

Autonomy as a Model for Anonymity [in Architecture]

“While productive labor is changing the means of production into constituent elements of a new product, their value undergoes a metempsychosis. It deserts the consumed body to occupy the newly created one. But this transmigration takes place, as it were, behind the back of the actual labor in progress.”

— Karl Marx, *Capital* (1867)

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RECLAIMING INDISTINCTION

There appears to be a strange yet common misunderstanding about the relationship between autonomy and contingency in architecture where the two terms are treated as oppositional and mutually exclusive. This is certainly evident in the framing of the terms of debate being held at the 2015 ACSA Fall conference: Between the Autonomous and Contingent Object. Here Michael Hays’ text, *Critical Architecture: Between Culture and Form*, is used as a point of bifurcation of two camps—one concerned with architecture’s dependency on social and cultural production, the other with an obsession with the pursuit of architecture’s capacity to achieve an emancipatory status through autonomy. But this may in fact be a kind of sensationalist reading of Hays’ text—a diversion that produces a kind of farcical distinction that has lasted now for decades. As architecture now grapples with questions raised through speculative philosophy,¹ it appears to be doing so while reifying an unnecessarily anthropocentric model of autonomy—a hangover from the 1970’s that may prevent architecture from addressing problems that lie beyond our ability to both think and perceive them.² But why would either of these approaches be taken in the first place and are they just two ways of arriving at a similarly anthropocentric end—either making separate and distinct individuals (autonomy) or specific social objectives (culture)? The issue at the core of the question rests with how architectural difference is determined and if our own awareness of difference is a necessary or even desirable component in that equation.

While indeterminacy and emergence have come into the mainstream of architectural discourse, it has done so with a great deal of friction with modern conventions such as critical intent, authority, authorship and autonomy—all of which are projected upon the figure of the architect, the architectural object and the discipline of architecture itself.³ Central to these problems has been a cultural transition from a 20th century model of identity and autonomy toward a 21st century constituted by multiplicities and their fundamental unknowability manifesting in the speculative figure of anonymity. Hays himself declares authorship as the necessary component for the possibility of a “resistant authority” that through a “persistently rearticulated intent accumulates knowledge—more specific and

more precise—of the general architectural program and allows the growth of knowledge according to its own special beginnings and conventions rather than according to those derived from some prior authority.”⁴ But what Hays identifies as most important about Mies’ architecture is not that it privileges culture or form but rather that it (the architecture itself) resists the authority of both by rendering them indistinguishable from one another.

It is in the spirit of this observation that we should posit the question, “how might architecture [again] take up the problem of indistinction?” For the sake of debate I will make the following claims: First, architecture should invest in techniques that attempt to make no difference—no logic; no sensation; no recognizable affect—through the experimental production of anonymity. This means addressing the specific relationship between autonomy and contingency not as mutually exclusive of one another, but rather as paradoxically interdependent things. Second, this is a fundamentally political problem because it divests from human self-awareness as the cornerstone of critical thinking while turning toward the production of possible mediums that exist outside of our ability to sense or think them. The structural logic of sovereignty and the historical mutation of power into distributed rather than centralized forms is used to parallel the cultural disappearance of autonomy replaced as contingency. This serves to reinforce the claim of interdependency between autonomy and contingency. Third, by examining several contemporary projects including a project emerging from a recent graduate elective course of mine, I will demonstrate that autonomy and contingency are not only not oppositional to one another, but rather that they specifically form one another through the production of anonymous figures and new contingencies. Together, these claims establish the basis for a new project in architecture that pursues anonymity as a mechanism for new forms of un-human autonomy.

