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Mark Jarzombek

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As far as he is able, the author lays his cards on the table; that is in no way the same thing as the game.

Adorno, preface to *Negative Dialectics*

The Sphinx and the Chimera

This essay began as a series of observations on an article by Daniel Libeskind in which he critiques the “flattened and technicized thinking” of conventional architectural practice by pointing to the vibrancy and life-giving energy of disorder: “Architecture has always been concerned with the problem of the creation of order. . . . It is common in schools to be taught that some structures and designs are natural, proper and orderly . . . and that others, especially those which contain the element of fantasy, a different kind of reasoning, or seem irreverent to the given system of production are unacceptable and unnatural.” Libeskind goes on to praise “poetic complexity . . . the unfinishable and permanently deferred . . . and the arbitrary, born of the delirium of order pushed beyond its limits.” He calls on students to help develop a new “projective poetics of architecture.”¹ Libeskind hopes to expose the tragedy of architecture existing under the steady threat of extinction by reason and science, while simultaneously holding it forth as the repository of hopes that no other activity of the mind seems able to equal.

The argument, certainly appealing in its underdog challenge to orthodoxy, revolves around a paradox: for though Libeskind rejects “the representational narrations of the past as symptoms of a hegemony of order, his article is itself a

1. Jacques Callot, *The Temptation of Saint Anthony*, 1653

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“representational narration.” It presupposes not only the opposition of science and poetry dating back to the ancient Greeks and repostulated in the Enlightenment, but also Friedrich Nietzsche’s critique of science, which he held responsible for creating a mechanistic cosmos indifferent to the moral and spiritual needs of mankind. The presence of this historicity, which forces to the surface ready-made theoretical components that have remained serviceable over time both in academic philosophical contexts and in populist philosophizing, does not, of course, invalidate Libeskind’s argument. But it does run against its grain. The process of inserting a theoretical position within the various, sometimes conflicting, historical frameworks in which it operates connects it with a past that is deemed secondary or irrelevant as it deflects from the urgency of the present.² As a result, historicity — by which I mean not historical context, but the figural other to textuality that is *within* the text yet simultaneously works against it — is prevented from playing a role in the formation of theory, as it could endanger the notion of original thinking. As John Keats said, “Let no one believe that Wordsworth’s influence marred my originality.”³

Since Libeskind’s article has no footnotes (that would weaken its claim to authenticity and constitute a concession to “past narrations”), it is meant to be read not as a text among texts, but as a singular statement based on deeply felt emotions, or — as literary critics would say — as inaugural. It is based not on the merely known but on unassailable conviction. Steeped in the moral force of its challenge to authority, it claims that once the deadening strictures of rationalism and professionalism have been swept aside, students will see “the mystery of which forms and meanings give us only a provisional and portentous outline.” This idealism purposefully catapults the discussion beyond its complex historicity, which — since it, too, is larger than individual life — could contaminate the inspirational authenticity of his argument and weaken its claim to pedagogical and historical uniqueness.

The writings of Libeskind and Peter Eisenman, among others, have revived one topos in particular; namely, the oppositions order versus disorder, whole versus fragment, and “the search for center” versus “the resolutely eccentric.” Eisenman used this topos to set up the distinction between modernism and poststructuralism. Consider his assertion that his archi-

tecture “would attempt to see things in a relativistic, non-synthetic way: fragmentation, decomposition, not seeing the world as hierarchical. That to me, is the cognitive structure of postmodernism.”⁴ As for all topoi, this one does not constitute the full idea, but part of theory’s unreflective substructure, unreflective not because the author has failed to reflect on it, but because it does not carry with it the history of its use and, especially, its connections to American romanticism and antihistoricism. From Eisenman’s critique of a static hierarchical world or from Libeskind’s critique of “artificial thinking,” it is not implausible to jump to Eliza Farnham’s *Life in the Prairie Land* of 1846, a classic tale of the frontier in which the author elaborated on the distinction between the restrictive rationalism of urban domesticity and the natural freedom of the prairie. As a topos in American politics, I think also of Henry Adams, who, in visiting Washington, D. C., admired less “that overweighted single dome” than the statues in the rotunda of the Capitol Building; these were the perfect statement of “the collective vibrations of a people; their conscious spirit, their public faith, their bewildered taste, their ceaseless curiosity, and their arduous and interrupted education.”⁵ And there is, of course, Charles Baudelaire’s satirical and still-potent “Further Notes on Edgar Allen Poe” of 1857, written in defense of the American poet who, so Baudelaire argued, had unmasked the poverty of ruling ideologies and challenged forth the vividness of the inexplicable. Poe chastised “those Sphinxes-without-a-riddle which stand guard before the holy portals of Classical Aesthetics” and pointed to a dynamic type of beauty that, in opposition to static truth, “discovers new delights — dazzling colonnades, cascades of molten metal, fiery Elysiums, melancholy splendors, the sensuous pleasures of regret, all the magic dreams, all the memories of opium.”⁶

