage in political struggle is clearly nonsense, and so is deconstruction in architecture as I have described it thus far.

However, the function of absence as a shibboleth is not enough to explain its importance in the discourse. There are another set of factors which have little to do with deconstruction and a lot to do with the pre-existing significances of absence and the obligation of any discourse claiming a lineage in the avant-gardes to have an historiographic mode.¹¹ To explain this it is first necessary to insist that deconstruction in architecture posits an *experience* of absence. That is; the absence of a concept of the humanist subject is not supposed to lead to an architecture which is liberated to some yet to be determined end, but rather to an architecture in which the absence of humanist concepts of the subject can be palpably experienced. Following the commonly held but rarely argued idea that architectural works can have a critical function, many architects want the refusal of humanistic grounds for architecture, to be architecture, to be built, and finally experienced. About this experience of absence I will then go on to say: (a) that it is inadequately distinguished from the sublime; (b) that such experiences of absence are a familiar trope of apotheosis in a humanist architecture of presence (as anyone who read their Derrida would expect); and that (c) the experience of an absence which is not a call to presence is one way in which the modernist avant-gardes claimed to have succeeded the humanist tradition.

Let us cast an example of how one might experience absence from Eisenman's design for the Bio-Centrum Frankfurt-am-Main. The parti of the building is developed from a layered intersection of various site lines and a diagram of the structure of DNA.¹² The architecture consists in the interplay of intersecting systems of different kinds; geometric, territorial, programmatic, iconographic, structural. No presuppositions are made about a privileged spatio-temporal location at which an embodied mind will perceive an order of systems. There is supposed to be no way, or no profit, in reflecting on one's experience, there on the concourse of the research institute because this has deconstructed by one's knowledge of its origins in an diagram which, although a representation of fundamental facts of human existence, cannot itself be experienced. Thus our experience of the deconstructivist building is a sort of critical paradox which is supposed to somehow undo the paradoxical account of human presence in architectural theory as we have inherited it. According to Eisenman, his work then leaves "deconstructed" the traditional architectural dichotomies of structure and decoration, abstraction and figuration, figure and ground, form and function, those paired terms which swung about the centre of the question of the possibility of our presence before them.¹³ When such oppositions have become

¹¹ This obligation is explained well by Tafuri when he emphasises the paradoxes of an architecture which defines itself as the heir to the Moderns who founded their thought on a transcending of history. See Manfredo Tafuri, *History and Theories of Architecture*, NY: Harper and Row, 1980, p64 and passim.

¹² Peter Eisenman, "Bio-Centrum Frankfurt-am-Main", *Deconstruction: Omnibus*, p159-161.

¹³ Peter Eisenman. "The Blue Line Text". *Deconstruction: Omnibus*, p151.

empty and indifferent to any “us” which one might previously have believed had owned, used, or appreciated them, Eisenman claims that architecture can begin an exploration of the “between” of these categories.

If a building does not actively refer to: need or programme; or, enculturated expectations of the meaning of building elements; if in building the architect does not insist on a privileged route or hierarchy of spaces in which a sequence of experience will render the building intelligible; or any explicit programme of perception of size and direction: then clearly this would tend to foreground the self-referential and conceptually synthetic aspects of architecture and not actually encourage speculation about natural human conditions and ultimate foundations for architecture. But in the rhetoric of deconstruction experiential categories and techniques are not merely not employed, they are excluded in a polemic. Eisenman tells a story about a scientist client who dares him to make in a building a complete paradigm shift, a conceptual advance in architectural knowledge which will “challenge man’s very occupation of space”¹⁴ Eisenman does not consider theories of subjectivity as a supposition or guide in the making of architecture, but rather as the some lesson or parable which can be transmitted in the experience of his work. Experience is demonstrably reduced, and “theory” elevated to the category of an object of experience. Eisenman’s situation reminds us of that of Brunelleschi who somehow needed to be convinced of the theory of perspective, beyond its evident success in the depiction of depths. Brunelleschi’s pin-hole and mirror device is not required to prove the usefulness of perspective but to construct it as indubitably true, to experience its truth. Eisenman is not concerned with what architecture might be if lent the tools of more sophisticated concepts of human subjectivity. Rather his architecture is a device to lend post-structuralist architectural theory, which is, or ought to be, provisional, critical and polysemic, an apodictic character.

In any case what is new in this? Much architecture since the eighteenth century has set out, under the themes of the rational and the romantic sublime, to exceed the anthropomorphic. There is a *prima facie* case for seeing deconstruction in architecture as a redeployment of the aesthetics of the sublime, the traditional position opposing humanism. If humanism is a doctrine of a necessary formal likeness between the world and the human body, we could say that, historically, there has long been an anti-humanist aesthetic in the sublime: either in the confrontation with a disembodied reason; or, in explicit attempts to effect the human sensorium without claiming any likeness for it. (Thus we could, for example, match Eisenman with Ledoux and Libeskind with Lequeu.¹⁵) Deconstruction in architecture opposes the design of buildings as a prediction of experiences which might be had in them with an concept of architecture as a construction in thought which is arbitrary except in regard to its own conceptual coherence. Rationalism and formalism have *always* tended towards the sublime. Jean-François Lyotard’s

¹⁴ Peter Eisenman, “En Terror Firma: In Trails of Grottextes”, *Deconstruction: Ominibus*, pp152-3.

¹⁵ Daniel Libeskind, a contemporary architect also collected in the Deconstructivist exhibition, Claude-Nicholas Ledoux 1736-1806, Jean Jaques Lequeu 1757-after 1825.

account of the postmodern sublime would encompass much of deconstruction in architecture. In a definition of the sublime taken from Edmund Burke, Lyotard explains the sublime as the end to threat, or essentially in the end itself, in the pre-reflexive *now* where time and the succession of moments collapse onto one another.¹⁶ And it is surely this transcendence of presence on which Eisenman plays, just as Lyotard claims the avant-garde is locked into playing, this is the end to culture, architecture will never again give you what you want, admire its awesome self-absorption. If the sublime is that appreciable thrust toward the transcendence of all meaning, which had in the past the useful property of freeing art from mimesis in the imitation of God's productivity, we could define deconstruction as a new sublime, an irreligious sublime that offered no redemption, a reversed sublime that offered only doctrine. Perhaps the deconstructive architects have less in common with Derrida's attempt to end metaphysics than with the gnostics who believed that the absence of good in the world attested to the presence of an evil creator. The reason that absence is required to be papable then because it is really alterity, and post-humanist theories of subjectivity are merely a cloak for the figure of the inhuman.¹⁷

However, there is a further felicity in playing on absence which is that as well as being a mode of the sublime it is, dialectically, an opening or closing trope in humanist discourse. Absence is a common theme in those theoretical reflections which have organised themselves around stories of origin and an aesthetics of an ultimate telos, where the thing absent is self knowledge, or God's knowledge, of what it is to be human. The experience of a certain absence, loss, or intangibility is thus the necessary starting point of a humanism, which traditionally then proceeds to find what has been lost in the ever present dimensions and form of the human body: in an anthropometrics and a consequent anthropomorphics.¹⁸

When Loos offers to say what architecture is he gives an embracing and demanding version of the loss and supplement motif. "If we find a mound in the forest, six foot long and three foot wide, formed into a pyramid shape by a shovel, we become serious and something within us says, "Someone lies buried here." This is architecture."¹⁹ As I trip on Loos' grave I pass from the experience of identity between my body and the dimensions of the grave mound, to a state of reflection. Someone lies buried here. I did not make this grave. Someone who is not here has had me remember this death, this absence made present for me now. *Et in Arcadia ego*. According to Loos it is in the experience of the tomb that we know that there can be an

¹⁶ Jean-François Lyotard, "The Sublime and the Avant-garde", collected with other essays on sublime aesthetics in *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time*, Stanford U P, 1991, pp89-107.

