

COLD HEAVEN: THE USES OF MONUMENTALITY

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In this talk I'm going to be taking certain historical moments concerning monumentality in visual art and in architecture and talking about how my thinking about this subject matter produced writing. In part, I'm interested in the dissolution of modernism and in investigating the relation between urban monumentality and daily life. The writing will be quoted abruptly, so you will have to consider the writing's relationship with the more direct, and analytical histories, elliptically.

I often work in relation to a reading of the logics of other mediums, of the logic of historical end games. It is interesting to gain a distance that is not artful, that is not posed but that works at a distance from one's own medium, that is writing. It is perhaps artful to attempt this distance toward art and toward architecture, especially monumental architecture, because one is so constantly confronted by it as a user of the city. Here are all these towering monoliths, thoughts in space, signals from other eras, criss-crossing with this era, with this eras monuments. How do you write in relation to this urban landscape? I read the city and I read its culture industry from the perspective of historical critique and I use this critique in a duel with appropriated motivation. The moves one might make and the reverberation from the limits of one's moves are stored in the city.

"An alien dialogue begins to represent this immersion."

This is a quote from a work entitled *With Hidden Noise*, which was written in 1985 and which attempted to situate a reader in the dialogic oscillation of Duchamp's *With Hidden Noise*, which was a readymade conceived in 1916.

What interested me about Duchamp's piece at the time was that Duchamp's *With Hidden Noise* was both a moving object and a perfectly immobile object, a signaling device whose meaning was constantly seeming to come from elsewhere, from a space that had nothing to do with the object. That is to say, the Duchampian object is actually a process which provokes an observer to keep reaching for the essence of it, the *Hidden Noise* of its meaning, only to realize, through a kind of engaged training, that one can't ever pin down the meaning —meaning always vanishes and this is its *Noise*. The readymade object continually displaces itself to networks of semantic relations, then ricochets back upon itself— to its own indifferent and self sufficient if enigmatic reality. The *Noise* names the speed of a process of dialogic communication, a cluster of doubt about real facts, and its doubt makes one produce an act of communication for oneself, an act of thought which is direct and pleasurable.

It is possible to analyze the project of the architectural avant-garde of the early Twentieth Century —the monuments envisioned— in terms of this Duchampian model. That is, to link up the dialogic seesaw of the readymade with its social potential for liberating thought.

What you see before you is the Seagram Building in New York City, designed by Mies Van Der Rohe, 1954-1958. Withdrawn from the kaleidoscopic image tank of the city, aloof, present in the particularity of its accelerating repetitive order, its steel columns (its steel skeleton) and glass cover wall (its multidirectional reflecting skin), autonomous and yet proposing, through its reflecting and yet nearly transparent facades, its combination of tremendous weight and near emptiness, its permutating mullions, its cleared space around its own staged structural foregrounding and perfection, the Seagram Building proposes a critical dialogue with the observer. Or at least, if purely from the perspective of the progressive intent of the early 1920's, the heroic age of modernism, one might paradisiacally regard the Seagram Building as doing this. Mies highrise office rectangle with its paradoxical glass walls is an urban landscape play. The analogy with a Gertrude Stein play is not inexact. The Seagram building can be read as existing partly to be performed, dematerializing into a process of design supplied and completed by the man on the street. The masses confront the Seagram Building. The building confronts the masses. Utterly rational organization proposes its dialogue. The dialogic space opens up a public exhibition of critical space: subversive theatre. Art abandons its aura, which vanishes into politics.

From the perspective of the 1980s, however, this liberating scenario loses validity when confronted by the measure of history. An operative history, real time systems, bracket the Seagram Building and the dialogic project it monumentally symbolizes. The utopian intent of Mies structure of steel and glass floats free of its activation in real time, leaving architecture, leaving modernism, with a suspension, an imaginary social purpose, a void, as the basis for the structures in space which are designed. Mies makes his glass skyscrapers for an institutional clientele. The self evident fact of the era, the autonomous foregrounded structural machine, the monumental multivalent building, designed to train the citizen to take a critical attitude toward the conventional life around him, becomes a corporate headquarters, signature of multi-directional authority flowing from the decentered autonomy of perfect monumental structure. Awe and intimidation, an asymmetrical authoritarianism, a barrier, an insulation, all highly traditional connotations of the monument, flow from Mies highrise building. The dialogic production of meaning is appropriated.

The will of the epoch translated into space, Mies dictum, becomes the will of the multi-national corporation, administering the Manhattan air. The passerby comes to orchestrate not his own composition, but a commercial to the secrets of power enacted by the buildings design.

With Hidden Noise, which I wrote guided by Duchamp's *With Hidden Noise*, mimes this dream of a utopian dialogue as it proposes utopia's historical failure and nevertheless enacts it —with all the ambiguity that implies. Writing the *Noise*,

reading the *Noise*, one performs again as a subject in a system which has taken possession of that subjectivity. The result, the writer is naturally dubious about collectivity while nevertheless portraying it. A paradox hits the street, then bumps into Philip Johnson's glass fishscale tower at California and Market, then goes back to perform the *Hidden Noise*.

