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The Look of the Object

[Minimalist art] aspires not to defeat or suspend its own objecthood, but on the contrary to discover and project objecthood as such.

Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood," 1967

The end of the object is tied to the eclipse of history.

Manfredo Tafuri, *Theories and History*, 1968

Object in art and object in empirical reality are entirely distinct. . . . The primacy of the object, as the potential freedom from the domination of what is, manifests itself in art as its freedom from objects.

Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 1970

The current neomodernism in building forms represents a changed identification with the modern: no longer with the comportment of the avant-gardist, but rather, with the objects that modernism produced. It is not a quotation of these forms in the manner of postmodernism, but an actual identification with them, with the *look* of architecture. This would be facile if the extent of the shift concerned only images. Along with the current taste for the architecture of the 1960s, we should seek to renew the question of the object, which, at that time, animated the thought of figures as diverse as Adorno, Fried, and Tafuri.

The problematic of the object as developed by the figures I quote has been neglected. In recent decades neo-avant-gardist architecture has claimed its heritage by rejecting the unique object as the culmination of architectural thought and instead embracing process, theory, and critique. But this posture was mistaken if it supposed that the critique of the object early this century had caused the object's demise. Tafuri showed that the historical avant-gardes were agnostic about the object. The New Objectivity *sacrificed* the art object to "life," again and again. The expressionists exasperated the object, roughening its surface and sucking it hollow.

Now the object is returning in its fullness. The current vanguardist modernism has not simply come around in a cycle of architectural revivals. A modernist comportment is the armature of a new commerce of images, and the cultural difference between a building, an MPeg3 player, and a haircut lessens as consumer sensibility reaches the status of ideation. The look of modern architecture is suddenly popular. All the dreams of the avant-garde have come true but as a nightmare — life has become like art rather than art like life. Art objects have lost their aura and every artifact is reified. Revalorizing the specialty of the architectural object might allow the profession to return to popularity with the promise that concrete experience will protect the architectural "brand" in the new e-culture.

There is a risk. The object might indulge a regressive idealism, a hankering after conviction in art and firm boundaries in the art disciplines. In this delicate balance, the name "minimalism" has many advantages. In the 1990s a critical account of minimalism became orthodox theory in the visual arts and a whole toolbox of anti-idealist critical tactics is now available under the names of the *October* group. It is tempting to draw on such authority and lecture practitioners that minimalism in architecture is not (despite what the trade journals say) about reduction, proportion, and the quality of materials. What architects are supposed to learn from the visual arts is that the simplicity and refusal of interpretation by the object is merely a ploy to evoke an aesthetic of phenomenal experience. Can an architectural object be minimalist in this way? Surely not, if this merely means that the same paeans to concrete experience that were once said about Le Corbusier or Aalto are now, on the authority of Rosalind Krauss, said about Mies. The practitioners are correct: not in the sense that architecture should return to formal idealism, but in that it is the objecthood of the object that is at play, and not the subject's perception.

Fried claimed that minimalism was duplicitous by confronting the spectator with objects that had the *look of not being art*. This undid the spatiotemporal nexus of painting and sculpture, the art object acting not to collapse the duration of the phenomenal experience into the work's spatiality (as he thought it should), but the work requiring the time of one's experience. Fried called this theatricality, playing to an audience, but he could have called it picturesque, as Robert Smithson was to point out. Since the nineteenth century, architecture has known the perceptualist side of minimalism as "picturesque" planning, which eschews form in order to form experience. But the greater significance of the picturesque is that it tied experientialism to objects from outside the canons of art, to the everyday and the abject; it prepared the space for the minimalist "look of non-art." That the picturesque has a history, rather than forming a principle, shows us that there is no meta-aesthetic of subjective perception that the different arts form in different ways. What lies between the arts, in the space of history, is not some experiential ground but the concepts and objects of the arts. Like the architect Brunelleschi's gift of perspective to painting, in modernism certain concepts of the object were introjected between the disciplines, producing in each their nonconceptual logic.

Architecture is art but architectural objects are not artworks: this is the arena that is now open for practice and theory. To repeat the trick of minimalism in architecture would be meaningless if its outcome were merely an experientialism — this we already know. Who can, today, be interested in an architecture that is a script to be performed? It is time for an architecture that is not a relation but a concrete object in the world, which will look back from a nonhuman place.