The archetypal problematic at the core of these oppositional debates was ingeniously dramatized by Gustave Flaubert in his masterpiece of 1874, *The Temptation of Saint Anthony*, toward the end of which a stony Sphinx and a multiheaded, many-limbed Chimera confront one another in the desert. Each is repulsed by the other, yet secretly longs for the other’s attributes. Their dialogue begins as the Sphinx, who represents constancy, morality, natural wisdom, and language, and who passes her time by retracing the alphabet in the sand, is

accosted by the monstrous flying Chimera. Unlike the ponderous Sphinx, the paragon of “centeredness,” so to speak, the Chimera, unpredictable and swift, revels in inventive spontaneity.

I show men dazzling vistas with cloudy paradises and distant bliss. . . . With my paws I have chiseled architectural wonders. I look for new scents, larger flowers, untried pleasures. If anywhere I catch sight of a man contented and wise in spirit, I fall upon him and strangle him.⁷

For the Chimera — to borrow the words of the first futurist manifesto — “all things move, all things run, all things are rapidly changing.”⁸ As can be expected, the two are soon trading jibes.

Sphinx: Stop shooting your flames into my face and shrieking in my ear; you shan’t melt my granite.

Chimera: You shan’t catch me, terrible Sphinx!

Sphinx: You’re far too mad to stay with me!

The sparring brings out the dark shadow each tries to hide. The Sphinx suffers from a stifling aridity and timeless immobility, the Chimera from the emptiness of endless innovation. The Sphinx embodies everything conventional, doctrinaire, inflexible, and totalitarian, the Chimera everything disruptive, facile, fleeting, and vapid. Put another way, if the Sphinx represents history, the Chimera represents antihistorical contemporaneity. In Libeskind, the Sphinx is all “institutionalized habits of thought and action, . . . techniques of deception, . . . and predestined and correct expressions,” which are to be countered by a “release” of creativity and the emergence of a “projective poetics of architecture.”

At first, reconciliation seems impossible, but once past their initial confrontation, the Sphinx and the Chimera reveal their secret longing to unite. The Chimera admires the orderliness of the Sphinx, who, in turn, admires the spontaneity and liberty of the Chimera. The Sphinx pleads with the Chimera to come close so that she can climb on her back and they can fly away together. But the fleeting possibility of reconciliation quickly evaporates into anxious hopelessness. The Sphinx weighs too much to be lifted by the winged Chimera, nor can the Chimera stand still long enough for the Sphinx to move her stiff and heavy legs. The two creatures part in a tirade of recriminations.

Chimera: You weigh too much to follow me!

Sphinx: O Fantasy, carry me off on your wings to distract me from my sadness!

Chimera: O Unknown, I am in love with your eyes. . . . Open your mouth, lift your feet, mount on my back!

Sphinx: My feet, since they’ve lain flat, can no longer be lifted.

Lichen has broken out on my face like a rash. I have thought so hard that I have nothing left to say.

Chimera: That’s a lie, hypocritical Sphinx! How is it that you constantly call me and reject me?

Sphinx: It’s you, untamable caprice, tearing and eddying past!

Chimera: Is it my fault [that you can’t climb onto my back]?

How? Let me be!

Sphinx: You’re moving, you’re out of reach!

Chimera: Try again! — you’re crushing me!

Sphinx: No! impossible!