What's left? The world in motion? The world as text for this readymade dimension moving on defects in our representation of it? *With Hidden Noise, Assisted Readymade*, 1916/1988: through the fuzzy white and red buildings of the night that is not the inner city the simulacrum of suburban businessmen move. In the world, monoliths suck up one's will and reflect the state. Hordes of readers glance in ice age entropy as sudden meanings turn them numb as this abstraction.

One might argue that Mies was not unconscious of the tragedy of the arrogation of the dialogue opened up by his designs. Mies response was to withdraw, designing mythically aloof buildings which transcended the immediate social context by reflecting themselves. Mies buildings become mute testaments, self reflective to their structural purity. Monumental architecture answers its social appropriation by a corporate clientele with silence. As you confront the Seagram Building, as you perform its meaning, as you complete its design, the Seagram Building withdraws from the speculators, the real estate developers, the bureaucrats, the cops. Mies skyscrapers, in all their monumentality, become semiotic utopias, reflectors of their own structure. They come to exist by means of their own death.

In 1984, I found myself walking around my apartment roof one Saturday morning, watching a helicopter hovering over the new Philip Johnson building, on California and Montgomery. Dangling from the helicopter was a whitish human figure, wearing a kind of long flowing robe, and holding a sickle across its body. I later discovered that the helicopter had installed neo-classical togas, which had been commissioned by Philip Johnson, to stand atop the grey glass mansard roof of his new building. Philip Johnson's building displays these human sized togas, devoid of faces, as abstract spectres of the utopian dialogue of the 1920's. For Philip Johnson, history acts like Buadelaire's opium nymph in a *Double Room*, with those subtle and terrible eyes that one recognizes by their dread mockery. The citizen on his roof, me, looks down at the crowds on California Street —crowds moving in and out of the Bank of America Building, the Holiday Inn, the Embarcadero Center. The utopian polysemy of the international style dialogue pulls back to Philip Johnson's demonic laughter, in the form of empty togas atop his building. A profound skepticism may offer a distance from reactionary surfaces but it does not prevent one's immersion in historical time. The avant-garde utopia has become an absence stolen from history for the purposes of power and money. Now it is not the passersby who portray themselves when completing the design of the building; now Philip Johnson's draped abstractions, figures of emptiness, mimic the predetermined responses of the citizens.

There is a story by Borges titled *The Immortals*, in which a narrator who has been searching for the city of the immortals finally locates it, only to discover that the city of the immortals is a monumental parody because the immortals have realized that building an actual heaven on earth (tradition of the monumental city, simulacrum of heaven!) is impossible. The architects therefore have designed a perverse mimicry of a timeless city. They have invented an architecture whose meaning is that it lacks the finality of the architecture of finality. With no possibility (with every opportunity) of constructing a utopia in this fallen world (myth of modernist autonomy or no), one constructs monuments to a mannered emptiness, demon monuments.

It is interesting to speculate upon Philip Johnson's purposeless surfaces in this context. For example, how do the political ethics of mannerism, the total separation between concept and function, read when contextualized by the monumental form of a nuclear reactor, which Philip Johnson designed for the Israeli government in the 1960s? Is the empty surface of raw concrete covering the nuclear reactor a rhyme with the desert surrounding it: is it at play with Malevich's non objective art, i.e. nothing but a desert, a Suprematist emptiness? One approaches the reactor through a courtyard designed to resemble the approach to a church. It makes no difference evidently whether one designs plutonium or religion, in fact one appreciates the play of signifiers in such a desert. The barriers of monumentality go neither up or down, in fact they cease to exist, since the barrier has merged with itself. There's no meaning, there's no rules, life is a chaos of surfaces.

If one could once to obstruct, collides as the city arrives the cancelled mind,
as its boulevards declare abolished sound, language to remain alone.
Suppose they do mime, as having never arrived.

The city is a casual seduction, is empty, shutdown to its wires, as if an
American cobalt bomb had consumed every unexpected one of us. The city
was occasional for one to inhabit a while. But equally there are artifacts
from the past unified by the dream —what does this last quotation mean—
the city arranges words like war, sneakily, invents us, and arcades. To be
uncanny. In the city, they count something obvious that isn't gone, a
perfumed converging and urban projects in their cancelled darks, this is
nervous territory.

So no one is really dressed to go out. The have in fact been previously
choreographed, and looking in the water is a resemblance to that escape.
So nostalgia is left as an escape hatch.

