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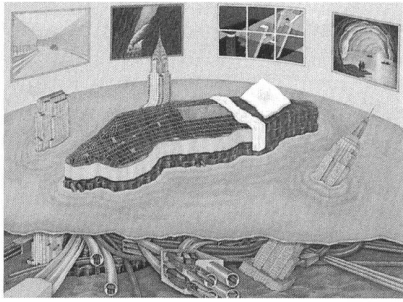
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Frances Hsu

(Per)Forming Modernism: In the Name of the Fathers

Rem Koolhaas is alone, among his peers, in his desire to struggle with modernism. My interpretation attempts to critically engage the import of modernism of his theory, practice, strategy and ethic. The story I tell takes Koolhaas himself – his attitude, his mentality – into account as well as his projects, in order to understand a certain number of the techniques invested in his architecture. I will suggest that his work, through repetition, problematizes our modernist past. I then complicate this notion by proposing that a certain dynamic of the fetish is registered by his repetitions, a dynamic I speculate can be approached through schizo-analysis, Deleuze and Guattari's logic of the unconscious. This "creative writing" turns the paranoid-critical method back onto its confiscator, to reveal the "hidden" filiations between the apparent opposites of Modernism and Manhattanism.

Manhattanism: the unconscious, inexplicit, retroactive

From the outset, Koolhaas situates his enterprise in the realm of the unconscious: "Manhattan is the product of an unformulated theory, Manhattanism, whose program ... was so ambitious that to be realised, it could never be openly stated. Manhattan's architects performed their miracles in a climate of dissimulation, luxuriating in a self-imposed unconsciousness."¹ That is, Manhattanism was possible only because it was never openly stated. Manhattan's program was performed, in a state of unconsciousness.

Koolhaas describes his own work as "a sequence of architectural projects that solidifies Manhattanism into an explicit doctrine and negotiates the transition from Manhattanism's unconscious architectural production to a conscious phase."² The task, therefore, is to conceptualise the inexplicit and to consciously formulate the unconscious. The space between Koolhaas' rhetoric and the inherent nature of his work is a symptom of this task. On the tactic he writes: "The retroactive formulation of Manhattan's program is a polemical operation. It reveals a number of strategies, theorems and breakthroughs that not only give logic and pattern to the city's past performance, but whose continuing validity is itself an argument for a second coming of Manhattanism."³

Retroaction will enable the second coming of Manhattanism. Retro-action is action deferred, when an event is registered only through a later

occurrence that recodes it. Each epoch dreams the next, Walter Benjamin wrote, and in doing so revises the one before it. Koolhaas discovers – in an architecture developed during the same years as European modernism, in a world existing at the same time as the Bauhaus, in the context of the 1970’s post-modernist search for meaning in the imitation of pre-modern form – in retroaction, his own polemic for the critical reinscription of the past in the present.

At the same time he argues for a second coming of Manhattanism, Koolhaas remarks that “this is the first time that an architect can build all over the world.” But this isn’t true: The first time was modernism; this is the second time. If his work does, as he says, “(solidify) Manhattanism into an explicit doctrine” and is driven, as I will show, by modernism, then what we see entangled in his retroactivity is a slippage between Manhattanism, modernism and modernity. Not only a confusion of time throwing over “any simple relation of cause and effect, before and after, origin and repetition”⁴ calling into question the modernist rites of replication and reproducibility; but also a continual relay of past, present and future in which “it is the very idea of a first time that becomes enigmatic.”⁵