The ideas expressed in this dialogue are easily rejuvenated by infusions of moral or political fervor intended to give the upper hand to one side or the other. This opposition constitutes what I call “figurative” theory: it tries to activate practice through a rhetoric — of which Libeskind’s article is an example — that claims to be unrhetorical and in this way aims to give its participants an “authentic” and critical role in social transformation. This rhetorical operation is, of course, basic to the Western humanistic tradition and spells out and legitimates the ideals and goals of a culture. Skepticism, however, could destroy the protective bubble in which these rhetorical practices exist by linking them to their repressed historicity and to the never-ending continuum of discursive absorptions and reflections. Historicity, inexorably joined to skepticism, temporarily disrupts the connection that theory struggles to establish to its own time frame and context. My purpose is not to purge theory of its figural realities. They are essential to its claim of authenticity and to the continuity of necessary humanistic self-deceptions. But in running against the grain of its rhetoric, history, instead of being surplus information, challenges theory’s grip on contemporaneity and denies its figurative isolation. The historical task is not necessarily negative, however. In essence, it points only to a disalignment, such as that between the internal organs of a human body and its outward appearance. Beneath the skin of contemporaneity lie the remnants of unresolved and forgotten debates that have over time been realtered, reshaped, and repressed.

*Poets have set Nature before them as their
sole mistress and they will always follow her
footsteps.*

Marco Girolamo Vida, 1540¹

*Art is the perfect application of the laws of
unity, order, harmony and reason.*

David Sutter, 1865²

Mimesis

Flaubert's Sphinx represents the principles and problematic of Aristotelian *mimesis*, a term that I will quickly define since it continues today to be mistakenly paired in opposition to abstraction. Aristotle conceived mimesis as encapsulating a broad cultural and moral philosophy that emphasized the unity and integrity of the world. It was based on the assumption that human reason can comprehend and correlate with natural reason. This principle of wholeness encompassed a cycle that, for Aristotle, began with the child's imitative capacity, which he perceived to be spontaneous, natural, and ontologically given. In his *Poetics*, Aristotle stated that "the instinct for mimesis is implanted in man from childhood, one difference between him and the other animals is that he is the most imitative of living creatures and through imitation learns his earliest lessons."⁹ It was mimesis that linked the primitive imitation of a child with the ultimate goal of society; namely, the integration of all its parts into an organic unity illuminated by divine goodness.¹⁰ The system depended on an individual's potential to move from ignorance to knowledge by expanding experiences with nature into ever-greater unities. Imitation was not a mere recording of what was perceived, but was associated with growth and reason, and since reason connected man with divinity, a child's imitations were miniature incarnations of larger and more powerful things to come. Mimesis created a continuity from childhood to maturity, so that, ultimately, the leaders of society could imitate God in their capacity as prime moral agents. The *polis*, therefore, had a natural basis just as man had natural beginnings, and a divine basis because man had divine ends.

The fine arts, though playing a lesser role than politics in creating the natural whole that was ultimately the well-run *polis*, had a moral obligation to further society's progress. Poetry, music, and painting found their place in the critical middle ground between ignorance and knowledge. They gave shape to leisure time, and leisure, for Aristotle, was essential in one's life if one were to rise into political consciousness. Thus the fine arts served the moral-political leadership from above, while simultaneously enabling the still ignorant to participate with others in aspiring to reach a state of communal goodness.

Aristotle's theory of mimesis was based on the centrality of moral action, the immediacy of the natural response to

nature's wholeness, and the need to elevate society so that it could fulfill its divine potential. These basic premises, which can, of course, be found again and again in Western culture, are far from defunct in modern architectural theory. Alexander Tzonis and Liane Lefaivre in *Classical Architecture: The Poetics of Order* have attempted to reinvoke the principles of mimesis — even to the extent of citing Aristotle himself — by arguing that classical architecture “is a product of culture” and that it therefore needs to be respected and imitated, as it is based on a system “that is complete and whole and perfect.”¹¹ As such, architecture “should affect the minds of the audience for the sake of public good. It should edify wisely, consult and comment judiciously, defend and praise, rouse consciousness and criticize.” This argument, which seems to have sprung directly from the mouth of the ancient Sphinx into our own time, attests to the undiminished appeal of neo-Aristotelian cultural moralism.