¹⁷ Anthony Vidler has analysed this play between absence and alterity by deploying Freud's concept of the *unheimlich*. Anthony Vidler, *The Architectural Uncanny: Essays in the Modern Unhomely*, MIT 1992.

¹⁸ The template for this story of finding the body to fill a conceptual lack is that of Callimachus' check discovery of the Corinthian Order in a young woman's temporary headstone. See Joseph Rykwert in "On the Origin of the Corinthian Order" in J.Rykwert, *The Necessity of Artifice*, New York : Rizzoli, 1982..

¹⁹ Adolf Loos, "Architecture", in T. and C. Benton with D. Sharp (ed.s) *Form and Function: A source book for the History of Architecture and Design 1890-1939*, London, Granada, 1975, pp41-45, p 45.

architecture.²⁰ Thus for Loos architecture has its foundation, as Hegel thought, in the realm of symbolic expression in the cultic beginnings of art, in the monuments of the primitive world. We might re-find architecture in our day to day experience of anthropometric and anthropomorphic objects; doors, windows, stairs. But we find it as a tomb, a loss made present, a memory of our ancestors who, innocent of the concept of representation, did not distinguish the house from the temple. Architecture lies at the beginning of the story of the development of the human spirit. In the twentieth century architecture is only liminally present; in graves in forests, in monuments, statements of absence, of our distance from our origins. The grave story is told in the last words of an essay which is about refounding a modern building practice around the making and the use of buildings. Loos' article thus makes a succinct statement of what Eisenman claims to oppose: the idea that architecture has a nature determined by an original authority; and that this authority is signified in the anthropomorphic form of our artefacts, from windows to graves; and that we conceptualise architecture in response to the shock of our fit in it.

Eisenman begins his apology for his series of houses with a quote from the same article, "Architecture", by Loos.²¹ The quoted passage argues that the design of houses should not be considered art. Loos' point is that our reverence towards our origins and our wish to make architecture, should not confuse us about the functionalist thinking required to build comfortable houses within a particular social programme. Eisenman gives the quotation an ironic twist in arguing that houses must be made art to shatter the complacency of architecture. There is an explicit equation of absences here. For Loos, history demands that architects forgo art to build. For Eisenman art demands that architecture admit the loss of a social and political role. Eisenman manages in this sort of confusion of meta-discourse with argument to both honour and deface: the architecture canon; post-structuralist protocols about the rhetoric of origin; and Tafuri's bleak views on twentieth-century history.

Eisenman's most recent technique of "scaling" is supposed to cleans architecture of all anthropomorphic reference and qualities, indeed of corporeality through the interpolation of the forms of other projects at differing permutations of scales.²² Thus at the "Choral Work" (the garden in Parc la Villette which is the scene of the controversy which we are following) we trip, as it were, not on a dimension which we recognise like Loos' grave, not on some foundation or limit to the experience of architecture, but rather on Eisenman's earlier Cannareggio Project

20 And it is not only architecture which is explicated with this famous tag. Louis Marin shows how the metaphor of representation as death sets out the spatio-temporal axes of image making in his analysis Poussin's treatment of Et in Arcadia Ego. ("Towards a Theory of Reading in the Visual Arts: Poussin's Arcadian Shepherds". *Calligram: Essays in new art history form France*. Cambridge U P, 1988.)

21 Peter Eisenman, "Misreading" in Peter Eisenman, *Peter Eisenman Houses of Cards*. Oxford U P, 1987, p167.

22 This is the technique used in the "Choral Work" collaboration with Derrida at La Villette. A description of the technique can be found in Jeffrey Kipnis's documentation of the project, "Twisting the Separatrix", or in Ann Bergren's "Gender, Philosophy, Architecture", in *Strategies*. Bergren's article is of broader interest as she sets from Derrida's contribution to the project, work on "chora" in Plato, and bring this back to architectural questions with a timely reminder of persistence of gender markings in architecture.

transposed with Tshumi's plans for the park at various scales. Inserted into this auto-effecting system is the figure of a harp which is also a sieve, the figure of "chora" which Derrida drew, apparently in an attempt, clearly of limited success, to disturb the totalized composition. If we imagine visiting this garden after its completion where would be no way to connect our experience on the site to a passage of contemplation, in the way that Loos described. Rather in the conceptual mapping, deployment of prior knowledges, and deciphering of references which the garden requires, one could only experience the mutual incommensurability of the knowledge and experience of architecture.

Eisenman's play on absence contests the canon only to restate it and claim its authority. His is not so much a deconstruction of presence as an appropriation of the rhetoric of absence. Eisenman would hold that while there is no ground to be had in the presence of an architecture, we are nevertheless unable to escape the paradoxes of a certain pathological concept of presence, the consequence of a teleological anthropomorphism in western metaphysics. This diagnosis then comes to be treated as something like a ground. Thus Eisenman's work claims not to be based in an account of what architecture is, but in a necessary critique of what we have been obliged to think that it is.

Anthony Vidler claims a degree of historical necessity for Eisenman's position.²³ He sets out to show that Eisenman's destructive uses of the modern vocabulary are in a dialectic with mid-century progressive modernist call (by Gideon among others) for an authentic monumentalism, a civic symbolism, and they have as their final target the historical chains in which architecture is bound by Hegel's aesthetics. In Hegel, art has a historical and conceptual progression from the earliest symbolic forms, through representation, to a transcendence into spirit. Architecture is thus the first and founding art, the pyramid or monument, but also the art which waits, incapable of development, for history to end. Eisenman's work, particularly the burial and encrypting of the Romeo and Juliet castles and the "Choral Work", is architecture standing in critique of the monument. The Hegelian bind on architecture divides building into the useful and the monumental, into the dimensioned and the sublime, the authentic building which will emerge out of art at the end of history and the symbolical architecture which was the origin of art.

However, the opposition to Hegel is a form of monumentalism in itself, especially when as here, the form of the opposition is itself a citation of Bataille's and Derrida's work on Hegel.²⁴ I think in fact that Eisenman is in a more restricted economy and a more historical circuit; with figures such as Loos. Loos' Hegelianism; with his founding story of the grave mound, with his exhortation to work under the concept of building in the presence of needs rather than under

²³ Anthony Vidler, "Shifting Ground" *The Architectural Uncanny: Essays in the Modern Unhomely*, MIT, 1992, pp 117-146.

²⁴ See Georges Bataille, *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings 1927-1939*, Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1985, and Jacques Derrida, "The Pit and the Pyramid: An Introduction to Hegel's Semiology" in *Margins of Philosophy*, Brighton: Harvester, 1982, pp69-108. On Bataille's Hegelianism and the role of architectural metaphors see Denis Hollier, *Against Architecture: The Writings of George Bataille*, Cambridge Mass and London: MIT, 1989.

