Breaking language
A reading of ADVVT's work
Tiago Trigo

fig. a. Haus Kouter, ADVVT. Photography: Filip Dujardin, 2013.

«The cellar stairway is so steep that my aunt and uncle forbade my using it, but I'd heard someone say there was a world down there. (...) One day when no one was home I started down in secret, but I stumbled and fell. When I opened my eyes, I saw the Aleph. ⟨The Aleph?⟩, I repeated. Yes, the only place on earth where all places are—seen from every angle, each standing clear, without any confusion or blending.»[1]
Jorge Luis Borges, ⟨The Aleph⟩

The invention behind every word is a consequence of our desire to designate all that surrounds us. The word mountain was invented out of this concrete necessity. It was only after mountain, when everything that had been seen by everyone was finally named, that we became poets. Words have, since then, been the fundamental foundation to all our myths. Still, words bear no truth within them. The word to designate mountain could be door. By a mere question of chance, it is not. Every word must hence be seen as a fiction, a random codification.
With time, we proceeded from the codification of the physical world—like mountain—to the codification of abstract or non-existing concepts and structures, like time itself. Time, throughout the ages, became subject to the creation of its own mythology. Presently, the measure of duration which is considered to be the base unit of time is the second. Its official definition, since 1967, reads: «the second is the duration of 9192631770 periods of the radiation corresponding to the transition between the two hyperfine levels of the ground state of the caesium 133 atom.»[2]
Since its creation, the idea of second has been continuously redefined to the point where it is almost no longer legible. Our ambition not to leave anything undefined made us embark on a seemingly never-ending journey of manipulating concepts to the point where they lose their readability and, consequently, their meaning. As Hannah Arendt underlined, this febrile posture has led us to the point where, as with second, we say «sentences that are perhaps not as void of meaning as a ⟨triangular circle⟩, but are much more absurd than a ⟨winged lion⟩»[3].

This dissonance between meaning and definition is the probable reason for the customary practice of starting writings with an etymological analysis of the subject in question. Etymology legitimizes our words as the path leading backwards to an original moment of choice. Even so, it is probably treasured as legitimizing not because it is orderly—there is nothing more arbitrary than order—

but because it portrays the origin of possibility for possibility. A route leading not to meaning itself but to the possibility of meaning. An Aleph where all potential paths were once conglobated.

Architecten De Vylder Vinck Taillieu usually start presentations about their work with an image of what they have named the San Gottardo Double. This image is used to underscore the importance of context in our perception of space—if Stonehenge was built next to a quarry it would have no meaning.
The San Gottardo Double consists of a diptych of the San Gottardo pass in the Alps. Two identical photographs that were taken from the same angle on two different occasions, with one of them being partly concealed by mist. The mist, covering the second frame, underlines the presence of an equestrian statue, a traffic sign and an electric transmission tower, unexpectedly establishing a dialogue within these elements and making them active components of the image. These two photographs underline the process of reading reality, when new connections suddenly arise between apparently unrelated elements. A process when, as if through a sort of temporary blindness, we stop seeing what is present and a new image appears vividly before us. This revelation could be said to be the poetic act in its essence.

«Vitruvius tells us that a nursemaid brought to the tomb of a young girl of Corinth her few favorite things, gathered in a basket and sheltered from the rain by a roof-tile. By chance the lady put the basket above an acanthus plant. Next spring, the grown leaves surrounded the basket and the shoots, pressing against the tile, curled up in spirals. The sculptor Callimachus, on passing by the tomb, was fascinated by this and created the Corinthian capital.»[4]
Guido Beltrami, ⟨The Private Palladio⟩

«The past is hidden outside the realm of our intelligence and beyond its reach, in some material object (in the sensation that this material object would give us) which we do not suspect. It depends on chance whether we encounter this object before we die, or do not encounter it.»[5]
Marcel Proust, ⟨In Search of Lost Time⟩

The origin that prescribes order is always subordinate to chance. The existence of a potential truth within order would then imply the acceptance, by the reader, of an arbitrary choice. In other words, accepting a given order is to engage on a paranoiac-critical process of voluntary madness. A process that, hopefully, will never

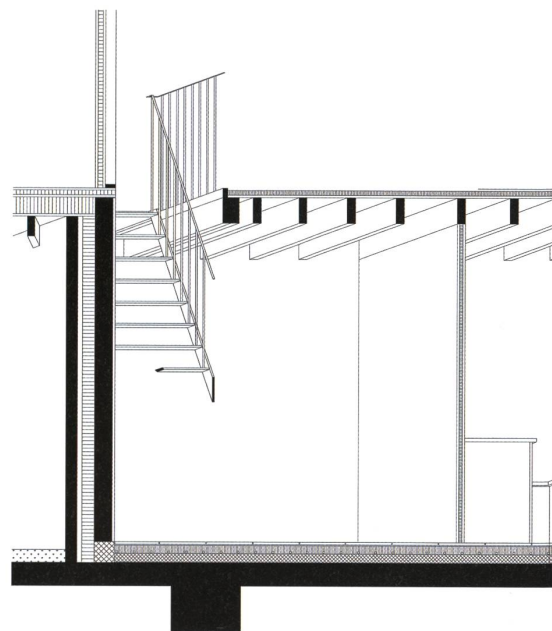*fig. b. San Gottardo Double, ADVVT, photographed with a one year interval.*

fig. c. Haus Tichelrei (Drawing), ADVVT 2011.