THE POLITICS OF ANONYMITY

Anonymity is a multivalent thing—at once both a threat to the possibility of imagining new futures while providing an exceptional incubatory space for possibilities to develop. The Ancient Greeks first developed the concept of anonymity as a kind of placeholder for things thought to exist but without identification. Its root, *anónymos*, is constructed from *an-* (without) and *-ónym* (word or name); translating into a class of unknowable things that operate outside of language and by extension understanding.⁵ Never something knowable but synthetically thinkable and material in nature, anonymity is perhaps the most valuable and controversial “natural” resource in the information economies of the Anthropocene. Furthermore, anonymity is posited as a kind of utopian performance objective within ever more efficient and distributed models of power, thus accounting for its complicit relationship to sovereignty and the evolving project of its disappearance toward ever more “gentle” models of governance. This argument looks to political theory in order to identify both the site and the function of anonymity in architecture.

The challenge for architecture since Tafuri’s *Critique of Architectural Ideology* lies in its ability to divorce the discipline from an obsession with sensation (both formal and cultural) and instead pursues the project of its apparent disappearance without losing effectiveness. But what constitutes such a non-confrontational mode of production and how does one experiment with it toward subversive ends? And what kinds of ethical dilemmas does such a mode of experimentation yield within our contemporary cultural logic?

THE LOGIC OF SOVEREIGNTY AND THE PROJECT OF ITS DISSOLUTION

In structural terms, anonymity is nearly indistinguishable from autonomy according to the political model of sovereignty. Carl Schmitt’s sovereign decision, the event upon which the production of sovereignty turns, provides us with the initial contours of a model of anonymity. For Schmitt, the sovereign, he who decides on the state of exception, is a necessary component for preservation of any given state. Applied to systems thinking, the sovereign decision is indistinct from systemic accidents where a kind of violence is unleashed that

neither “makes nor preserves law, but rather suspends it.”⁶ For the purposes of this argument, the significance of Schmitt’s definition⁷ is two-fold. First, it frames sovereignty as an attempt to internalize the unknowable force of social transformation into the state (or architecture) itself. Second, the decision exists for scenarios where a given system or state⁸ is incapable of making a decision for itself—when it is unable to make a distinction necessary for its own survival—it suspends the law in order to do so. By extension, all sovereign states turn on the production of specific individuals⁹ that reproduce the possibility of a state of exception¹⁰ and thus the figure of the sovereign.¹¹ These are the two poles where autonomy and its experimentation have historically existed. But these figures change over time and if architecture is to author historical transformations (as architects are so fond of thinking it capable of), then it is begs questioning not so much as to how any single power relation works, but rather how new forms of power mutate from one form to another by accident.

For Michel Foucault, establishing a genealogy of power and a history of mutations in power relations between these two figures is fundamental to modeling particular historical eras. Jeffrey Nealon’s reading of Foucault is particularly useful in that “today power functions more efficiently than in the sovereign mode... Power increases its hold on the body and the body politic precisely by becoming less obvious, more ubiquitous, and therefore more effective.”¹² Nealon goes on to state:

As power mutates, its primary pivot point becomes increasing “lighter,” more virtual, and its effects become more efficient as power shifts its privileged point of application—from the body, to the soul, to the action. As power increasingly targets not actual bodies themselves, but “what they do” (D&P 18), power thereby gains an intensified hold “also on what they are, will be, may be” (18). In short power’s mutation over time exists alongside the parallel emergence of power’s economic viability: producing the desired effects with fewer costs, less expenditures of time and effort; better results with less economic and political resistance.

So what we see is that the efficiency of power relations is a function of how little resistance it faces, political, economic or otherwise. Thus the design of an effective architecture is synonymous with the design and exploitation of efficiently anonymous forms of power. Critical resistance itself becomes a more difficult and even compromised proposition both because it must attempt to decide what is and is not aware of its own effects. But with this transformation of sovereignty from the figure of the individual into the figure of the accident, autonomy must also migrate from individual material bodies into virtual populations. This transformation accompanies a shift from understanding politics as a necessarily human endeavor to politics as a material model.¹³ This is perhaps what makes Mies the ultimate author in that he himself was not the author of significance. Rather, what Hays so mindfully points out is that the architecture itself of Mies “renders the issue of origins or first causes unproblematic, one arbitrary *cantus firmus* being imitated and repeated so many times as to lose its primacy.”¹⁴ This positions architecture both inside and outside of the things it produces in precisely the same way that the sovereign exists both within and outside of the law in a state of exception. With this in mind, architecture is necessarily political—not in a conventional, but rather a material sense.