Architecture which has no questions left to ask, ought to be enough to query whether the history of modernism is a symptom of Hegel's attempt to end metaphysics, or whether architecture still remains sunk in metaphysical speculation by the collapse of the modernist project. In short I think that Tafuri is still correct when he wrote that our conceptual situation is bound within the historiography of modernism.²⁵ Tafuri was writing about the advent of postmodern historicism and its effects, its paradoxical confirmation of the modernist death of history and death of the art object. Tafuri's diagnosis seems to have been taken for a programme by Eisenman with the result being a *mise-en-abyme* where historiography is constructed and theory is experienced.

Much of the literature on deconstructivism in architecture naively assumes that there are some relations between Derrida's philosophy and the buildings produced and that these relations can be examined as that of the adequacy of theory to practice or *visa versa*. Better informed writers attempt to make it evident that if deconstruction is anything it is the project of problematizing such questions.²⁶ But the usefulness of deconstruction in the theory of architectural remains an apposite question. Whether or not there is some solecism or a license which has been abused in calling work such as Eisenman's "deconstruction", and whether or not this abuse is timely, Eisenman clearly stands in need of some sort of conceptual tools for dealing with oppositions and dialectics.

The other major theme in the literature is the question of whether or not it is possible to ask if deconstruction is a style. Clearly in the most facile and pejorative sense, deconstruction is a style, or styles, and clearly this explains little about the intellectual pretensions of the phenomenon. The word play in "de-constructivism", the question of the citation of the avant-gardes as "style", is a more serious issue. As with Eisenman's relations with canonical figures like Loos, it is historiography as much as metaphysics which is the crucial issue and difficulty. Of course a self-reflexive architecture would want to make its past a mock topic to be disassembled and emptied in various formal games, but to do this with constructivism seems particularly facile as constructivism and thought about it was probably the most rigorous attempt to work with a radically empirical concept of experience.

²⁵ Manfredo Tafuri, *History and Theories of Architecture*, p64 and *passim*.

²⁶ Mark Wigley who wrote original essay for the Deconstructivist Exhibition has spent considerable effort since attempting to control the rampant misreading of deconstructivism/deconstruction's philosophical claims. [Phillip Johnson and Mark Wigely, *Deconstructivist Architecture*, New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1988, and Mark Wigely, "Deconstructivist Architecture", *Deconstruction: Omnibus*, pp132-134.] Wigley says that we should understand the relation as one of the abuse implicit in any "translation". But rather than have our misuse valorize the purity of Derrida's philosophy, Wigley claims that the solecism of a philosophical architecture is in the position to undo the architectonic metaphor in philosophy. Mark Wigley, "The Translation of Architecture: The Production of Babal", in *Strategies In Architectural Thinking*, ed. J.Whiteman, MIT 1992, pp240 - 256.

III. The Merzbau

Kurt Schwitters' Merzbau is a useful counterpoint to deconstruction as I have characterized it. Constructivism is in the Merzbau the object of a certain mortification, if not deconstruction. At the same time as the Merzbau deals with conceptual issues about constructivism it appropriates its form in a sort of parody. And lastly it evokes the figures of absence and alterity in an aesthetic strategy which attempts to force some displacement between subjectivity and corporeal experience. The counter point which the Merzbau offers is that it proceeds in a forthright manner to manipulate and prediction of bodily experience without giving epistemological primacy either to some thought or some pre-conceptual experience of it. Schwitters' Merzbau does not suppose a concept of a unified subject, and puts to such a concept questions which are as topical now as they were then. Indeed while the Merzbau is not some precocious (nor original) deconstructivist architecture, I would claim that the persistence of the questions with which Schwitters is dealing does constitute an historical relation.

The walls of Schwitters' studio in his house in Hannover, from which he ran his one person art movement "Merz", were themselves assemblages of found and made material placed with an eye to spatial effect. But some time about 1921 a part of Schwitters' house was requisitioned because of a shortage of housing and he was forced to move his studio. He refounded it around a number of merz-columns which were moved from the older studio, the only one documented, even slightly, being the *Kathedrale des erotischen Elends* (Cathedral of Erotic Misery) which he abbreviated to *KdeE*. More columns were made and their relation to the walls fixed. While all Schwitters' work, literary and visual relied on the assemblage and the marshalling of disparate materials and concerns, the Merzbau was autobiographical with the particular theme of Schwitters' involvement with the avant-garde movements. The work which resulted eventually covered three rooms, an attic and a cellar. It was built over ten years, shown to very few people, and remained unfinished when Schwitters forced to leave Germany in 1936 after rather publicly making an anti-Nazi joke. What we know of the Merzbau is largely from Schwitters' photographs and descriptions of 1930 — 1932, and there is reason to believe that the space changed character considerably after that. For our purposes here it will be sufficient to make a provisional description which is based on the formal analysis and historical research of John Elderfield published in his *Kurt Schwitters*.²⁷

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John Elderfield, *Kurt Schwitters*, London: Thames and Hudson, 1985. I have also consulted: Werner Schamlenbach, *Kurt Schwitters*, New York: Abrams, 1967; Kate Steinitz, *Kurt Schwitters: a portrait from life*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, Uni of California Press, 1968; Rosemarie Haag Bletter "Kurt Schwitters Unfinished Rooms" *Progressive Architecture*, 58:9, 1977, pp97-99; Jan van der Marck, "The Modernist Schwitters", *Art in America*, 73, 1985, pp124-133; and Dorothea Dietrich, "The Fragment Reframed: Kurt Schwitters' Merz-column", *Assemblage*, 14, 1991, pp83-92.



Fig. 1. Kurt Schwitters, Hannover Merzbau, view with Gold Grotto, Big Group and moveable column, photographed c.1930. Photograph courtesy of the Sprengel Museum in Hannover.

The room was four metres high. (Fig. 1) The elements and surfaces were largely timber and plaster. The work in the ceiling and the corner of the room was called "The Big Group". The darker shapes on the table were the "Gold Grotto". The large element standing on the floor was a movable column. The light entered from the left and from behind through the "Blue Window". In the wall to the right there was a door which led up stairs to a high window to look back to the "Blue Window". The stairs continued down to re-enter the room from behind the movable column. In the corner next to the "Blue Window" stood the column "KdeE", merzed into the wall. The room beyond which one would have entered through was like this but with a lower ceiling which hid a crawl space which Schwitters used for a bedroom. The room had elaborate electric lighting but at some stage this burnt out and Schwitters found he preferred it with candles.

About 1923 Schwitters converted Merz from a dadaist stance to one of "collective construction" and began publishing articles on architecture. At the same time he began to enclose and hide the dadaist and figurative elements of the Merzbau by building them into walls of white geometric forms. These opened in various ways to reveal the earlier work. What field of reference there is between the Merzbau and modernist architecture is difficult to describe. In print Schwitters takes what appears to be a hard functionalist line, holding that architecture is not art and publishing Ludwig Hilberseimer's *Grosstadtbauten* as *Merz*, no. 18. At the same time he was building the Merzbau's "white" skin, which has the appearance of an aesthetic, rather than a constructivist, modernism.²⁸ Moreover, even the "white" aspects of the Merzbau were not part of Schwitters' public oeuvre, and the rooms were only shown to friends and initiates.

