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DOING AWAY WITH THE DISTURBANCE?

Nicola Emery

The accomplished rationalization of life seems to be accompanied by an ultimate mystique – the mystique of fluid space deprived of all finite and physical objectivity. Space that stages itself, its own void, the sterilization and disappearance of all otherness.

Space that is neither here nor there, but beyond any place; space that means „no", but in a negative henceforth bespeaking totally conventional neutrality. Space become „blasé," rife with elegant and global indifference. Minimalism?

Seen as such, this mystique of passing in review also lends expression, in somewhat strict terms, to the spirit of our desensitized world. Nor is it only a sort of mask: Despite Nietzsche's predictions¹, architecture almost knows how to adopt this disenchantment as a truth of its own – truth that certainly too often even, be it ever more often, remains pathetically enchanted ... blessedly bathing in the narcissistic aura of its presumed role as a protagonist in the dematerialization of the world. And the Entzauberung (disenchantment) that this signifies, signifies more than anything, or else signifies the anesthetizing of all things, of all opaque foreign bodies offering resistance to spatial dissolution. So it is not all that recent that this minimalism signifies and insists upon, with its neutrality, the end of art.

Execution, emptying, capital punishment of a body foreign to art – but can it really get to the root of the

question? A substitute for eliminating the misdemeanor appears and is quite easily be conceded: for instance, Concrete Art, an unobtrusive on-site installation ... And thus the fault and the disturbance are made to disappear in a single reciprocal gesture, and, in the final analysis, without causing all concerned the slightest trouble.

The transformation of the concept of „art," and of the hierarchical relationships between the various arts, reveals the effects of the power of abstraction that imposes itself here. Abstraction that imposes itself not only as an architectural trend but also, indeed primarily, as a form of rationalism, or an operative mode seeking to free itself of any substantial ties.

In the controversy going on today between the arts, and given the paradoxical „pole position" that now seems to eschew to architecture, the trend is to interpret, in coherent and painstaking fashion, the dematerialization, sterilization and even dissolution of the opacity of existence – such as it accompanies the imposition of the planetary technical installation on the remaining living world. Let us say space is supposed to be time that is speedily devoured, and that the fluid temporalizing of time – the liquid flow of every moment and segment akin to the melting of one snowflake into another – is meant to build up the ideal model (through paradox) for all spatial bodily

presence. Then, it would certainly be easy to understand that within the system of this architecture, all honor belongs to the active elimination of the shapeless world of painting and of such other works that, in their impossible-to-assimilate heterogeneity, obstruct the indifferent processuality of the neutral. In the light of this diffuse contemporary threat of an accomplished ending to the space for art, it goes beyond mere erudition to hark back to Mondrian and the De Stijl experience, which has been of such capital importance to much of architecture from that time until this day. In highly explicit terms, Mondrian upheld the need for a mortal combat against the otherness of art, against the extreme face of art as the infected face and body of the Other. In order to „oblige coarseness, weight and natural color to disappear," Mondrian called upon a „neutralizing and nullifying opposition" and an „alliance between Neo-Plastic art and the hygiene demanding smooth surfaces that are easy to clean." His goal expanded until the image of the enemy became condensed into the pitting of „the natural structure of bodies" against „their tragic expression." His idea was that the foreign enemy, the Other within us, needs to be „denaturalized," and that by applying these norms, one would end up destroying „the tragic expression of the House, the Street and the City. Through balanced oppositions, dimensional relationships and colors applied according to positional relationships, physical and moral joy, the requisites of salvation, will spread. With a little good will, it should not be difficult to create a sort of Eden."²

Nowadays, this utopian-eschatological ambition so open to action and belonging to a program drawn up some 70 years ago may draw a smile. Let us allow that, on the one hand, today's „blasé" architecture has no trouble ridding itself of the finalizing tension expressed here, which is perceived as emphatically ideological. The problem is that, on the other hand, the same architecture will find it far more difficult to explode the connected principles of „neutralizing and nullifying" intended to control and contain any element of radical questioning, any heterogeneous disturbance of taste. Yet this is exactly what is at stake. There is a need to readjust the relationships between the different arts – for instance the relationship with the shapeless world of painting-painting –

while allowing architecture to maintain, in more or less overt and conscious fashion, its compositional principles of „balanced oppositions," „dimensional relationships," and „colors applied according to positional relationships." Fulfilling this need means acknowledging that these laws, and the memory of them frozen into illegitimate authority, lie at the source of the ongoing and progressive threat of a worrisome reduction of the space available to the heterogeneity of art, a reduction of its extreme atmosphere.

¹ „Originally everything about a Greek or Christian building meant something in reference to a higher order of things. This atmosphere of inexhaustible meaningfulness hung about the building like a magic veil. [...] What is the beauty of a building to us now? The same as the beautiful face of a woman without spirit: something masklike." In: F. Nietzsche, "Human, All Too Human," § 218.

² Translated from the French translation of the Italian quote. Excerpts taken from an essay by Mondrian titled „Neo-plasticism; Home-Street-City" and first published in Lehnig's International Revue i10, 1927.