AN ARCHITECTURAL TRACING OF MUTATIONS IN AUTONOMY

Architecture has a brief but intense period of deliberately experimenting with political autonomy beginning in earnest in the 1960’s with the Italian *Operaismo*, *Archizoom* and *Superstudio*, Aldo Rossi’s *Architecture of the City*, and the emergence of Peter Eisenman. While strategies and tactics differ from one another, the general similarity between them lies between their production of autonomy (specificity) amidst universal conditions (generic). For *Superstudio* and *Archizoom*, this meant architecture’s disappearance into a kind of absolute homogeneity while it’s users became either emancipated (in the case of the

Continuous Monument) or absolutely confined to a “bad infinity”¹⁵ (in the case of No-stop City). In both cases, the formal language of the architecture was repetition without difference while taking a different position as to how to distinguish its otherwise indistinguishable political value. In the case of Rossi’s *Architecture of the City*, autonomy is framed not in relation to an absolute homogeneity of the city, but rather with respect to the absolute heterogeneity of urban conditions. This approach necessitates a turn from the autonomy either of the user or the system as a whole toward the autonomy of the architectural object as a specific and distinct body within the polis. Eisenman takes this even further by exercising architecture’s autonomy through its ability to be generated through purely formal means absent of the cultural formation he addresses as function.¹⁶ So what we can decipher is a kind of mutation of power relations away from the user in the figure of the “free agent” toward a more precise and bound model of autonomy that addresses specific contingencies. This would at first appear to demonstrate and intuitive contradiction where autonomy is achieved through tighter constraints, and thus not autonomy at all. But this is rather an instancing of mutations toward more efficient and therefore less apparent forms of sovereignty distributed through their respective populations. Where autonomy was once sought through the body of the user and then manifested within the slightly more distributed architectural object, the territory of autonomy must once again be reconsidered.

The agency of architectural autonomy once again finds itself in crisis with buildings serving as too obvious and too apparent to yield the efficiency necessary to produce social transformations the way they did during the 20th century. It would seem that in many if not most cases, 20th century and early 21st century architecture strives to stand out and distinguish itself thus undermining its capacity to author historical mutations in the way that Mies, for example, was able to achieve. I argue that this is lazy mimicry driven by a contemporary cultural logic that the discipline is all too quick to reify. And while the Furthermore, this is where the significance of software and computational processes begins to offer itself as an alternative to an obsession with what we have historically considered architectural form—especially when these processes become indistinguishable from social-material populations themselves. The micro-decisions taking place within a post-digital milieu at any particular scope or scale are making distinctions and producing friction between things operating at other scales. The question for these processes in the context of anonymity is to employ them toward paths of least resistance—the strategic development of minimally frictive behaviors—as a means of producing a resistant authority absent of human intention or awareness. This is a kind of non-anthropocentric thought experiment for architecture to undertake acknowledging that perhaps we are not the answer to the problems we face now or in our future. The mistake that architecture continues to make in both culturally and formally biased pursuits is that they insist on privileging distinguishable human experience (generally program or sensation respectively) within these environments. But in the context of environmental crisis, anthropocentric models are proving to be either misguided or impotent. What’s worse is that architecture’s demonstrated capacity to generate autonomy or critical distance from its origin has also yielded a reverse effect where “the sum total of social labor undermines its own conditions of planetary existence.”¹⁷ In other words, the architecture of the things that constitute our cities and societies are failing to reproduce the ground upon which they depend. We have somehow forgotten the obvious: that autonomy is not exempt from contingency!¹⁸ And yet here we are now, still producing the sensation that we as architects and architecture itself can somehow achieve an emancipatory status from our own condition through the sheer intensity of formal operations when it is the intensity of these events that threatens our very existence.