The argument should not, however, be equated with neoclassicism, even though neoclassicists are usually portrayed as its most powerful defenders. It was an essential tenet of the Chicago School of literary criticism and of twentieth-century formalism, where it had a direct impact on art and architectural theory. Clement Greenberg's famous 1939 defense of abstract painting was, for example, thoroughly neo-Aristotelian. He was opposed to representational art not to the principles of mimesis. Art was to become “abstract” because it aimed to imitate not the lowly world one *sees*, but the world of “God, by creating something valid solely on its own terms, in the way nature itself is valid.”¹²

Le Corbusier adapted the same principles to his theories of modernism. “Architecture is the first manifestation of man creating his own universe, creating it in the image of nature, submitting it to the laws of nature, the laws which govern our nature, our universe.” But, Le Corbusier added, contemporary man has forgotten these basic principles: “Man proclaims that he is a free poet and that his instincts suffice”; he has abandoned “spiritual order” for “capriciousness.”¹³ The architect should relearn the moral imperative and strive for a pure mimetic relationship between the mental interior of the self and the interiority of space.

We would perform a moral art: to love purity! We would improve our condition: to have the power of judgment! . . . His home is

The arts, not in theoretical formulas but in viable forms, exemplify the implicit goals, the realm of actualized or imagined value which any moral theory involves. The very goods of life which are the subject matter of ethics find their patent and palpable presence in the arts.

Irwin Edman, 1928³

Even the first expression of imagination is regulated by rules. . . . And all these rules are finally grounded in the rational order of the universe.

Wilhelm Dilthey, 1890⁴

Art is the seizing of natural facts [and] then the ordering [of them] by strength of human intellect, so as to make them . . . serviceable, memorable and beautiful. . . . The Love of Order [dispels] all rebellious and dissolute forces in lower creatures and in ourselves. . . . One may have full strength and yet be absolutely under control. . . . [One's purpose as an artist] is to keep the temper of the people stern and manly; make their associations grave, courteous, and for worthy objects.

John Ruskin, 1873⁵

made clean. There are no more dirty, dark corners. Everything is shown as it is. Then comes inner cleanliness, for the course adopted leads to refusal to allow anything at all which is not correct.¹⁴

Though Le Corbusier is often considered an antihistoricist modernist, if one reads more carefully, one discovers that, in keeping with the Sphinx, he argued that mankind could live a moral life “because everything about our past history is known to us” (!) and it is this knowledge that has prepared man for the final mimetic act: the imitation of divine cleanliness and reason.¹⁵

Neo-Aristotelianism is even more apparent in Richard Neutra's *Survival Through Design* of 1954, where the combat between the Sphinx and the Chimera is firmly decided in favor of the Sphinx. Architecture, according to Neutra, needed to relearn the “supreme law” of biological consistency with nature. It is no easy task, he warned, for “we now have dropped perhaps too carelessly the moral accent.” Bemoaning the fragmented and cruel world, and hoping that there was still time to restore a sense of normalcy, he urged architects to take up the struggle “by virtue of wholesomeness” to bring meaning and purpose back to individual lives and to society as a whole. The consequences of failure would be severe: “damnation and death through our own default.”¹⁶

The purest neo-Aristotelian among twentieth-century architects was Eliel Saarinen, who in his *Search for Form in Art and Architecture* placed the artist at the moral and political center of society. Artists are ontologically predestined to lead, since “art form . . . is something which is within man, which is strong when man is strong, and which declines when man declines.”¹⁷ Like Aristotle's noble and good politicians, Saarinen's artists know that “quality of leadership is the sole key to success.” The objectives of education are “genuine art, good form-relations, and good form-order,” breeding “good individualism, good human relations, and good social order.”¹⁸ So speaks the Sphinx.