Schwitters states that the Merzbau was not architecture, nor interior design, but an abstract sculpture, which worked by generating from its surfaces intersecting spatial zones and boundaries.²⁹ Although it was not architecture, it is nevertheless clear that the Merzbau must have "worked" architecturally through: spatial compression and release; the interplay of route and view; the Gestalt between elements and the surfaces defining volumes; a certain sequenced direction of one's attention to the scale of elements and surfaces; and to the interplay of tactility and vision. This spatio-somatic register is over, or under, written with bundles of iconic and referential signs to be deciphered, in thought, and in real time interlocution with Kurt Schwitters who accompanied visitors as a guide. We can suppose that at a level of psychically and thought events the Merzbau would have produced in the visitor a certain self-awareness of the constructed nature of one's thought about one's self, one's body, about the correspondences and differences between the experience of these rooms and a world of things equally constructed.

²⁸ Elderfield cites evidence that Schwitters had a project for a room which might have been a more straight-forward parody of constructivism. Schwitters describes a model of a room which was interactive, somehow mechanically adjusting its formal composition to account for mice which lived in it. Schwitters also kept guinea pigs which lived in the Merzbau. Elderfield, p 150.

²⁹ Kurt Schwitters, Letter to Alfred Barr, Nov. 23 1936. Archives of the Museum of Modern Art, New York. Exert quoted by Elderfield, p 156.

In a description of the Merzbau from 1930 Schwitters gives it the name of one of its parts, "KdeE". Schwitters described the Merzbau as growing like the city, automatically, with his role like that of the Housing Bureau, setting the rules for seamliness of appearance, and being prepared to adjust the rules to direct the development.

I run across something or other that looks to me as though it would be right for the KdeE, so I pick it up, take it home, and attach it and paint it, always keeping in mind the rhythm of the whole. Then a day comes when I realize I have a corpse on my hands - relics of a movement in art that is now passé. So what happens is that I leave them alone, only I cover them up either wholly or partly with other things, making clear that they are being downgraded.

Kurt Schwitters quoted in Schmalenbach, *Kurt Schwitters*, p130-132.

This down grading happened when the highly iconographic, assembled, and to be assembled pieces like the *KdeE* were built into hollows and crevices of the growing geometric abstract plaster forms. But whether this was a downgrading or the construction of a reliquary is ambiguous. In the room there were some forty grottos. They had themes of; personal remembrance, various topical and generic literary themes, and a sort of hagiography of the avant-garde with relics of its heroes and Schwitters travels across Europe to meet them. Schwitters describes some of the grottos -

...the Goethe grotto has one of his legs and a lot of pencils worn down to stubs. The submerged personal-union city Braunschweig-Lüneburg has houses from Weimar by Feininger, Persil ads, and the official emblem of the city of Karlsruhe, which I designed. The sex-crime cave has one abominably mutilated corpse of an unfortunate young girl, painted tomato-red, and there are splendid ex-votos here. Other caves contain authentic brown coal...

Kurt Schwitters quoted in Schmalenbach, *Kurt Schwitters*, p.130-132

A bottle of Schwitters' urine with preserved flowers figured prominently, as did hair, clothing and mutilated dolls. Elderfield describes the Merzbau as having an "obsessional fixation with human object parts and with the themes of sexual violence, death and desecration."³⁰ The caves of Merzbau apparently appalled and disgusted as often as they amused the few who saw them, one visitor describing the rooms as "a kind of faecal smearing — a sick and sickening relapse into the social irresponsibility of the infant who plays with trash and filth".³¹ The theme of sadistic sex murder might have been particularly hard on Schwitters' local visitors, as this was like the rest of the Merzbau, brought home from the city, in this case reminding them of details of the notorious Hannover sex murders of Fritz Haarman. The caves were, by their nature, hidden, and Schwitters would apparently match grottos to viewers, but whether he did so in deference to the sensibilities of his guests or in an assault on them is difficult to tell.

³⁰ Elderfield, *Kurt Schwitters*, p161.

³¹ Alexander Domer quoted by Elderfield *Kurt Schwitters*, p162.

In any case, disgust aroused by the Merzbau is not only at the contents of some of the grottos, but at the existence of the grottos, at the idea of a grotesque constructivism. The grottos are within the cave of the Merzbau's white plaster; a finding within a finding. Modernist architecture was partly about isomorphic space, extension and infinity, about space consisting in and for itself without boundaries. It was not about rooms. So we can further specify the Merzbau's constructivism as grotesque in the sense finding the new white architecture there in its interiority, hidden in the suburban street. Thus constructivism is spatially reversed but also compared with the idea, or experience of the *grot-sque*, with those brilliant fragments of antique fresco, decorative and monstrous architectural inventions, found in Rome where the ground collapsed to reveal the remains of buildings.

Elderfield uses the grottos of the Merzbau to connect a number of themes in his description of Schwitters' work. He thinks the caves to be a literal repression of Schwitters' dadaist interests by his project of developing abstraction and his growing connections with constructivism and De Stijl, and connects this to a larger dialectic between positive constructivist avant-garde themes and the negative Nietzschean avant-gardism of Dada and Surrealism.³² But this does seem a limited explanation of the presence of Mies van der Rohe and other constructivist saints closeted in secret grottos with the likes of Goethe, Garbo and the Nibelungen. Elderfield also worries about the Sadean themes of the Lust Murderer's Grotto which he is unable to reconcile with the clowning Schwitters who loved children and guinea pigs and who excluded suggestions of private psychical motivations in his two dimensional collages.³³ Elderfield builds a case for representing the caves and the geometric skin as a telling inconsistency in both Schwitters' psyche and the modernist spirit.

We can agree with Elderfield's account of a repression if we do not limit the analysis to explaining Schwitters' categorization within the avant-garde, but rather see the Merzbau as an allegory of the relation of art and experience in the modern city. Walter Benjamin found Freud's concept of the repression of traumas the most useful explanation of the experience of a false consciousness of *technik* (the German word means both technology and technique). Benjamin recounts Freud's description of neuroses resulting from trauma and of the role of consciousness in constantly protecting itself against over stimulus, against shock.³⁴ The significance of this for Benjamin is the way in which it might bear on the production of conscious and unconscious memories. Benjamin's idea is that the quality of experience has been impoverished in the modern world, where it is not, as it once was, garnered up as involuntary remembrance and offered as wisdom to the collectivity. Rather our experience is largely of parrying the shocks of modern life which threaten to traumatize our psyche and which we therefore repress. There are two

³² Elderfield, *Kurt Schwitters*, p157.

³³ Elderfield, *Kurt Schwitters*, p165.