ARCHITECTURE AS UNHUMAN THOUGHT

So does the question of the autonomy or contingency of objects mark a point in architectural thinking that demands a shift in orientation away from the liberal human subject or

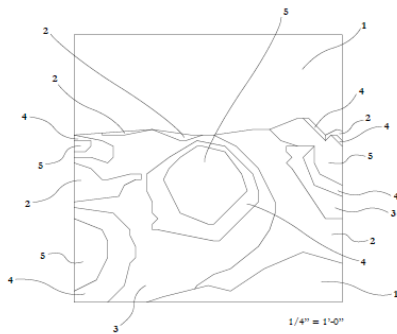


Fig. 1

- 1 Behr Ultra Pure White Self-Priming Interior Flat
- 2 Valspar Ultra White Matte Interior
- 3 Dunn-Edwards White Interior Flat Paint
- 4 Glidden White Interior Premium Paint Flat
- 5 Sherwin-Williams Extra White HGTV Home Interior Flat

Figure 1: Paint by number elevation.

Figure 2: Exterior photograph.



human populations at large? If we take the question seriously, I argue that it does demand such a shift.

In recent years, there has been a small but notable grouping of projects that have, most likely unintentionally, begun to play with the production of anonymity through both silence (similar to Hays' reading of Alexanderplatz) and material ambiguity (similar Hays' reading of the Barcelona Pavilion). The first example is First Office's Paranormal Panorama project at the MAK Garage Top. Here a series of precise architectural procedures is specified that projects a landscape of Mont Tendre onto a connected series of walls using a range of different white paints (Figure 1). The result is a nearly if not totally unrecognizable by patrons of the space, thereby demonstrating an architectural ability to produce difference recognized at one order while remaining non-existent to another. The question for Paranormal Panorama lies in its ability to move past minimalist tactics (perhaps into post-minimalist ones?) for the purpose of incorporating larger amounts of information manifest in formal assemblies that remain undetected (Figure 2). The deliberate pursuit of anonymity is likely not First Office's agenda, but the question of being able to intensify the work while maintaining its liminal aesthetic is perhaps a more reasonable way to express a possible direction for the work to continue in the name of anonymity.

It is one thing to paint by number across a 2-dimensional surface at the scale of a building, but quite another to sustain a liminal degree of recognition when moving into additional dimensional, more chromatic environments or at larger or longer scales. Such an example can be found in David Gissen's recent work, Reading Hollywood in the Smog. Here Gissen simulates the textual variations of the Hollywood sign made possible through the thickened air of a smoggy Los Angeles. The project speculates on the range of possibilities that might go unnoticed or perhaps misread when viewing the sign from a distance (Figure 3). The conflation of text into the realm of materiality demonstrates the generative capacity of anonymity by unravelling the precision of a pure transmission of information.



ENDNOTES

1. Meillassoux, Harmon, Bryant, Srnicek, Brassier, just to name a few.
2. Virilio's accident serves as the figure of these problems.
3. The fairness, appropriateness and/or accuracy of this projection is of course debatable.
4. K.M. Hays, *Critical Architecture: Between Culture and Form*, in *Perspecta* vol 21, 1984.
15. This argument was first presented at the ACSA 103 conference, J.M. Taron, *Anonymity and the Making of a Non-relational Architecture*, March 2015.
6. G. Agamben, *State of Exception*, University of Chicago Press, 2004.
7. One that emerges from the debate between Schmitt and Benjamin as described by Adorno.
8. For Schmitt and Benjamin, this territory is Law.
9. What Agamben calls bare life (homo sacer).
10. Another term developed and used by Agamben.
11. This is what Hardt & Negri articulate as the multitude and Empire respectively.
12. J. Nealon, *Foucault Beyond Foucault*, Stanford University Press, 2008.

While these two projects inadvertently stumble into the territory of anonymous architecture, a more deliberate set of experiments have taken place through an elective course I taught during the Winter 2015 term at the University of Calgary's Faculty of Environmental Design the University of Calgary's Faculty of Environmental Design.