fig. d. Haus Vos, ADVVT. Photography: Filip Dujardin, 2014.

lead to truth itself but rather contribute for the possibility of chance to occur anew, so that further orders/doubts can arise.

Borges and Proust, in different ways, address a similar idea about one such potential truth which could be summarized as follows: the object-that-talks precedes the word-that-talks. This means that architecture—to be seen as an ancient and vast laboratory of spatial invention—manipulates a mass of memories/sensations that space itself encloses, as a kind of genetic code that links us all to feeling certain things in specific environments. We ought to remember that Borges's Aleph reveals itself—to both men in the tale—within the spandrel of a dark flight of stairs!

ADVVT's work embraces this spatial heritage by addressing the basic elements of architectural language: door, window, wall, structure, roof, etc. They use them as a given order which is then manipulated to create spatial ambiguities, enhancing our awareness towards elements that would usually go unnoticed. An order which is essential to this operation as ambiguity only arises when put against the context of a pre-existing set of expectations. Dealing with such unconscious expectations—or involuntary memories—and accepting that nothing is original except that which has been forgotten, their architecture should thus also be read in terms of its absence, as a reference to what is not present.

What follows is a possible reading of ADVVT's work, as a continuous magma of incidents that, as in Salvador Dali's paranoiac-critical method, might allow us to relate objects that would otherwise be unrelated, materializing images of concrete irrationality with the most imperialist fury of precision:

From the street we face window-openings that have been closed with bricks. But a drawing of the building tells us otherwise. These window-openings were never really open, never really windows. They are nothing but fake immured windows. A rehearsed archeology is at play. On the inside, an opening connects two compartments. It is framed by an L-shaped element resembling part of a door case. But there is no door in sight. Somewhere else, the jamb of a doorless door-frame has no adjacent wall. It was torn down. Cement, deliberately left unpainted, indicates the places where the demolition was amended. One other space was modified by demolishing the existing load-bearing walls. In its place a series of

scaffolding props are used as a perennial structural solution. On the façade, tiles are painted with a brick-pattern as a reference to the wall underneath. Temporary becomes permanent, tectonic becomes spray. The rigorous detail drawing of the building's construction section shows an uprooted glass of wine on top of a table. Willful ambiguities further underlined by a sequence of rooms: in here, everything which was wall became door, and everything that was door became wall. At the center, four fake columns stage a nonexistent structural grid. On the rear façade, an exit is made through a closed wall, as a hidden passage. By the end of the back garden, a trompe l'oeil panel reenacts the structure of the shelter it covers, creating a new compartment behind it. Overlapping mullions are used as the most effective answer to stability and thermal requirements. Sverre Fehn shows up in a fat window. At an upper room, the flooring stops to disclose a series of wooden-beams underneath it. This void creates a sort of mezzanine which we cannot reach because a wall of aluminium window frames prevents us from doing so. By the other side of these frames, on top of the revealed wooden-beams and standing precariously on its hind paws, an embalmed fox stares at us.

«The taste of the apple lies in the contact of the fruit with the palate, not in the fruit itself; in a similar way poetry lies in the meeting of the poem and the reader, not in the lines of symbols printed on the pages of a book. What is essential is the aesthetic act, the thrill, the almost physical emotion that comes with each reading.»[6]
Jorge Luis Borges, ‹Obra Poética›

«Passersby and visitors expect a different degree of being finished after four years of renovation. We sense a lack of understanding for the achieved result. Admittedly, we also felt reserved from time to time when confronted with bizarre and here and there even subversive ideas…(…) After a while we began to understand the language better.»[7]
Piet Bodyn and Elen Meurez on ADVVT's Haus Rot-Ellen-Berg

