Taste Is Critical

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> "Most people think of sensibility or taste as the realm of purely subjective preferences, those mysterious attractions, mainly sensual, that have not been brought under the sovereignty of reason. They allow that considerations of taste play a part in their reactions to people and to works of art. But this attitude is naïve. And even worse. To patronize the faculty of taste is to patronize oneself. For taste governs every free -- as opposed to rote -- human response. Nothing is more decisive."[1]
> *Susan Sontag*

This essay addresses the surprising affinities between the concepts of criticality and taste, and the relevance of the latter for contemporary architectural discourse and production. Long associated with subjectivity, frivolity and pleasure, taste has often been understood as impossible to generalize from. In short, it would appear to be the antithesis of reason, theory and the critical. While accepting some of these descriptions, this paper challenges this conclusion, maintaining that it is a false and dangerous choice to make between taste and criticality. Instead, they must be understood as compliments of one another. This argument is positioned within the current debates of "post-criticality" and harnesses the thought of David Hume and Susan Sontag to make the case for expanding architecture's sensibilities.

WHICH CRITICAL?

In every entry in the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) for "critical" the key term is judgment. The first entry reads thus: "given to judging;"

Note the semi-colon. There's more to come, but it will only be a modification. This inclination to judge will remain at the core. Here's what follows the punctuation: "*esp.* given to adverse or unfavorable criticism; fault-finding, censorious." To be critical is to have a predilection (or a taste for) for making negative judgments. The second entry is more focused still: "involving or exercising careful judgment or observation; nice, exact, accurate, precise, punctual." It is no longer just a predisposition to judging, but a thorough, well grounded practice of decision making. Entry number six continues this trend: "tending to determine or decide; decisive, crucial."

Moving back up the list, we find a slight shift of focus in entry number five: "of the nature of, or constituting, a crisis." Part "b" of this entry continues, "involving suspense or grave fear as to the issue; attended with uncertainty or risk." Is it that such 'precision,' 'accuracy' and 'decisiveness' are what is needed to solve such crises (it takes the critical to resolve the critical) or, is it the case that no matter how 'careful' one is, 'uncertainty and risk' will always remain?

It comes as no surprise that the OED says *almost* exactly the same thing about the noun "critic." Entry one defines it as a person who "pronounces judgment on anything or person; *esp.* one who passes severe or unfavorable judgment; a censurer, fault-finder, caviler." This last term, caviler, is surprising but telling. A caviler is someone who is "crafty," or is "a captious[2] or frivolous objector, a quibbling disputant." In other words, one needn't be an expert, or even well intentioned, to be a critic, only convincing. Is this the crisis of criticism? Entry two seems to correct for this, limiting the field to those "skilful in judging of the qualities and merits of literary or

artistic works." Both skill and aesthetics have now been added into the mix. To be a critic, to be critical, is to have the *power* to decisively judge against something, especially aesthetic production. But how is this skill and its attendant power acquired and what legitimizes it? Taste? Knowledge? Both?

What then of the proper noun created when critical is used to modify theory: Critical Theory? At once a philosophy, a politics and an ideology, it meets every definition of "critical." It is at once negative, precise, crucial, decisive etc.; it emphasizes the importance of aesthetic production, and directly addresses the societal uncertainty and risk inherent in capitalism. It was established to oppose and combat the anemic social relationships and individual freedoms created by capitalist modes of production and consumption. Its goal was nothing less than to "liberate human beings from the circumstances that enslave them."[3] It tried to achieve this by creating a line of thought which would "explain what is wrong with current social reality, identify the actors to change it, and provide both clear norms for criticism and achievable practical goals for social transformation."[4] Thus, more than just a comment on the world, this mode of discourse was to be an active agent, empowering subjects to help democratically establish "their own historical form of life,"[5] by raising their consciousness of their situation.

WHO'S TASTE?

> …though the principles of taste be universal, and, nearly, if not entirely the same in all men; yet few are qualified to give judgment on any work of art, or establish their own sentiment as the standard of beauty.
> David Hume

The empirical philosopher David Hume describes taste using concepts and terms that are surprisingly similar to those used to describe "critical." For him, taste is the faculty employed for making judgments regarding sensorial and aesthetic phenomenon. Taste is a form of intelligence; a way of knowing the world by reconciling sensorial experience with cognition via the faculties of the imagination. It is the flip-side of criticism; criticism dealing mainly with negative judgments, taste concerning those associated with pleasure.