In Robert Longo's work, monumentality markets loss. With Longo, the failed project to enact the spirit of the age, a *Zeitgeist*, generates a pathos and a futility, a futility which is valuable merchandise and of which, one might argue, Longo is rather cynically aware. In *Cold Heaven*, Longo floats little gold leaf tombs before the viewer, ruined transcendent monuments. A grandiose avant garde project floats before the viewer, the possibility of social change suspended in a simulated

diorama, the work's multi-valence no longer offering a transformative depth, but a tarnished surface, documenting the gesture of attempting an impossible totality, a corrupted *Zeitgeist*. Longo takes the desire for collectivity and fixes it to a process of consumption: i.e., the consumption of disaster. This death dance, this expressionist melo-drama, becomes the surface of a truth, of a posed catharsis which mimics not active engagement in social reality, but the witnessing of a fantasy surface, a collaged readymade distance, an advertizing layout, replicating seduction mechanisms, predicated on the viewing of ruins as spectacle.

There were real victims in those burnt black and white reproductions of staged suburban slums, but to Longo, the disappearance of their aura implies the vanishing of their historical truth. Culture produces trance witnesses to devastation, who watch apocalyptic previews. One can shoot up with the thrill, encountering Longo's diorama. Is it afternoon after the riot? Simply turn the tv on or off. Trapped in the video arcade? Free base off the artificial screen. Consume art which assigns one a viewpoint which is riskless. In *Body Of A Comic*, instead of encountering another person, personal presence, depth, you encounter storage drums (nuclear waste containers). This is a farce. *Body Of A Comic*. Longo's work keeps enacting these simulated perspectives in which the viewer continually sees himself advancing into a perspective which denies entrance. The work displays this process of vanishing perspectives, of blocked totalities. In *Now Everybody*, the human figure is shot (pun), the human figure is readymade. One need only dip into the program with all the other film stills, call up the image to construct a generic, allegorical figure: everybody. It is a collaborative project, like Mies modernist dialogue, only here, with Longo's art, the collective experience is a death dance, with man caught in defeated transformative gestures. Longo memorializes the subject, as in *Pressure*, where subjectivity is the last shrine, a penultimate moment to an apocalyptic culture where the citizen becomes a marionette, as in *Men In Cities*, continually teased, titillated, always on the verge of consummation, yet only achieving consumption, utter consumption of subjectivity. Here one floats, as in *Tongue To The Heart*, suspended within a mausoleum which is itself an imploding allegory of selfhood. One becomes an opera mask amid the artificial if chaotic waves of deranged symbols. There is community in shared exhibition of ironic comment concerning one's own estrangement. Longo's work sells the spectacle of the monument obliterating separateness. The artist has become a good cop, bad cop. Good cop: packaging the subject; bad cop: inhabiting one's singular outbreak to subversive ends. Human beings come when their names are called. I float in my suspended world therefore I am. That's how ideology works. So you get expressive gestures of kitsch transcendence, the last monuments wheeled out as a cold heaven, along with images of junkheap connections, disaster lyrics.

Longo is mediation, an enactment of fascist desire, in which experience, the presentment of and response to, a multi-leveled reality, has become a tremendous illusion, a drive-in movie. The seduction mechanisms of which Longo's art is ideological symptom are powerful and to me, terrorizing. I read juxtaposed images of this our American culture to reveal meaning, to situate a relation to history,

instead of having history in its reality dematerialize. I make propositions about events in order to put some of the *noise* back in —to interrupt the kaleidoscope surrounding the screen with a critical awareness. I want to reframe the image fate. Critique maybe can generate an uncorrupted present, free of irony and cynism. We hit and run, we replicate our subversion suits, we suspend ourselves for a time in the urban landscape play, we enact paratactically a critical enclave, we read the contingent city; we think in this reading a good deal of why it is perhaps problematic to write, like Clark Coolidge does in his work, *The Crystal Text*, that “I hate history”. But there, down the hill, before the Bay, are the new urban skyscrapers of the financial district. The light is already changing as I write this. The light makes its own surface highrise, a disfigured, asymmetrical skyscraper, superimposed against the glass of the buildings down below. The buildings are in high performance. Shades of light, an approaching blue, enter the floating business offices. We are suspended together in this theater of reflection and refraction. The temporary immediacy of the street goes unnostalgic against the successful dematerializing of the Battery and Sacramento grey glass monolith. Cross hatches of white painted steel float free of their facades.

Within the Ball of Contradictions (ghost vaporized by exaggeration)
the waste products of a prehistoric...

Raw violence: Conflicts do not feel ambivalent about us. Expressing
the Berlin Wall as raw graffiti material for armless dummies in
department store windows.

Departments of self education (stores).

There were no references —that had been the trouble; but the
reaction came with the sense that the large, sad poorness was itself
a reference, and one by which a hundred grand historic connections
were on the spot, and quite thrillingly, reestablished.

Flick of being as a tip of heavy, grayish dipped wax
brush
Flicking in slow motion, sudden
Unexpected really quite again reverberating
Tension.

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