Architecten De Vylder Vinck Taillieu's proposal is one of confrontation. It is as if in each of these spaces something of what we thought we had already put in order, within our architectural pre-concepts, is modified and distorted. They position themselves at the frontier between order and arbitrariness, poetry and madness, meaning and insignificance. In between the fashionable bricoleur and the
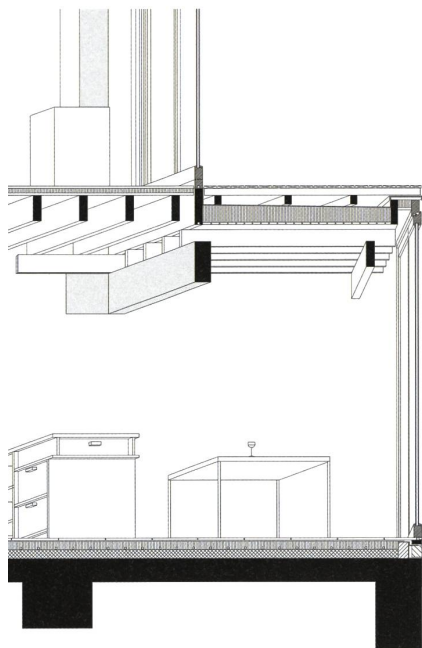
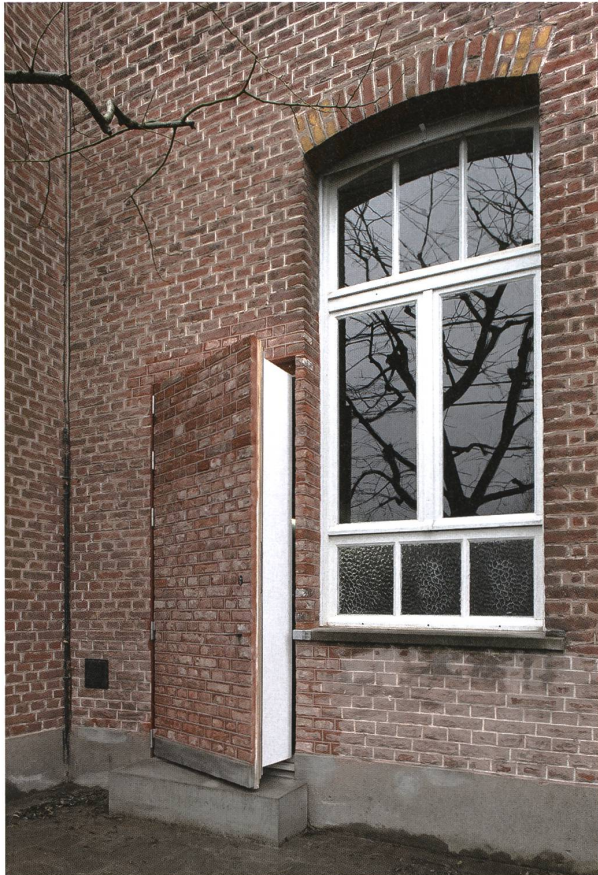*fig. e. Tower of Pisa, Martin Parr, from «Small World», 1990.*

disdained squatter, they enact fictions, which are used as tools within their work—allowing arbitrariness to become order—and as a way both to raise awareness towards reality and to foment the reader's appropriation of space. This is done not by using fabulous metaphors—like that of a winged lion—but by setting up a tectonic narrative, related to a vernacular architecture of rooms and windows.

The search for processes of use and appropriation is made within the context of a social poetry of relation. Aiming towards a rediscovery of space that stems from this tension amidst the reader, their work creates a dialogue—as in Martin Parr's photograph—where one, even if unconsciously, interacts with the space by mentally composing and reconnecting all possible alignments.

In the end, we are cynically left alone with randomly scattered pieces of Ariadne's thread. No truth, no order, no exit. We will always be lost. It is not meant to be comfortable. Just a reminder of all the possibilities that the labyrinth itself encloses.

fig. f. Haus Weze, ADVVT. Photography: Filip Dujardin, 2012.

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1   Jorge Luis Borges, ‹The Aleph and other Stories›, New York 1971 [1949], p. 10.
2   ‹The International System of Units (SI) 8th Edition›, Sèvres 2006, p. 113.
3   Hannah Arendt, ‹The Human Condition›, Lisboa 2001 [1958], p. 14. (author's translation)
4   Guido Beltrami, ‹The Private Palladio›, Zurich 2012 [2008], p. 4.
5   Marcel Proust, ‹In Search of Lost Time: The Way by Swann's›, London 2003, p. 47.
6   Jorge Luis Borges, ‹Selected Poems 1923–1967›, London 1972, p. 294.
7   Piet Bodyn and Ellen Meurez, ‹Architecten De Vylder Vinck Taillieu: 1 boek 2›, Gent 2011, p. 85.

Tiago Trigo, born 1985, is a portuguese architect, having studied at FAUP, in Porto, and PUC, in Santiago de Chile. As an INOV-Art scholar he lived in Seattle where he worked at Jim Olson & Tom Kundig's office. As a practicing architect he has worked with Eduardo Souto de Moura, in Porto, and currently works at Silvia Gmür and Reto Gmür's office, in Basel.