³⁴ Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, cited by Benjamin pp160-161 in "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire", *Illuminations*, London: Fontana, 1968, pp152-190.

concepts of experience and Benjamin is able to distinguish them with the German words; *Erfahrung*, which describes the sublimation of environmental stimuli within a pre-existing stock of “experience”; and *Erlebnis*, which is a conscious and instrumental apprehension of experience. The poverty of contemporary experience Benjamin saw as having resulted from a false consciousness of *technik*. With false ideas of the function of technology it was impossible to mediate one’s daily and immediate experience within culture and memory. Instead the immediate experience of metropolitan life becomes so many traumatic shocks. The way forward, according to Benjamin, is to admit to the poverty of experience, that is the impossibility of cultural continuity, and to construct new cultures. What is pathological in contemporary culture is the “double exposure” the wishful embedding of the experience of modernity within pre-existing cultural constructs, such as steel structured buildings clad in historicist ornament.³⁵

Elderfield takes the Merzbau as a symptom of Schwitters’ ambivalence between constructivism and a concept of an aesthetic and artist realm distinct from the unified productive field imagined by the socialist constructivists.³⁶ But Schwitters’ apparent undecidedness is not simply a matter of the limits which an historical position necessarily puts on artist foresight. There might be a use in saying that the opposition of the formalist skin of the Merzbau to its downgraded cultic interiors is an allegory similar in its lesson to Benjamin’s analysis. Benjamin’s aesthetics as they developed through the 1930s are also a layering of rhetorical stances which seem opposed but which in fact draw on previous positions in what is an evolving argument. In “The Story Teller”³⁷ Benjamin is clearly regretting the loss of cultural traditions, such as the model of passing on wisdom which is implicit in the story, but not in the novel which concerns life as it happens to an individual. Thus Benjamin claims the alienation caused by capitalism is felt not only in the industrial workplace but generally as an impoverishment of *Erfahrung*. In the essay “Poverty and Experience”³⁸ (which is the basis of Derrida’s letter to Eisenman) and in “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”,³⁹ Benjamin develops this account, but draws different conclusions. He is now a partisan for constructivism, praising Russian cinema and Bauhaus architecture as a therapeutic conclusion of an historical process, and as harbingers of an art of *Erlebnis*. This would be an art without nostalgia, which is prepared to admit its historical position, after the death of the *aura* of artworks, their claim to uniquely connect to some

³⁵ McCole states that Sigfried Gideon’s *Building in France*, 1928, was one starting point for Benjamin’s reflections on *technik*. McCole, *Walter Benjamin*, pp184-185.

³⁶ Schwitters understood this as an antithesis of Art and Style as defined by Van Doesburg, and publically from 1923 Schwitters was on the side of Style against Art. (See Elderfield p149) Elderfield describes Schwitters as a “fellow traveller” with the constructivists who ultimately reverted to a personalised art, indeed recovered his earlier Expressionism. Yet Schwitters’ position looks more consistent if we think of this as similar to Loos’ distinction of a symbolical Architecture from a social Building.

³⁷ Walter Benjamin. “The Story Teller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov”, *Illuminations*, London: Fontana, 1968, pp83-107.

³⁸ Walter Benjamin, “Erfahrung und Armut” *Gesammelte Schriften*, Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1972-. II.1 pp213-219.

³⁹ Benjamin. “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”, *Illuminations*, London: Fontana, 1968, pp211-244.

Erfahrung. In his last position, in “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire”,⁴⁰ Benjamin decides that attempts such as Baudelaire’s deployment of the themes of epic in the day to day *Erlebnis* of Paris are not reactionary, they are potential sites of resistance, remembrances of what cultural values are for, even if the continuity of these values has been shattered.⁴¹

The contrast of formal and iconographic realms in the Merzbau is then not only to do with the succession of Dada by Constructivism to which Schwitters was witness. It is the interpolation of constructivism onto an aesthetic account of art, and to some extent art history. Benjamin claims the auratic aspects of art are a remembrance of its past cult function. Cult objects have their value in their existence, their display is incidental and unnecessary. The history of art shows a move from the aura of the object’s existence to the effects it might have, its exhibition value.⁴² This explains something of the force of Schwitters’ cult of the avant-garde. If we follow Benjamin it is not simply perverse. Rather it is the highly topical question of what experience one is to have of constructivist works; of what place, neither temple nor gallery, they are to be experienced in. Schwitters gives two answers to this question: an obvious one — the city; and an ironic one — the grotto, and we will explore these themes in relation to ideas of Benjamin’s.

IV. Collage and the City

The city is the topos of constructivism. It is thing which will be changed by new buildings, it is the residence of the proletariat who are the agents of change, the very experience of it is supposed both to alienate and make one critical of the “natural order” of capitalism, and this experience can be represented by a new art form: cinema.⁴³ Benjamin claims constructivist cinema as an example of an art freed from its aura and it is instructive to put contemporary city films alongside the Merzbau. Benjamin mentions cinema in relation to the idea of an art which consists in the

⁴⁰ Benjamin, “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire”.

⁴¹ My description here of Benjamin’s position on modern art is intended only as a suggestion as to the sorts of conceptual difficulty and degree of seriousness which might open out of Schwitters’ refusal to let go of his “art” while pursuing a constructivist polemic. My description is a working premise drawn from my reading of Benjamin. In fact this is an area of considerable difference of opinion among Benjamin scholars. Miriam Hansen claims that what I have described as Benjamin’s last position is more consistent with the body of his writing on experience wherein *Erfahrung* and aura are valued as the space of an imagined reciprocity of the look, a metaphorical investment in objects not unlike Freud’s uncanny. For Hansen the “new positive concept of barbarism” of the “Poverty and Experience” and “Work of Art” essays “implicitly denies the masses the possibility of aesthetic experience”, rather than, (as I have suggested, following Julian Roberts) constituting a proposed new aesthetic. [Miriam Hansen, “Benjamin, Cinema and Experience: ‘The Blue Flower in the Land of Technology’”, *New German Critique*, 40, 1987, pp179-224.] Julian Roberts, by contrast, emphasises the Marxism of the “Work of Art” essay as the most sophisticated and final position [Roberts, *Walter Benjamin*]. While John McCole claims that there are two positions which are antinomies which guided Benjamin’s thought through the politics of the avant-garde while shielding a coherent aesthetics which was a materialist but non-instrumental account of technology [McCole, *Walter Benjamin*]. Susan Buck-Morss, emphasises the critique of fascist aesthetics which runs through the “Work of Art” essay. [Susan Buck-Morss, “Aesthetics and Anaesthetics: Walter Benjamin’s Artwork Essay Reconsidered”, *October*, 62, 1992, pp3-42]

⁴² Benjamin, “Work of Art”.

⁴³ For an introduction see Michael Minden, “The City in Early Cinema: Metropolis, Berlin and October”, *Unreal City: Urban Experience in Modern European Literature and Art*, E.Timms and D.Kelley (ed.s), New York: St Martin’s Press, 1985.

self-presentation of the masses. Dziga Vertov's *The Man with the Movie Camera* of 1929⁴⁴ fills this description in that it eschews narrative, characterisation and actors, limiting itself entirely to a collage of images of metropolitan life in a drive toward a pure witnessing of visual truths. It advertises the features of modern life; elevators, telephones, trams and organised sport, montaging these onto a sequence given by the passage of a day. The film emphasises the repetitive and synchronic aspects common to industrial labour and to simply moving about in the modern city. Vertov's film speaks to a new critic, not the bourgeois arbiter of taste but to the mass public. It speaks to them not across a contemplative distance, but immediately, in a state of distraction, in a experience unmediated by the aura of traditional cultural values.