In his essay, "Of the Standard of Taste,"[6] he notes that most "common sense" notions of taste maintain that "sentiments" are all true because they cannot be linked to a concept outside of themselves. In this conception, everybody's individual taste is "right." This is opposed to judgments of "understanding" (philosophy, science) which are grounded by their adherence to external referents and are "always conformable to that standard." However, this lack of a unique standard does not render aesthetic experiences inconsequential or relative. Nor does it mean that sentiment and understanding are mutually exclusive modes of thought. While there are no *a priori* rules governing artistic production – or "compositions" - they are grounded like all practical knowledge "on experience and on the observation of the common sentiments of human nature." In this realm the works that are deemed the best are those that have withstood the test of time, and are generally agreed to exhibit the highest qualities of the art. This emphasis on historical continuity, he provocatively argues, accounts for why the rhetoric of Cicero is still held in high regard even after the ideas have been rendered obsolete.

But who is it that determines what remains relevant? What kind of critic is capable of making such judgments? Who is allowed to create and enforce the canon? What qualities must the critic have to enable her to recognize the affinity between "form and sentiment" in the works that continue to earn praise, as well as any new ones that will? What is clear is that such a person has taste. And for Hume the skills associated with this capacity are: a delicacy of imagination, good sense (i.e. reason), practice, constant comparisons between both new work and canonical examples, and a lack of prejudice.

While he makes it clear that delicacy is a gift of birth, it, along with the others factors, can be improved or diminished over time depending on how often and well it is exercised and experienced. He also makes it clear that while the principles underlying this faculty are universal, the specific skills and qualities necessary for developing ones taste are historically conditioned, differ over time, from place to place, and from one discursive field to the next. The principles and practices of taste may not change, yet objects and contexts in which they emerge do. One must not only learn how to use taste, but one must do so within the confines of a specific cultural, historical and aesthetic context. This requires one to fine tune one's faculties in order to determine when something is still relevant or superior and when something new is worthy of entering the canon.

But does not the establishment of a canon, via experience or otherwise, preclude or at least slow down innovation and diversity? Late in the essay Hume notes that there are conditions which, although not enough to undermine "all boundaries of beauty and deformity," do account for and accept difference.

> [Although] the general principles of taste are uniform in human nature … where there is such a diversity in the internal frame or external situation … [that there is] no room to give one the preference over the other; in that case a certain degree of diversity in judgment is unavoidable.

The internal and external conditions that produce this variety are respectively: the "different humours in men" and the "particular manners and opinions of our age and country."

How then is this not a return to there being multiple, if not infinitely "right" sentiments? Hume's answer is that while there are not countless modes or genres of aesthetic production, there is a plurality of them, each of them governed by their own standards. He takes pains not to establish a hierarchy among these different genres or sensibilities. The sublime, the tender, and raillery are equally valid. While it is difficult if not impossible to employ the principles of taste across these them, within each of them, one can be critical of the varying degrees of quality. Taste is neither universal nor infinitely fragmented. Taste is plural. This tolerance of multiple modes is the opposite of the prejudice that prevents one from developing one's taste. Having a specific sensibility or preference for one thing does not mean negating other equally valid ones. It would be a mistake, Hume notes, for "a critic to confine his approbation to one species or style of writing, and condemn all the rest." He continues, the selection of our preferred sensibilities occurs in the same way in which we chose our friends, picking ones that we share the same "humour and disposition" with. Taste is faculty of recognition, of comradely, of empathy. It produces collective subjectivities as it generates individual ones.

MOVING ON

> … Intellectual progress usually occurs through sheer abandonment of questions together with both of the alternatives they assume - an abandonment that results from their decreasing vitality and a change of urgent interest. We don't solve them: we get over them.[7]
> John Dewey

What is not allowed by Hume for any sensibility, time period or culture, is for "morality" to be undermined or obfuscated. Here is the moment a criticality that foreshadows Critical Theory. Sentiment and good taste cannot trump immoral acts. Good form cannot justify bad behavior.

Such is accusation against the recent "post-critical" or "projective" turn in architectural discourse and production. To its detractors, the post-critical is dangerous because, 1) it abandons both the means and the ends of Critical Theory; 2) replaces them either with the facile charms of pragmatics and decoration, and 3) furthers the agenda of the social, economic and aesthetic status quo by failing to provide truly oppositional (i.e. structural or utopian) alternatives to it.[8] While it is true that the means of Critical Theory have been challenged and new modes of production proposed, it is less obvious that this is a sign of capitulation to the forces that be. In fact, it is the opposite of this, using methods both ornamental (not decorative) and banal to combat them.