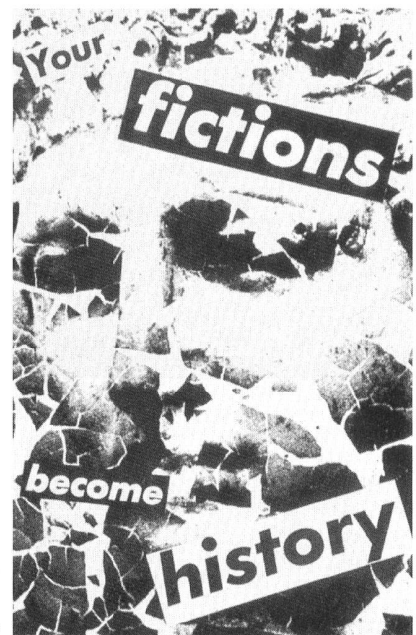
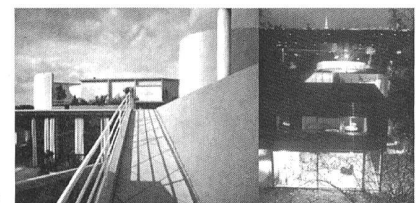
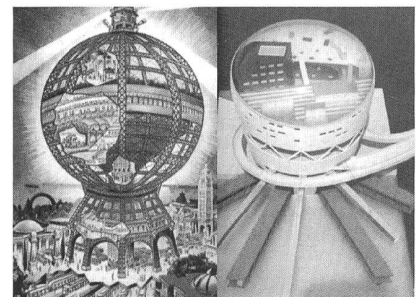
Repeating the modern

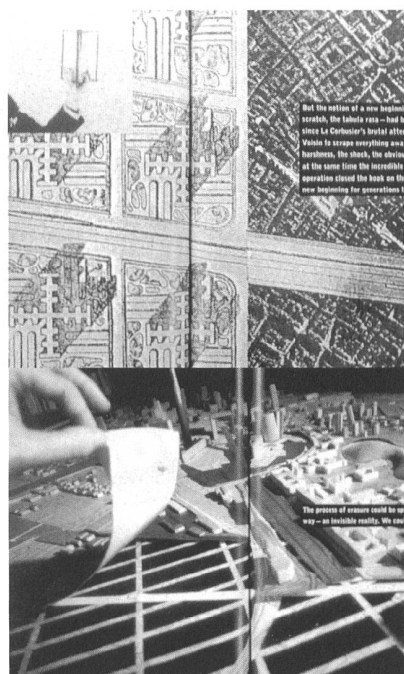
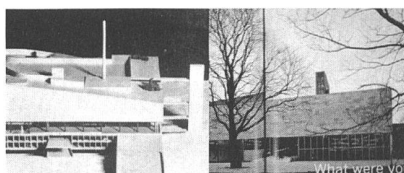
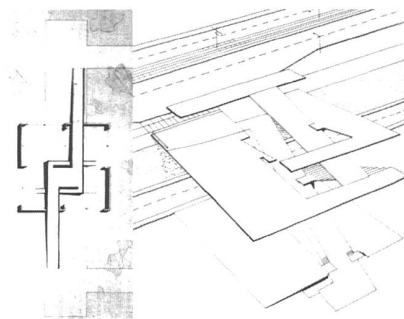
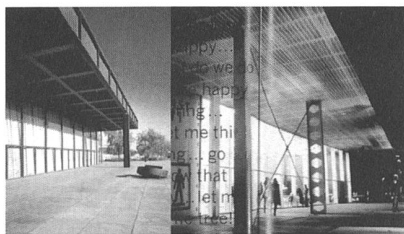
Koolhaas brackets Manhattanism and Modernism as signs of the modern. At the same time he is engaged in repositioning the modernist’s search for a New World. These techniques result in a surreal play of tensions between the universe of modern(ist) signs and the domain of the real, the now. Image and text, broken apart, interlaced and reinscribed into contemporary contexts:

1: Displacements and disinterments of Manhattanism’s omnipresent objects of desire.

2: Appropriations and deformations of modernism’s icons and images: the Villa dell’Ava not only “looks like” the Villa Savoye, but also in SMLXL mimics Corbusier’s images in his oeuvre completè illustrating his Five Points of Architecture. This type of quotation suspends the object in an ambiguous state, one that lies between architecture and text. It is a writing on Corbusier comparable to the writing of Barbara Kruger.

The Kunsthal is a complex, excessive multitude of signs, each with several significations. It is an exquisite corpse where the surfeit of parts overwhelms the whole, a theater-in-the-round where the staging of





parallax, technically the displacement due to the actual movement of the observer, underscores that our framings of the past are dependant on our positions in the present.

Koolhaas' frequent elaborations of water can be understood as readings of the Corbusian icon of the ocean liner that focus not on the object (the ship) but on its frame-of-reference (the water). Water is historically and psychologically the site of birth and folly. The Raft of the Medusa, Noah's Ark, The Floating Pool, the Roman bath as constructivist social condenser: Koolhaas reinterprets a modernist icon in the post-modernist age of psychoanalysis.