What this means in terms of cinematic art can be made clearer by a comparison with Walther Ruttmann's *Berlin: Symphony of a City* of 1927.⁴⁵ *Berlin* is remarkably similar to Vertov's film in terms of subject matter and filmic technique. It is a technically advanced film, deploying the apparatus of montage and is relatively clean of novelistic narrative focalization. And yet the rhythm and dynamics of film are analogised to a symphony, and the themes of love, birth and death, over-determine the diurnal cycle into what Benjamin called a "double-exposure", a concept which he also used to describe the contradiction of historicist architecture which utilized a steel structure. *Berlin* has a double beginning, an entry to the city by train, and the 5 am start to the day, which articulates a mastery of space and time. The film then precedes to connote the filmic process as a sort of omnipresence natural to the city. By contrast Vertov insists that his film was made over time and in a process not different in its nature from other forms of work. Famously, Vertov shows the camera in shot. But another notable difference is that Vertov relies on montage (a process of editing between views of events supposed to be happening at different places at the same time) while Ruttmann's cut aways are metaphors. Ruttmann cuts from city workers to cattle and soldiers, and then back to the workers, in a visualisation which may be striking, in that cinema is a striking new technology, but which, as a metaphor, is familiar, a thing held up for our recognition not our experience. Vertov is further concerned that the collapse of distance in montage should not be mystified, Elizaveta Svilova is shown editing the film, and this within a montage sequence which compares editing with other forms of work, such as the telephone exchange, which involve similar manual operations.

Berlin is an ultimately pathological attempt at mastery of the shocks of urban life, an attempt to develop manners and mores in a cinematic representation of the city which will demand of us that we recognise and semanticize our experiencing of it within pre-existing ideas of what human experience should be. This is a culturist avant-gardism which would attempt to co-

44 D. Vertov, M. Kaufman, *The Man with the Movie Camera: Fragments from a Cameraman's Diary*, Soviet Union: VUFKU, 1929.

45 W. Ruttmann, C. Mayer, *Berlin: die Sinfonie einer Grosstadt*, Germany: Europa Film, 1927. These two films have been compared since their making. Vlada Petric quotes Vertov, that the comparison is an absurd half-truth. Vlada Petric, *Constructivism in Film: The Man with the Movie Camera A Cinematic Analysis*, Cambridge U P, 1987, p79. Also see Michael Minden, "The City in Early Cinema".

opt the revolution in technique to the support of the social status quo. Progressive art, according to Benjamin, does not desire a new experience but to express the poverty of experience, the historical truth of the destruction of experience, and to express this “in such a pure and distinct way that something decent comes of it.”⁴⁶ A work such as *Berlin* indulges in the fantasy of most science fiction, the idea of the same “us” experiencing a transformed reality. Vertov clearly aimed at what Benjamin admired in the science fiction of Paul Scheerbart and Bauhaus architecture. This is to imagine the space, if not the image, of a new “us”; the transformation of the conditions of subjectivity by the poverty of experience, alienation and the shock experience of new technologies.⁴⁷

The parallels between these films, Benjamin’s theories of experience and the Merzbau are insistent on the level of their subject of urban experience, their question of a new art or a post-art would arise out of such experiences, and most obviously on their formal technique of collage and montage. I have claimed that Schwitters’ work is directed at the notions of subjectivity implicit in constructivism rather than in some simple transgression of its positivist agenda. Yet the Merzbau with its “cultural” aspirations and allusions might be thought to have more in common with *Berlin* than with *The Man with the Movie Camera*. The Merzbau in its montage of Hannover, avant-garde clichés and cultural icons, clearly runs the risk of *Berlin*, the risk of a double exposure, of constructing the experience of itself as both mythic and self-conscious, of bringing home the city, and constructivism, and the great art of the past, and the death of art to join together on whim into a declaration of Schwitters consisting as a artist, there in the crawl space ceiling of the collage house. To extrapolate the comparison of films with the Merzbau it will be useful to compare it briefly with the concept of a Collage City hallowed in architectural thinking since Rowe and Koetter’s book *Collage City* was published in 1978.⁴⁸

Could the method of the Merzbau: a collage of found pieces; a rigorously contingent aesthetic; a historical pluralism; a certain theatricality, could this not be the programme for actual cities? The idea of a city of collage has demanded the attention at least partly because it seemed a conceptually clear alternative to the co-ordinated and sterile city of modernism, the consequence of a constructivism which did indeed reorder the building production and transport apparatus but without the hoped for reform of society and taste. What we need in a city, according to many architectural urbanists of the 1970s is a degree of overlap, of surprise, of plurality and contingency, multiplicity of uses, a layering of history. Manfredo Tafuri made an interesting response to this sort of proposition, declaring it to be the “poetics of heterotopia”.⁴⁹ He meant

46 Benjamin “Poverty and Experience”, quoted in Derrida “A Letter to Peter Eisenman” p8. [“Erfahrung und Armut”, *Schriften*, II.1 p218]

47 See Roberts, *Walter Benjamin*, p185.

48 Colin Rowe and Fred Koetter, *Collage City*, Cambridge Mass and London: MIT, [c.1978].

49 Manfredo Tafuri, “Ceci n’est pas une ville”, *Lotus International*, 13, 1976, pp10-13. Tafuri’s critique is in the first place directed at Aldo Rossi’s collage “Analogous City”, also published in *Lotus* 13.

by this that it was a liberalist self-indulgence, a collage of a city below which is written “this is not a city”, as if the paradox were interesting. The pieces of the collage city can coexist only in the declaration of the architect’s naming it as culture. In Benjamin’s terms it is a double exposure. If the collage city were planned for and built (even at the remove of designing conditions of enablement) and the result tested against the originating concept for efficacy, it would no longer be a collage. Collage is not a concept it is a representational form. Even more obviously than in painting, in collage representation cannot be bracketed from memory, the necessary decay of impressions, and death. Tafuri gives an example of the anguish of collage in a Schwitters canvas in which Schwitters paints four panels in the manners of Mondrian, Kandinsky and Moholy-Nagy, and in his own style.⁵⁰ He then separates them with thick black lines, printing the name of each artist and creating a *mise en abyme*, an infinite expansion and regress of the claim to be an artist. In Merzbau we see a rigorous investigation of the impossibility of the collage city as a programme. A Collage City would be a project like *Berlin*, a project of a continuity of culture in a changed socio-technical condition; a new start double-exposed with our present lacks.

If *Collage City* is the architectural analogue of *Berlin* then clearly the Merzbau maintains a more critical position if only by virtue of the space of representation. However, the Merzbau does not sit easily with the cheerful techno-determinism of *The Man with the Movie Camera*, and the politicization of aesthetics which Benjamin calls for in the “Work of Art” essay. Schwitters’ position is more like that of Baudelaire in Benjamin’s account, and indeed like Baudelaire’s description of the figure of the “rag picker” who makes sense of the discarded and who stands at the opposite pole to the *bohème* in the range of new subjectivities constructed by urbanization.⁵¹ Schwitters’ interest in preserving artistic tropes and bourgeois manners in order to assault them is neither intended to inversely celebrate them in mockery, nor to destroy them, but rather a process of mortification. Benjamin holds that in Baudelaire the citing of traditional forms within a radically materialised culture is progressive, in that it reifies bourgeois aestheticism and makes of it an object which stands in question of an alienated environment.