To better understand the agenda of the post-critical, we should start by noting that as a prefix, "post-" is not a synonym for "anti-." The OED has it as: "afterwards, after, subsequently." The post-critical anticipates what happens after the critical (theory) moment is over, if it isn't already, and asks, what do we do now? How do we move beyond (not against) its insights and impasses? The post-critical recognizes that, after things have been 'explained, actors identified, and goals of social transformation declared,' one still needs to establish contemporary skills and methods that are critical to achieving them today. This means experimenting with multiple formal and theoretical strategies other than the autonomous and difficult championed by Critical Theory. The focus on the plural is an important tenant of what Somol & Whiting call "the projective," and represents an epistemological shift from the establishment of logical " if … than" statements, to the posing of the aesthetic question: "What if … ?" This emphasis on multiple alternatives is not to be confused with utopian solutions, which seek to carve out a space of resistance. Rather, it is a call for the proliferation of alternatives - in Hume's terms, for different sentiments - that could exist within current conditions but are presently repressed.

Despite these divisions, there are some moments of continuity between the critical and the post-crit-

ical. An important example is Somol & Whiting's observation that "the sophistication" of Michael Hays' position on critical architecture, is that he recognizes that autonomy is a *precondition* for engagement with the social, not a retreat from it – a position Somol & Whiting share.[9] The concept of autonomy is a touchstone of one of the founders of Critical Theory, Theodore Adorno. He argued that the critical work of art is at once generated by conditions found in the world, yet is separate from it. This paradoxical condition serves as a reminder as to what ideas and actions are impossible at any one historical moment, and thus have no home in the world other than in the estranged world of artistic form. Such forms are not intended to produce pleasure or pain, rather, they at once reveal and position themselves between human beings and the conditions that oppress them. [10]

What Somol and Whiting find objectionable is that by 2002 this previously exceptional position of critical architecture – straddling culture and form, engagement and estrangement – was now deemed the defacto position attributed to all legitimate forms of architectural production. Further, there was seemingly only one long-standing aesthetic technique for articulating this position, indexicality (or hot). In addition to it being a representational rather than a propositional mode of production, the continued focus on a particular tactic runs counter to own Adorno's position that critical aesthetic strategies (and forms) needed to evolve in order to effectively address the contemporary state of the ongoing crises; this capacity to adapt being a key characteristic of the avant-garde he championed. This suggests that both the critical skill for designers and critics alike is to recognize when the (battle)field has changed significantly enough to warrant the devising of a plethora of new strategies for operating effectively in it. The goal remains the same, but the tactics must change. In this sense, the critique of the critical is less a question of its substance than its style. Or, in Hume's definition of taste, the principles stay the same but the forms will change.

Somol & Whiting propose two such tactics – the Doppler and the cool – which emphasize, account for and interrogate the ever-changing relationships (explained as an expanded form of parallax) between subjects and objects (and between objects and objects). In these and all other aesthetic proposals, invention (i.e. design) is recognized as the key to engagement and resistance. Thus, architecture's legitimacy and effectiveness rests on its ability to generate and design new forms and sensibilities. This ability is what allows architecture, when it engages issues outside its traditional scope – their examples are "economics and civic politics" – to do so not as experts in these subjects, nor as critics of them, but as "experts in how design can affect these fields."[11] This suggests that in order to be affective, architectural design, theory and criticism must not only be armed with good intentions and knowledge, but with taste.

NEW SENSIBILITIES

> Taste has no system and no proofs. But there is something like a logic of taste: the consistent sensibility which underlies and gives rise to a certain taste. A sensibility is almost, but not quite, ineffable. Any sensibility which can be crammed into the mold of a system, or handled with the rough tools of proof, is no longer a sensibility at all. It has hardened into an idea.
> Susan Sontag

One of the most astute accounts regarding the importance and effectiveness of sensibility and taste, and the need to breed multiple ones, is found in Susan Sontag's essay "Notes on Camp." Among the qualities Sontag found valuable about Camp was the fact that it wasn't conceived of as an exchange of bad for good art, or low for high taste. Rather, it rejected such false choices, instead offering "for art (and life) a different -- *a supplementary* -- set of standards" to make and judge cultural production. Specifically, Camp was understood as a contrasting addition to the "classical, serious, accurate and high minded" taste, and to the then more contemporary sensibility of "seriousness, anguish, cruelty, derangement" that described much modern art. If the former emphasized beauty, harmony and completeness, and the latter violence and fragmentation, Camp, was an aesthetics of frivolity and openness, "incarnate[ing] a victory of 'style' over 'content.'"