3: Disguisals of the modernist search for the New World: Koolhaas begins in "Delirious New York" where the artificial architecture of Manhattanism is the "other" of traditional European classicism. He returns to Europe, at Lille, and looks to Asia, in Seoul and Hanoi, in search of a new New World. While his terms are as numerous as they are well-known, the discourse itself is contradictory and paradoxical. If he characterises Manhattanism, his urban model, as an experiment lacking a manifesto he is nevertheless persistent in his attempts to find a "new newness." His scripts for the future slip between the frames of history, theory and analysis, exhibiting an imbalance between subjectivity and objectivity, reflection and generalization. Koolhaas attempts to pinpoint the future by locating the new, yet the present is site of the new. Thus he is saying that the present is the future.

Anticipated futures, reconstructed pasts,⁶ immanent presents

The relay between future, past and present is explicit in OMA's competition project for La Défense, which is at the same time both and neither Manhattanism and Modernism. In this undecidability lies a connection between modernism's one-size-fits-all universalism, and Bigness and "SMLXL". "Tabula Rasa Revisited" anticipates the future by "erasing" the past, reenacting the modernist operation that doubles as, in fact reveals, Manhattanism. Yet in the end is the beginning, a dilemma that is created by the paradigm, which was initially proposed as a solution.

In repeating the modern, Koolhaas not only reproduces the original struggle; he also produces another, his own, struggle. His is a form of work in which the problems are the solutions. He does not (want to) get rid of the problems. In fact, he wants to intensify them – just like the architects of Manhattanism who, he writes, "far from solving any problems, propose metaphors that order and interpret an otherwise incomprehensible Metropolis."⁷ In this sense Koolhaas works not with the intention to judge or define, but to defer judgement and find the undefinable. His architecture is about possibility, so he is always searching for impossibilities. He is looking not so much for freedom or liberation as simply a way out. He has been (voluntarily) kidnapped, and must call home to assure everyone that he is all right.

The absence of discussion on modernism and Manhattanism is intriguing because it is Koolhaas himself who circumscribes them into the territory of his activity with his first two texts, written over two decades ago. The subject of his earliest is Leonidov, "an obsession that began even before I started architecture school."⁸ In the next, "Delirious New York," he identifies a grouping of both modernists and "Manhattanists": Raymond Hood, Wallace Hamsen, Salvador Dali, Le Corbusier – namely, his fathers.

The article on Leonidov appearing in "Oppositions" in 1974 is only a small part of a never-to-be-completed book that was initiated when Koolhaas was 23, in 1967 – as he says, before he started architecture school. It is interesting to note that his research for "Delirious New York" was initiated shortly before he finished architecture school. And as he recalls, this book was conceived before he ever visited Manhattan and

written largely after he had left the city where he did the bulk of his research. That is: Even before the beginning of his career, before the founding of OMA, the displacement and deferral – i.e. retroaction – that will come to mark his later work is established.

Koolhaas denies the moral, ideological and aesthetic baggage of his modernist fathers while recasting their iconic and representational presence in the present. At the same time he is engaged in inscribing the present (i.e., his presence) into the past. He does this by rewriting modernism as a series of missed encounters (“Dali and Corbusier Conquer New York” in “Delirious New York”) and false memories (“Less is More,” “The House that Made Mies” in “SMLXL”).⁹

“Dali and Corbusier Conquer New York” narrates the imaginary acquaintance between the apparently opposed Surrealist and Modernist. “Less is More,” OMA’s contribution to the 1986 Biennale, reconstructs the Barcelona Pavilion and installs various media interventions in the space. Koolhaas wants to demonstrate its appropriateness for contemporary life and “to shock people into an awareness of the ‘hidden’ dimensions of modern architecture.”¹⁰ The Barcelona Pavilion stands for both contemporary life and modern architecture. Koolhaas “remembers” the rebuilding of the pavilion, tracing its path from Barcelona to wartime Berlin back to Barcelona, making its history inevitably and inaccurately part of his own. “The House that Made Mies” is Koolhaas’ story of the German architect’s only (if unrealized) commission in Holland, where he sets himself up as inheritor of the legacy by identifying Mies as the architect of “his mother’s friends grandmother.”¹¹