V. Grotesque

If we now return to the image of the grotto and the theme of grotesque in the Merzbau, there are yet more homologues with Benjamin’s ideas on the situation of art in the 1930’s, and with the criticisms which Derrida has of Eisenman. The passage Derrida quotes from “Poverty and Experience” (published in 1933) is wrought with tragic and hopeless urgency about the approaching war. Benjamin believes that we have not valued culture and piece by piece

⁵⁰ I have been unable to find a painting matching this description in Elderfield or Schmalenbach.

⁵¹ see Walter Benjamin. “The Bohème”, *Charles Baudelaire: a Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*, London: New Left Books, 1973, pp 11-34. This comparison of Schwitters and the rag picker is made by Elderfield, [*Kurt Schwitters* p 168], who cites the idea to Susan Sontag’s excellent account in *On Photography* [New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977] Sontag is of course working from Benjamin.

abandoned it. If we had it still we "... should have wagered it to the Mont-de-Piété for a hundredth of its value in order to receive as an advance a few coins of the "Present". In the door stands economic crisis, behind her a shadow, the war to come." As any leverage which culture might have provided in 1933 has been lost, Benjamin believed that "In its buildings, its paintings, and its histories, humanity prepares itself to outlive, if necessary, culture. And most importantly humanity does this while laughing. Perhaps this laughter here and there sounds barbarous. Good."⁵² It is clear, (particularly in the figure of death which is the rhetorical key to the passage) that Benjamin has his theme from Baroque concepts of tragedy which was the basis of his book *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*. Benjamin's analyses of conceptual and historical distinction of the symbolic from the allegorical, and of the relation of allegory to the figures of death and ruin, can assist us in qualifying the grotesque aspects of the Merzbau. Its play with concealment, alterity and the experience of one's own presence are not sublime and not symbolical, but grotesque and allegorical. The self-doubting of one's presence in the ruin of Merzbau is not answered by an aesthetic of transcendence, the "transcendental ideologicalization" of which Derrida accuses Eisenman.

The Merzbau proposes a grotesque constructivism at least partly as a consequence of the technique of collage. The structure of spoiling-as-making is implicit in Merz. All of Schwitters' merz material was technically rubbish. It required to have been discarded before being redeemed by his collecting it, which is why we must be a little careful of Schwitters' about downgrading it in grottos. His statements about the discipline of *passé* elements, about the governance of seemingly appearance, are clearly part of the irony the merz-artist owes to idea of formal completion. The space of merz is a space of insistent heterogeneity: high and low; "Persil" and Michelangelo; body parts and the functions of Schwitters house; objects of desire and the passions themselves. Schwitters' description emphasises that the space defeats any expectation, frustrates of classification, and insists that the inclusion of objects and their arrangement has meaning only in his having brought them home to his fetish box. Any attempt to place the Merzbau collapses into the abyss of guessing Schwitters' motivations (which one knows to be contrived), or rather the very idea of a claim to artistic intention.

Like his paper collages, Schwitters' Merzbau works on two axes, those of choice and of arrangement. Arrangement is given the palm over the matter which it distributes impartially and according to the imperatives of form; this precious cultural icon or that banality of everyday usage each put to work in the making of a compositional line or form. But in the end, as we have seen, this "arrangement" is itself problematic. Schwitters' collage pictures, which have their consistency in an aesthetic painterly abstraction, nevertheless are made up of snatches of discourse and things. Collage being what it is, and having that pre-aesthetic moment of the

⁵² Benjamin "Poverty and Experience", quoted in Derrida "A Letter to Peter Eisenman" p 10. ["Erfahrung und Armut", *Schriften*, II.1 p219]

collection of things with a previous life, each Merzbild is within the paradigm of the stages of its own making between a first and a final reference. In *Mai 191* the suppression of the May 1919 workers' soviet in Bavaria is connoted in word fragments and colouring⁵³ which have been cut from their reference, but the cutting remembered, like an arrangement of dried flowers. The semiotics of these collages is a sort of visual rebus. Just as in the classic punning rebus (where a picture of a human eye becomes a sign for the personal pronoun "I"), Schwitters's collages rely on a certain radical but reversible dissociation between the semantics of the found material and its significance within the frame.⁵⁴

Schwitters works have something of the object centredness of a still-life, particularly in the subordination of reference in signifying the bathetic and grotesque. Thus the subject matter of the *merzbild* is, use and corporeality, and their thematics is, like the still-life, the liminality of the beautiful and the insistence of the grotesque; an artistic superfluity offered on the occasion of prosaic wants. Familiar objects, objects of use, are given over to a contemplation which exceeds them, which returns to the viewer that categorical difference between things which decay and consciousness, which we hold does not: in short the *vanitas* formula synonymous with the genre of still-life.

It is this transcendence which merz confronts, not with some mean artistic atheism but in the way that the grotesque has traditionally confronted the sublime, with excessive materiality and a troping of the end. The moment of disgust, the point at which the Merzbau becomes "a kind of faecal smearing" (and what would that be?), is, with laughter and melancholia, one of several "ends" of the experience of the work. What disgusts is clearly what always did; shit in the bed, kitsch in the artwork, sentimentality icing the cruelty, matter out of place, rubbish and vomit, things which have been discarded but are still insisting on being present. What the Merzbau does is to make place itself a somewhat unstable concept with the consequence that anything might be in a special place or in a wrong place.⁵⁵ What is out of place in the Merzbau is

⁵³ This reading of *Mai 191* is Elderfield's, [Kurt Schwitters p73, pl X]

⁵⁴ There are some obvious parallels between what I have called the semiotics of the rebus in Schwitters' work and Benjamin's analytic procedure of collection in the Arcades project. But in choosing the concept rebus here I am hinting at a comparison of Schwitters' concept of merz and the concept of the emblem which is beyond the scope of the present study. Benjamin held that the false consciousness of technik was like a dream image. An awakening was possible in grasping the concealed utopian aspects of the image. Benjamin's fascination with the remains of Nineteenth century Paris, with kitsch, the bourgeois interior, the panoramas and arcades, was that these abandoned and degraded images of a past utopian moment could be made to function as dialectical images; sudden constellations of past and present. Benjamin's model for this work is the Baroque emblem. [McCole, *Walter Benjamin*, pp 280-295] Susan Buck-Morss uses John Heartfield's photomontages to suggest something of what Benjamin was attempting in the Arcades project. [Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing*, pp 110-158]

⁵⁵ If constructivism is implicitly utopian, we could think of the Merzbau as a heterotopia in Michel Foucault's sense of the term. Utopia has a relation to all of the rest of space by virtue of its programme to succeed the present. Foucault claims that there is another form of the generalist spatial relation, the heterotopia, a single place perhaps a garden, brothel or pilgrimage site, where the same stuff of the world undergoes a completely different relation. Utopias contest the space of the world by proposing to replace it, and as propositions they cannot exist. But heterotopias do exist in the world, it is the order and arrangement which they give to the world which is chimerical. [Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces", *Diacritics*, 16:1, 1986, pp22-27.] There are some parallels here with Benjamin's description of the allegorical figures of the Baroque, particularly the ambitious metonymy of

place, that is if we think of place metaphysically, as having some natural hierarchy, some propriety by which one can consider things for a placement, some meaning in arrangement. Here the work ends, not in some formal perfection and an ideal appropriation of an object. Rather the space of art evaporates into the excessive materiality of the thing and unwilled sensations of nausea, laughter and fear of death.