Phantasia

As Flaubert's story so vividly demonstrated, the Chimera is never far from the Sphinx. Already in Aristotle's time, the principles of mimesis were challenged by defenders of phantasia. Phantasia pointed to a power of inventiveness that

could not be realized through nature itself, limited as it was by its own laws. Phantasia posited the human mind against natural law. The crucial definition was articulated by Aristotle in *De Anima* as the faculty of the soul that, in retaining images, separated them from nature and thus allowed them to be manipulated by the mind.¹⁹ Phantasia could bring together “many things in such a combination as painters mix when they portray goat-stags and similar creatures.”²⁰ From the ancient goat-stag, one could turn to Boccioni’s *Fusion of a Head and a Window* from 1911 or to the *Technical Manifesto of Futurist Sculpture* from 1912:

A Futurist composition in sculpture will use metal or wood planes for an object . . . furry spherical forms for hair, semicircles of glass for a vase, wire and screen for an atmospheric plane, etc. . . . Twenty different materials can compete in a single work to effect plastic emotion.²¹

Whereas Aristotle was understandably cool to the value of phantasia, other philosophers saw it as a higher form of art than mimesis.²² In the second century B.C., Philostratus dramatized the difference in his *Life of Apollonius of Tyana*. He described a Greek and an Egyptian painter debating the opposing ways of conceiving the world through art:

‘Your artists, then, like Phidias,’ said the Egyptian, ‘went up, I suppose, to heaven and took a copy of the forms of the gods, and then reproduced these by their art, or was there any other influence that presided over their molding?’

‘There was,’ said Apollonius, ‘and an influence pregnant with wisdom and genius.’

‘What was that?’ said the other. ‘For I do not think you can adduce any other except mimesis.’

‘Phantasia wrought these works,’ said Apollonius, ‘a wiser and subtler artist by far than mimesis. For mimesis can only create as its handiwork what it has seen, but phantasia equally well what it has not seen.’²³

As examples of phantasia in literature, I suggest that one compare the *Argonautica*, the ancient tale of Jason’s search for the Golden Fleece, and its wonderful descriptions of remote places, with W. J. Cash’s description of the landscape of the American South: both use the theoretical device of “a second” nature, “a conspiracy against reality” Cash calls it, conceived in direct opposition to the rational order of nature’s laws.²⁴ Immanuel Kant defined this “wiser and subtler”

The mountain rises up with steep crags, looking toward the Bithynian Sea. Beneath it bare rocks washed by the sea are rooted form. Around them a rolling wave thunders loudly, but above, at its peak, spreading plane trees grow. From it there slopes gradually landward a hollow glade, where there is a cave of Hades roofed over by wood and rock. From here an icy breath, breathing continuously up from the chilling hollow, ever nourishes a shining white rim that melts in the midday sun.

Apollonius Rhodius, third century B.C.⁶

The country is one of extravagant colors, of proliferating foliage and bloom, of flooding yellow sunlight and above all perhaps of haze. . . . And through the long slow afternoon, cloud-stacks tower from the horizon and the earth-heat quivers upward through the iridescent air, blurring every outline and rendering every object vague and problematical. . . . The dominant mood, the mood that lingers in the memory, is one of well-nigh drunken reverie.

W. J. Cash, 1941⁷

*Imagination! lifting up itself
Before the eye and progress of my song
Like an unfathered vapor. . . .
. . . In such strength
Of usurpation, in such visitings
Of awful promise, when the light of sense
Goes out in flashes that have shewn to us
The invisible world, doth
Greatness make abode.*

William Wordsworth, 1805⁸

*[He was] seated at a deal table, drawing
circles, circles, circles; innumerable circles,
concentric, eccentric; a coruscating whirl of
circles that by their tangled multitude of
repeated curves, uniformity of form, and
confusion of intersecting lines suggested a
rendering of cosmic chaos, the symbolism of
a mad art attempting the inconceivable.*

Joseph Conrad, 1905⁹

*Artists now prefer to paint monstrosities on
plaster rather than faithful copies of natu-
ral objects. . . . On the pediments grow
tender blossoms, whose stalks twist in and
out and on which sit utterly meaningless
little figures. They paint stalks of plants
with half-figures, some with human heads,
others with animals heads. Such a thing has
never existed and never will.*