Repetition, fetish, schizoanalysis

Thus formulated, Koolhaas’ practices of repetition cannot be discussed in terms of influences, imitation and authenticity alone. These concepts do not account for the slippages, obsessions and denials, anticipations and deferrals, contradictions and paradoxes, false memories and missed encounters that in fact structure his production. A model that might better describe them is the Freudian concept of repetition. This concept points to neither the restoration nor the mastery of the struggle; neither to its reproduction in the sense of representation, of a referent, nor the simulation, of a detached signifier. Rather, it speaks to repetitions marking “the ruptures between the perception and the consciousness of a subject touched by image(s)”¹² of modern(ism).

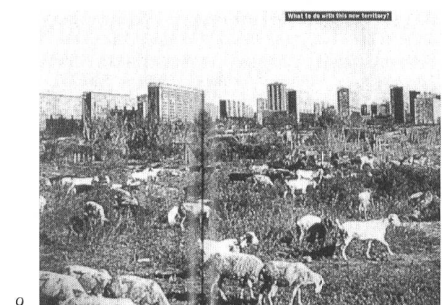
These terms are connected in the discourse of fetishism. The fetish is an object that negotiates the misfit (ruptures) existing between knowledge and desire (perception and consciousness). Both a compromise and a substitute, it is basically a reference to something you want but know you can’t have. According to Freud, the fetish is a schizophrenic state allowing the fetishist to suspend disbelief, postpone judgement and memorialize the castration.

The fetish as site of an architectural castration – might this evoke Koolhaas’ struggle with the commodification and lost opportunities of modernism? And explain his activity as “an architect ... with the need to analyse exact conditions and exact potentials of the profession”?¹³ A profession he calls a bestial activity and describes as “a lead ball chained to a prisoner’s leg”?¹⁴ The fetishisation of the exotic – might this be a context for the Flying Dutchman’s obsession with transatlantic transference? Transference seen in objects of Manhattanism and Modernism displaced into contemporary contexts?

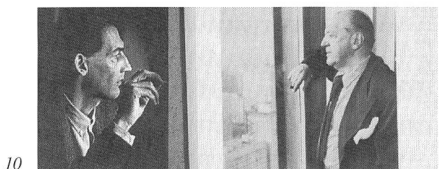
In an attempt to formulate a specific place for fetish in Koolhaas’ work, I would propose that it is not so much the objects themselves which are the primary concern but rather the system of relations established by and circulating around the objects. I would say that for Koolhaas, a certain



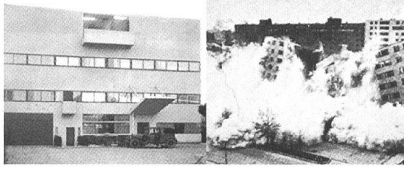
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11

"Pruitt Igoe, the black and white images of Cartesian collapse burn inside our heads."
Koolhaas in "Thinking Big", *Art forum Int.*, 1994

Illustrations

0 Madelon Vriesendorp, *Freud Unlimited* (Delirious New York)

1 Globe Tower (Delirious New York); Sea Trade Center Zeebrugge (SMLXL)

2 Villa Savoye (Le Corbusier, *Oeuvre complet*); Villa dell'Ava (SMLXL)

3 Barbara Kruger, *Untitled*, 1981-83 (from Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real, the Avant-garde at the End of the Century*, Cambridge, MIT Press, p. 95)

4 Mies van der Rohe, *Nationalgalerie Berlin* (from J. L. Cohen, *Mies van der Rohe, Paris*, Editions Hazan, 1994, p. 127); *Kunsthal Rotterdam*, SMLXL

5 Le Corbusier, preliminary study for an exhibition pavilion; *Kunsthal* (SMLXL)

6 Strassbourg, *Le Corbusier*, *Kunsthal* (SMLXL)

7-9 *Tabula Rasa Revisited*, Mission Grand Axe, La Defense, Paris (SMLXL)

10 Mies van der Rohe (from Cohen, p. 101); Rem Koolhaas (El Croquis 53, p. 4)

11 Villa Stein, Pruitt Igoe (from Charles Jencks, "Postmodern Architecture")

1 Rem Koolhaas, *Delirious New York, A Retroactive Manifesto for Manhattan* (New York: Monacelli Press, 1994): 10, 293.

2 Koolhaas, 11.

3 Koolhaas, 10.

4 Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real, The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: 1996): 29.

