

AFTER NATURE

Bart Lootsma

„They will tell you that to be political is to be merely angry, and therefore artless, depthless, “raw”, and empty. They will speak of the political with embarrassment, as if speaking of Santa Claus or the Easter Bunny.

They will tell you that great writing “breaks free” from the political, thereby “transcending” the barriers of difference, uniting people to their truths. They’ll say this is achieved through craft above all. Let’s see how it’s made, they’ll say – as if how something is assembled to the impulse that created it. As if the first chair was hammered into existence without considering the human form.”¹ (Ocean Vuong, *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous*)

During the exhibition *Schönheit vor Weisheit, Das Wissen der Kunst und die Kunst der Wissenschaft (Beauty before Wisdom, The Knowledge of Art and the Art of Science)*, in Fall and Winter 2019/2020 architecturaltheory.eu, the department for architectural theory at the University of Innsbruck, works in the Ferdinandeum in Innsbruck. Architectural theory, as a hybrid discipline, perfectly fits the curators’ idea that “art and science are two fields that both compete with and complement each other”, opening up an exciting field “where art and science meet and influence each other”. The curators believe that art is too often judged in a simplistic way according to its relationship to nature (as in “after nature”), where in reality it is exactly this relationship that is explored in any interesting work.² Also architecture has a long tradition of different theories rooting it in nature, which we explore and develop in our work.

Architectural theory investigates the history of architectural treatises as well as the actual conditions in which architecture is produced, whether social, cultural or technological, and criticizes, makes suggestions and proposals for its contemporary and future development.

In our studios, an educational model that has more in common with teaching architectural design than with human or social sciences, students mainly work on books, with the layout presented on a wall. The students weekly present their work in short lectures, after which there is a public debate about the development of the work. Architectural theory is a lived practice. In the end, the work is published on the website architecturaltheory.txt -and possibly elsewhere. Imagery -still, moving and increasingly 3D printed- plays as important a role as text. Plan, section and elevation still form the primary language of architecture, with renderings and animations gaining importance in the generation of ideas and the communication to larger audiences.

To accommodate our presence in the museum we therefore construct a wall, on which the progress on the production of the work can be followed, with a printer and screens for presentations and videos on one end. On the other end of the wall, there is a sculpture, a hallucinatory dream of figurative elements relating to the way nature has played a role in architectural thinking, from the Corinthian Capital and Caryatids, over the Naga Buddha statue to elephants and a turtle. All of these have been and sometimes still are part of architecture’s sculpted ornamentation.³ It’s a kind of architectural plague column, in which we express our gratitude to the multitude of thoughts and concepts on the relation between architecture and nature in history, while at the same time merging them and leaving them behind in one big 3D printed digital mashup.

Indeed, digital technology increasingly favors image production over the written and spoken word. The speed of the global circulation of digital concepts and images, including those available on JSTOR, Academia.edu, Google image search, Tumblr and Pinterest, demands a different kind of reflection on the production

¹Ocean Vuong. *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous*, Penguin Random House, New York, 2019, pp 132.

²<http://www.tiroler-landesmuseen.at/page.cfm?vpath=programm/ausstellungen&snippetmode=future&genericpageid=10565>

³ See the text by Giacomo Pala elsewhere in this brochure.



of new imagery and concepts. Google, our hegemonic search engine, does not distinguish between high and low culture, which suddenly appear in an equal field. It's in this new, fast, intuitive playing field that taste, scornfully dismissed in the Modern epoch, gains importance again.

In the opening words of his essay on taste, Giorgio Agamben states that "contrary to the privileged stature that has been granted to sight and hearing, the Western cultural tradition classifies taste as the lowest of the senses, whose pleasures unite man with other animals and in whose impressions one will not find 'anything moral'. Even in Hegel's Aesthetics (...) taste is opposed to the two 'theoretical' senses, sight and hearing, since a work of art cannot be tasted as such, because taste does not leave its object free and independent, but deals with it in a really practical way, dissolving and consuming it."⁴ Marcel Duchamp, in several interviews, even went so far to say that he considered taste – bad or good – the greatest enemy of art.⁵ It was the repetition -in a style, in a way of working- that distracted from the unique and precise intellectual content Duchamp demanded from a work of art. Of course, in architecture, repetition has been less of a problem for most of its history. Repetition, not even as a recipe, is not necessarily bad in architecture: it enables a certain continuity in the built environment in which new buildings fit. That's why debates on style have a continuity through the ages. Today, the architect Patrik Schumacher even proposes the next hegemonic style, Parametricism.⁶

In general, architectural theory, observing and analyzing what drives contemporary architecture beyond the immediately visible, has been skeptical about taste and contemporary styles as Duchamp. Architecture is not just a visual phenomenon, it's also a constantly changing form of organization and has to deal with ch-

anging social, cultural political, economic and technological demands.