One exemplary term project from the course undertaken by Mehdi Einifar exploits the historical insistence on anatomical parallels between architectural and human bodies by subjecting building facades to facial aging software. He notes that "comparing the face of a building to the human face has been a trend throughout the history of architecture. While both humans and architectures face the process of aging, there are some similarities and differences in the way they age. By considering the human face and a building's façade for our intervention, we can narrow down the scale of the project. Effects of aging on the human face are caused by loss of skin elasticity, loss of skin collagen, loss of volume, and gravity while effects of aging on the building's façade are due to weathering and natural causes including gravity, wind, rain etc." Einifar goes on to recursively subject 5 different building facades to the processes of Agingbooth, an app that instantly ages facial



Figure 3: The appearance of the letters of the Hollywood sign in the smog.

Figure 4: Agingbooth facade iterations.



photos. After a series of initial investigations, Einifar omits any superimposition of human facial imagery from the simulations and reduces the types to classical, modern and parametric while noting the number of years they were able to advance before achieving image collapse.. The results yield an interesting behavior: that classical and modern buildings are younger and capable of enduring much longer periods of simulated aging while parametric buildings, often subjected to time-based simulations in advance of their being realized, are much less resistant to the effects of time, often failing out after only one or two 35-year simulated periods. He concludes that while modern and classical architectures aim at eluding time through timelessness, parametric architecture alternatively aims at literally incorporating time into its body rather than attempting to dodge it. What Einifar's experiment reveals is not an artificial simulation of a building as it ages over time, but rather a test that determines how much time has already been integrated into the form of a building—producing a synthetic carbon date for a virtual arche-fossil.

CONCLUDING QUESTIONS

So what can be drawn as a conclusion from this set of experiments in the context of anonymity and the dissolution of sovereignty? For one, the viability of architecture as a critical endeavor is called into question precisely because the production of critical distance has become both a more illicit and a more difficult thing to achieve. But is it sufficient or even viable to pursue an architecture centralized upon our own knowledge? Has our complicity with environmental, social and political crisis disqualified us as a species from thinking a way forward or beyond ourselves? And if this is the case, might architecture expand its horizons without is toward a kind of "other" knowledge? And if so, what kind of tactics would it have to employ in order to keep us from precluding its development?

It may very well be that we are entering into an historical epoch where exceptionalism is no longer the model used to produce distance or induce social transformations. And if that is the case, than maybe this line of investigation is already irrelevant and without purpose. This has after all been the primary argument consistently levied against proponents of autonomy. But I remain skeptical of such blasé and unconsidered dismissals. Rather, the more likely case is that the project of ever more gentle (unsensed) modes of governance is in fact a distribution and intensification of exceptionalism (autonomy) itself, thus rendering the need for new modes of autonomy more important now than ever. But this places the historical and anthropocentric form of critical architecture at odds with this new trajectory while making the possibility of distinguishing between autonomy and contingency ever more difficult. So rather than elevating the project of critical architecture as a means of making [in vain] such a distinction legible (for us) and by extension producing an autonomy for us, architecture might instead invest in the production of an anonymous project where distinctions are made precisely beyond the limits of our perception by design so that our own shortcomings as a species might not preclude the possibility of social transformations.

13. Foucault's term biopolitics/biopower turn on this problem specifically, first developed in his lectures at the College de France. But the more precise reading of this problem can be found in an article written by Eugene Thacker titled Biological Sovereignty appearing in an issue of *Ply* (vol 17), 2006.
14. K.M. Hays, *Critical Architecture: Between Culture and Form*, in *Perspecta* vol 21, 1984.
15. P.V. Aureli, *The Project of Autonomy*, Princeton Architectural Press, 2008.
16. P. Eisenman, *Post-Functionalism*, *Oppositions* 6, 1976.
17. M. Wark, (Social) Theory for the Anthropocene, *futureswewant.net*, Nov 2, 2015.
18. Q. Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, Bloomsbury Academic, trans. by Ray Brassier, 2010.

Figure 5: Indecipherably aged facade.