5 Jacques Derrida, *Freud and the Scene of Writing* (1966)

6 In his essay devoted to modernism and postmodern art, Foster reads the Freudian concept of deferred action through Lacan, as "a complex process of anticipated futures and reconstructed pasts." (Foster, 207)

7 Koolhaas, 123.

8 Koolhaas, in an interview held with the author, spring '97.

9 There are several 7-year delays occurring in Koolhaas' activity. In 1967 he began his work on Leonidov; the *Oppositions* article was published 7 years later in 1974. In 1971 (one year before receiving his diploma from the Architectural Association) he initiated the research on New York that would lead to the first publication of *Delirious New York*, again 7 years later, in 1978. The 1986 Biennale marks the first appearance of Mies van der Rohe in his work. "The House that Made Mies," the next and only other discourse on this architect, which I believe to be published for the first time in SMLXL where it immediately follows "Less is More," is dated 1993.

10 From an unpublished book of competition texts.

11 O.M.A., Rem Koolhaas and Bruce Mau, *S,M,L,XL* (Rotterdam: 010 Publishers, 1995): 62.

12 "Pruitt Igoe: The black and white images of Cartesian collapse burn inside our heads." (SMLXL) See Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1978): 17-64.

13 *El Croquis* 53, p. 31.

14 O.M.A., Koolhaas and B. Mau, SMLXL, xix.

15 Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus, Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. R. Hurley, M. Seem, H. Lane (London: Athlone Press Ltd., 1984): 103

16 Koolhaas, *Delirious New York*, 9.

17 *ibid.*, 9.

18 *ibid.*, 11.

19 *ibid.*, 309.

dynamic of the fetish is at work, a dynamic registered in the assemblages of actions, images and fantasies constructed by his repetitions of modern(ism). This is not a supposition about who Koolhaas is (he may well be, as many have either concluded or implied, the Corbusier of our times); not, psychologically speaking, about "what he wants" (i.e., not about being fixated by ghosts of the past, or camouflaging with parody all the weight of the great dead figures of architecture.) Rather, this is a speculation on Koolhaas' practice as a process that both constitutes and produces it; on a functional dynamic that is the unconscious, inexplicit motivation; on what I think can be understood through Deleuze and Guattari's concept of schizoanalysis.

Schizoanalysis is "the process whereby the unconscious produces and reproduces itself. Unlike psychoanalysis, it does not reduce or interpret the unconscious, or make it signify something else. In schizoanalysis, the unconscious is a machinic network, whose issue is to produce the unconscious, and with it new statements, different desires."¹⁵ In short, schizoanalysis is the machinic production of unconscious desires. Here I can make the connection back to Manhattanism, the architecture of the unconscious. On desire, I would direct the reader to the enigmatic opening lines of "Delirious New York" that advise us "to look for proof not in the external world, but in the very modifications of the mind that mediates on it,"¹⁶ asking "Why do we have a mind if not to get our way?"¹⁷

Koolhaas overturns machinic desiring-production into a theater of representation. Does this notion reposition the role of repetition in his practice? Machinic-desiring production is compulsive repetition, like automatic writing and automatic architecture. In "Delirious New York" he writes of the Empire State as automatic architecture, a surrender to the building processes of Manhattanism comparable to the automatic writing which is happening at the same time in Europe. If Koolhaas wants to provoke a second coming of Manhattanism, and calls Manhattan the *Capital of Perpetual Crisis*¹⁸, then machinic, or compulsive, repetition could point to a subject who works by taking on the crisis as a mimetic defense, or screen, against the trauma that is produced by its reproduction.

"Arrival of the Floating Pool: After 40 years of crossing the Atlantic, the architects/lifeguards reach their destination. But they hardly notice it: due to the particular form of locomotion of the pool – its reaction to their own displacement in the water – they have to swim toward what they want to get away from and away from where they want to go."¹⁹