This emphasis on style was not to be misunderstood as a narcissistic retreat into pleasure. For her the Camp aesthetic had serious ethical implications, as it revealed "another kind of truth about the human situation, another experience of what it is to be human - in short, another valid sensibility;" a sensibility that, not unimportantly, was often produced and championed by a marginalized social group: urban gay men. Camp, like all sensibilities,

became an avenue for generating and legitimizing a different form of collective identity.

Despite appearances, camp was neither immoral nor anti-intellectual. She notes, following Hume, that while morals are essential and generative, they are also somewhat fixed. What really counts, she argues, is "the style in which ideas are held. The ideas about morality and politics … [in Camp are] held in a special playful way," a way that makes them valuable to someone who can discern the characteristics of this sensibility, i.e. someone with taste. In this case, a taste for camp, a sensibility which may initially have appeared foreign, crude and superficial, but which via practice, constant comparison and good sense, becomes an more ever more delicate and better understood sensibility. In fact, Sontag's method of analysis, which comprises of describing the qualities of camp in a thorough and robust series of "notes," does nothing if not illustrate the efficacy of Hume's principles for developing one's taste.

Historically, camp emerges and is attractive "when one realizes that 'sincerity' is not enough.' The then current (circa 1964) sensibility of seriousness being deficient because it was neither able to distance itself from reality nor was it recognized as directly engaging itself within current ideological battles. By introducing a new standard - "artifice as an ideal" - Camp proposed an untimely interjection into a world that was serious to the point of suicide.

> "Camp proposes a comic vision of the world. But not a bitter or polemical comedy. If tragedy is an experience of hyperinvolvement, comedy is an experience of underinvolvement, of detachment."

This emphasis on comedy, underinvovlement, and detachment is far from a retreat into the ironic and self-referential modes of most post-modernism. Rather, its emphasis on doing something (making one laugh) rather than meaning or representing something, provided a new tool for directly engaging and affecting change and raising consciousness.[12] It was a way of being critical of the status quo, of identifying the agents for changing it, and for establishing new goals and modes for evaluating success.While it may be difficult to make a comic architecture, there are sensibilities and architects – including OMA, Herzog DeMeuron, Bjake Ingles Group (BIG), Atalier Bow Wow and Saana - that include humor in their design repertoire. These practices also stress sensibility over form, meaning, structure or use. The latter are not ignored, but they are guided by the desire to produce more sensibilities not more efficiency. In the case of these firms the new sensibilities include "the cool," "the graphic," and "the patterned." They represent only a few of many possible new sensibilities that can and are emerging today to challenge the critical, the autonomous, the hot and the indexical.

The emergence of new sensibilities requires new modes of criticism that can help examine and develop these phenomenon. In short, it requires that we simultaneously expand and refine our taste – as Sontag does in her notes - in order to see what new collective identities they attract, produce or inhibit.

It is not a question of reaffirming the phenomenological subject who (mis)recognizes herself in the object, or of producing the greatest pleasure for the greatest number. Rather, the goal is the production and organization of new collective identities via aesthetic means.

CRITICAL TASTE

> *"There is taste in people, visual taste, taste in emotion - and there is taste in acts, taste in morality. Intelligence, as well, is really a kind of taste: taste in ideas."*
> Susan Sontag

The question, following Hume, is how to judge whether such collectivities are themselves moral or not, and who has the capacity, the delicacy and good sense to know when they are and when they aren't. Here, Sontag's notion that nothing is more decisive than taste, and that it is equally applicable to questions of morality, intelligence and ideas, is crucial. In order to judge, to be critical, one needs to develop their faculty of taste. Sontag, in championing Camp, and for expanding the field of acceptable sensibilities and tastes echoes Hume's warning to critics not to pick one sensibility at the expense of all the rest.