Taste, however, may be much more than a simple repetition. It might even be the necessary drive for innovation. Agamben positions taste as "the figure through which Western culture has established an ideal of knowledge that it presents as the fullest knowledge at the same time as it underlines the impossibility thereof. Such knowledge, which could suture the metaphysical scission between the sensible and the intelligible, the subject does not in fact know since he cannot explain it."⁷ Taste is "situated at the very limit of knowledge and pleasure." It's driven by Eroticism, as a "knowledge the subject does not know but can only desire".⁸ As such, Agamben even presents taste as the very essence of philosophy, as "knowledge of love, philosophy, signifies: beauty must save truth and truth must save beauty. In this double salvation, knowledge is realized."⁹

In design, taste, this strange hybrid between knowledge and intuition, becomes essential in a world dominated by images circulating in increasingly excessive speed. These images can be used in collages and assemblages, or now even morph into another to produce new images in mashups and through kitbashing. Both techniques originate in popular culture. Mashups originate -as many digital creative techniques like sampling- in music. "A mashup (...) is a creative work, usually in a form of a song, created by blending two or more pre-recorded songs, usually by overlaying the vocal track of one song seamlessly over the instrumental track of another."¹⁰ The same can be done with other cultural content, be it images or architecture.

Kitbashing or model bashing originates in a practice whereby a new scale model is created by taking pieces out of commercial model kits. These pieces may be added to custom projects or to other kits. For professional mo-

delmakers, kitbashing is popular to create concept models for detailing special effects in movies. Commercial model kits are a ready source of „detailing“, providing any number of identical, mass-produced components that can be used to add fine detail to an existing model.¹¹ Increasingly, also kitbashing is a digital phenomenon, taking advantage of the vast image and 3D object libraries available in the Internet. Because of their origin in given originals, which were modelled after a reality, the new imagery is already charged with associations, meanings and atmospheres from the beginning, which becomes even more convincing in the detailing. It suggests functions, meanings, histories and narratives. The use of existing imagery (made after nature) is essential in the immersive effect of science fiction and fantasy productions like 2001: A Space Odyssey, Star Wars and Blade Runner and in fantasy and steam punk productions like Game of Thrones or Carnival Row. Innovation also occurs in other ways, through small mistakes, misinterpretations and variations in the multitude of images produced, as it happens in the Chinese concept of innovation Shanzai.¹²

This also means there is not one right way to develop an architecture and design fitting the age of computing and Internet. Most architects still seem to follow the program as formulated by Gottfried Semper in his famous manifesto *Wissenschaft, Industrie und Kunst*, as republished in the series *Neue Bauhausbücher* in 1966.¹³

This book was a program for a design, which would do more justice to industrial production, getting rid of all ornamentation Semper criticized in the objects he found at the World Exhibition in London in 1851, which mostly consisted of animal and floral, in short: natural motifs. It triggered avant-gardes worldwide to formulate new programs for craft and industrial production, abandoning centuries of theory and

knowledge about architecture and design. But maybe innovation is not only triggered by new ways of production, but in the many cracks and fissures between knowledge and desire. And maybe this is an opportunity to rethink the relationship between architecture and nature -after nature. In our installation and work in the museum, we clearly put idea before production, Beauty before Wisdom.

4 Giorgio Agamben. *Taste*, Seagull Books, London/New York/Calcutta, 2017.

5 See also: <https://www.quora.com/What-did-Duchamp-mean-by-Taste-is-the-enemy-of-art>

6 Patrik Schumacher. *Hegemonic Parametricism delivers a Market-based*

Urban Order, in: H. Castle (ed.), Patrik Schumacher, (ed.), *AD Parametricism*

2.0 - Rethinking Architecture's Agenda for the 21st Century, *AD Profile* #240, March/April 2016

7 See note 4, pp. 51.

8 Idem, pp. 52.

9 Idem, Pp. 76.

10 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mashup_\(music\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mashup_(music))

11 <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kitbashing>

12 Byung-Chul Han. *Shanzai*, Merve Verlag, Berlin, 2011.

13 Gottfried Semper. *Wissenschaft, Industrie und Kunst, Neue Bauhausbücher*, Florian Kupferberg, Mainz/Berlin, 1966.