Benjamin's analyses of the Baroque and his theory of language take us well beyond the present occasion and it will be sufficient to elaborate on Derrida's reference to Benjamin's remarks on the ruin. Derrida asks Eisenman if his architecture is not some new image of a ruin. Derrida says that "In the past great architectural inventions constituted their essential destructibility, even their fragility, as resistance to destruction or as a monumentalization of the ruin itself" (in the Baroque).⁵⁶ Is there in Eisenman's architecture, asks Derrida, a projective deconstruction? Is this an architecture as fragment and contingency, a present ruin which is a "memory" of a mythic future where Eisenman's fractured buildings will be completed by thought about them?

Benjamin shows that "ruin" does not merely designate perfection in relation to time. "Allegories are in the realm of thoughts what ruins are in the realm of things" says Benjamin.⁵⁷ The ruin's opposition to the perfected building is like the opposition of allegory to symbol. But this opposition, has been construed incorrectly by Western culture since the Baroque. Both Neo-classicism and Romanticism offer a role for art by supposing an unlimited immanence of the moral in the beautiful. They do this by erroneously treating of the "manifestation" of "ideas" in art as symbols; when the theological concept of the symbol is of a unity of material and transcendental objects. The rule of the symbol in art is expounded by modern theorists as an opposition to the emblematic and allegorical. Benjamin cites Schopenhauer's idea that allegories express concepts with more or less efficacy while symbols express ideas artistically.⁵⁸ Benjamin rewrites this opposition as an historical dialectic. Neo-classicists and romanticists in denouncing allegory as a mere mode of designation, a convention and convenience, have misunderstood Baroque theological doctrine and with it much of the role of art. Benjamin's work is designed to show the profusion of signs and their ambiguity in Baroque culture: "the conflict of cold and facile technique and the eruptive expression of allegorical interpretation"; is the artistic corollary of a dialectical account of sacred and profane worlds. The seeming failure of an art where "anything can be anything else" it is in fact a just judgement of a world in which this is the case; anything

fragment and the dissociative structure of signification in the rebus. [Benjamin, *Origin of German Tragic Drama*] Tafuri's argument against a collage city mentioned earlier [fn. 49] relies on describing these as heterotopias.

56 Derrida, "Letter to Peter Eisenman", p 11.

57 Benjamin, *Origin of German Tragic Drama*, p 178.

58 Benjamin also describes Goethe's opposition which runs that the allegorical sees the object merely as a replaceable instance of the general idea, while "Whoever grasps the particular (the symbol) in all its vitality also grasps the general" [Goethe quoted Benjamin, *Origin of German Tragic Drama*, p161].

can be anything in a world whose works are vanity.⁵⁹ “The Symbolic” is the realm of the perfected beautiful individual: both the anthropomorphism of classicism, and its romantic variant; the placing of the individual in a redemptive narrative.⁶⁰ In the Baroque, which sees history as the Passion of the World, significance is the marking out of the stations of the decline of a world which was always untimely, sorrowful and unsuccessful.⁶¹ Thus the emblem of death’s head is the point of the historical specificity of the Baroque, its antithesis to classical symbolism and humanism. It has its power “because death digs most deeply the jagged line of demarcation between physical nature and significance”.⁶²

it is common practice in the literature of the Baroque to pile up fragments ceaselessly, without strict idea of a goal, and, in unremitting expectation of a miracle, to take the repetition of stereotypes for a process of intensification. [...] The perfect vision of this new phenomenon was the ruin. The exuberant subjection of antique elements in a structure which, without uniting them in a single whole, would in destruction, still be superior to the harmonies of antiquity, is the purpose of the technique which applies itself separately and ostentatiously, realia, rhetorical figures and rules.

Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, pp178-179.

The ruin is according to Benjamin the model for an artwork which understands its position in a period of historical decline. In the passage above we find an early and scholarly statement of what will be his prescription for cultural engagement in the shadow of the Second World War. Faced with the impossibility of a coherent culture, the artworker’s stake in the present can only an impossible combinatrix of cultural fragments.

The grotesqueness of the Merzbau, even in its more savage and disgusting moments, clearly serves a ghastly comedy which is at a purposeful remove from the morbidity of counter-reformation German drama. Yet the Benjamin’s description of the *Trauerspiel* has useful parallels to the Merzbau’s piling up of fragmentary references and the question of the meaning of lack of formal closure. If the Merzbau evokes an alterity this is not a device for estranging an observer who can then better know the relation of body, self and subjectivity. This would merely be an evocation of a romantic sublime, a confrontation of the frailty of human life before nature, a claim about art’s powers of redemption. If the Merzbau plays on the absence of an environmental interlocutor for the self it does not do this to make present some sophistic critique of the subject, but in a materialist and non-instrumental analysis of the site of experience. It is not a ragged and crazed symbol of a dadaist, then constructivist, then expressionist environment, which we can use to imagine so many experiences of the future. The Merzbau was an allegory of the experience of

⁵⁹ Benjamin, *Origin of German Tragic Drama*, p174, Benjamin goes on to show that writing in itself is bound up in these antimonies of the unique and the reiterative, which is another reason to suppose that Derrida is setting out to identify himself with Benjamin in the letter.

⁶⁰ Benjamin, *Origin of German Tragic Drama*, p160.

⁶¹ Benjamin, *Origin of German Tragic Drama*, p166.

⁶² Benjamin, *Origin of German Tragic Drama*, p166.

the city and the weight of responsibility in the inheritance and construction of culture in a tragic time.

VI.

I have attempted to discuss the Merzbau because it seems to exemplify an idea much discussed at the moment: a built work where a critical function is predicated upon the apprehension of certain absences, voids and undoings. I posit, and have attempted to emphasise in the terms of my description, that the mode of this apprehension was the experience of the Merzbau. That is: visual, tactile, kinaesthetic and psycho-sexual relations in the time of individual lives. Of course, the Merzbau is absent (destroyed in the bombing of Hannover in October 1943) and I cannot be tested on this point.⁶³ However, I went on to argue that, whatever the mode of apprehension of the Merzbau, its subject is an anatomy of the self-knowing of experience, and particularly the experience of the twentieth century city. In this, the terms of my discussion (following certain hints from Derrida) have been those of Walter Benjamin. My aim is not to exemplify Benjamin's theory nor to argue for a new analysis of the Merzbau. Rather I attempted to show the sophistication of early twentieth century inquiries into experience when compared to the present deconstruction both of "experience" and "constructivism". The purpose of the comparison is not to admonish contemporary architects for lack of originality, but rather to make a point about the hubris of "deconstructing" categories which have already been destroyed by history.⁶⁴

⁶³ There is a facsimilie of a corner of the first room with the part *KdeE* in the Sprengel Museum in Hannover. But this is reconstructed from the photographic evidence of the exterior.

⁶⁴ This essay has been in production of some years and I owe much to discussions of aspects of it with my students. As well as at K+E, I have been fortunate to be able to discuss versions of the essay at the conference *Space, Meaning and Metaphor* (Perth, September, 1991) and as a visitor to The Department of Architecture of The University of Hong Kong (March 1993). Particular thanks to: Rosemary Hawker, Desmond Hui and Bill Taylor.