Still, it is easy to infer from Sontag's fear of sensibilities "hardening into ideas" is evidence of a dangerously anti-intellectual stance. Such an interpretation is ironic, not only because Sontag was one of the leading public intellectuals of the past half century, but also because it limits the intellectual to such a narrow band-width. If architecture is only about ideas, or about a limited set of ideas, or about the representation of a limited set of ideas, concepts, politics etc., then why design, why not just write?

The emphasis of sensibility, taste and aesthetics is one way to generate new forms and modes of architectural intelligence. The aforementioned graphic, cool or patterned sensibilities are a few of the many potential forms this intelligence can take.[13] Does this plurality mean that it also resists ideation or theorization? Yes and no. The advantage of a sensibility resisting ideation and conceptualization is that it remains hypothetical and provisional, and thus is open to counter evidence. It can be constantly tested but never proven; perpetually responding to new information and noise; i.e. to experience.

Does this mean that these aesthetic sensibilities and the taste needed to understand, explain and further develop them are a-critical, or, only that they cannot be categorized as Critical Theory? Do they not allow, if not demand, one to judge with care and precision? Do they not offer a decisive stance? Yes, but what do they oppose, who or what might they liberate? For starters, the discipline of architecture. As with Camp, the production of new sensibilities like the cool, the graphic, and the patterned, helps to loosen the tyranny from the all-too-few modes of expression available to architects today. While it does not, and cannot offer a specific alternative to institutional power, it does what aesthetic practices do best: challenge that power's sensibility, not by discursively proving how unreasonable or unjust it is, but by proposing alternative ones to them. In this way sensibility and taste are things to be critical with, not of.[14]

ENDNOTES

1. Susan Sontag, "Notes on Camp," in *Against Interpretation and other Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus + Giroux, 1966), 275-292.
2. Which the OED defines as "fitted to ensnare or perplex in argument; designed to entrap or entangle by subtlety; fallacious, sophistical 3. Crafty; 4, humorous?" (the question marks is theirs).
3. Max Horkheimer, *Critical Theory*, (New York: Seabury Press, 1982), 244; cited in Bohman, "Critical Theory."
4. James Bohman, "Critical Theory," The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, on-line addition, http://plato.stanford.ed/entries/critical-theory/; accessed on 9/29/09
5. Max Horkheimer, *Between Philosophy and Social Science*, Cambridge: MIT Press 1993), 21; cited in Bohman, "Critical Theory."
6. David Hume, "Of the Standard of Taste," in *Aesthetics: A Comprehensive Anthology*, Steven M. Cahn and Aaron Meskin eds., (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2008), 103-112.
7. John Dewey, "The Influence of Darwin on Philosophy,"[1909] in The Influence of Darwin and Philosophy (New York: Holt, 1910), 19.
8. George Baird, "'Criticality' and its Discontents," Harvard Design Magazine, (Fall 2004/Winter 2005); Reinhold Martin, "Critical of What?" Harvard Design Magazine, 22 (Spring/Summer 2005).
9. Robert Somol and Sarah Whiting, "Notes Around the Doppler Effect and Other Moods of Modernism," *Perspecta* 33 (2002): 72-77.
10. Theodor Adorno, from "Aesthetic Theory," in *Aesthetics: A Comprehensive Anthology*, Steven M. Cahn and Aaron Meskin eds., (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2008), 358-369. In Adorno's words "unresolved antagonisms of reality reappear in art in the guise of immanent problems of artistic form;" form which presents both "an aesthetically complete object, while preserving within it the traces or fracture of those elements which resisted integration" and thus remain estranged, or absent from it, such as political and economic reform.
11. Somol & Whiting, op cit
12. It also recalls Somol and Whiting emphasis on "cool." The art critic Dave Hicky has argued for further expanding the field of acceptable artistic production, calling it "Redeemed Cosmopolitanism." Dave Hickey, *Beau Monde: Toward a Redeemed Cosmopolitanism* (Santa Fe: Site, 2001).
13. Patterns is another; see Andersen & Solomon, "Promiscuous Patterns, Synthetic Architecture," *Harvard Design Magazine* (Winter 2009, forthcoming).
14. This is consistent with Felix Guattari's notion that "creativity is resistance." See Verna Andermatt Conley, "creativity is resistance," from "Artists or 'Little Soldiers?' Felix Guattari's Ecological Paradigms," in Deleuze|Guattari & Ecology, Bernd Herzogenrath (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 119. See also Guattari's book, *The Three Ecologies* (London: Athone Press, 2000).