Vitruvius, early first century¹⁰

art as “a second nature created out of the material supplied to it by actual nature.”²⁵ Kant thus legitimized fragmentation and dismemberment as necessary to human imagination; in so doing, he opened the way for phantasia to become an important tool in critiquing the hegemonic principles supposedly inherent in mimesis. Defenders of the Chimera could easily expand the “first nature” into a negative force against which one had to resist. Nineteenth-century romantics already identified mimesis variously with the evils of reason, science, and historicism; more recently, Libeskind has equated it with “research architecture, . . . cybernetic systems, . . . the engineer, . . . the laboratory, . . . and the technician.” All are said to belong to “the poverty of the real world” as opposed to the richness of the poetic imagination.²⁶

The difference between mimesis and phantasia, especially as competing models of ethical behavior and cultural critique (has art not become a form of ethical behavior legitimized by discursive practices?), was clearly visible in two now-famous exhibitions in the Galerie Iris Clert in Paris: Yves Klein’s *Le Vide* (The void), which opened in the spring of 1958, and Arman’s *Le Plein* (Full-up), which showed in the fall of 1960. Klein, wanting to heighten the viewer’s awareness of the immaterial, painted the interior of the gallery white and left the spaces empty to produce the full immediacy of “the voids.” This project, often attributed to radical abstract modernism, was instead, following the Greenberg model, an expression of radical moral neo-Aristotelian mimetism; its goal was to free one’s vision from the conflicts of a cluttered life and return one to nature in order to bring one into contact with the divine. Arman’s response was to fill the same rooms with garbage collected from the streets of Paris, piled high to the ceiling:

I am introducing the sense of the global gesture relentlessly, remorselessly. . . . It is not about recontextualizing an object from its utilitarian and industrial substratum . . . but rather about recontextualizing it in itself in a surface that has been sensitized X times by its multiplied presence.²⁷

Should art initiate a return to the divine whole or should it enact and demonstrate the human capacity to shake apart received social and moral structures? The Italian idealist philosopher Benedetto Croce, in proper neo-Aristotelian fashion, argued that “the intrinsic requirement of the true

concept [of life] is the connectedness of all reality in an organism of concepts; and the parts of an organism cannot stand one beside the other, one indifferent to the other, as in mechanical aggregates.”²⁸ Life is based on the moral unity of society and art. Proponents of disconnectedness, however, like Arman and the English sculptor William Tucker, interpreted the notion of unity as an illusion grounded in sentimental attachments to objects. “We feel we know our own body,” Tucker explained, “but we can never see more than a part of it, and can never have a full visual sense of our individual wholeness.”²⁹ Tucker’s recent sculptures play on the ambiguities of word and object by collapsing the conceptual totality of a word like *horse* with a bronze fragment from the human torso. Similarly, Jean Tinguely saw his art in opposition to Western capitalism and rationalism, and demanded that artists “resist the anxious fear to fix the instantaneous, to kill that which is living.”³⁰ John Cage, also in accordance with classical notions of phantasia, saw his music as “an affirmation of life — not an attempt to bring order out of chaos nor to suggest improvements in creation, but simply to wake up to the very life we’re living.”³¹

Medieval philosophers were well versed in this oppositional dynamic. Yet in the written tradition, with its strong Platonic and Aristotelian underpinnings, phantasia found little support. Vitruvius and the twelfth-century Cistercian Bernard of Clairvaux both argued that phantasia violated the social contract between mankind and divinity. In the Renaissance, however, despite its much-heralded neoclassicism, phantasia reemerged as the valid theoretical platform it is known as today. Angelo Poliziano, companion and tutor of Lorenzo de’Medici, argued that humanism was not the naïve reinstating of the classical past, but a recognition of discontinuity coupled with a need to keep the past alive in its fragmentary form; he saw “imitation as the mark of an unhappy mind” and welcomed a type of writing composed out of the bric-à-brac of classical texts.³² Pointing out that there was “no single book of Roman antiquity which we professors understand,” Poliziano envisioned history not as a comprehensible whole, but as a vast container whose contents could be disarranged endlessly without suffering or damage.³³ He sought to oppose the highly structured hermeneutics of medieval scholarship in the same way that early twentieth-century collagists responded to perspectival representation, or postmodernists

In the cloisters meanwhile, why do the studious monks have to face such ridiculous monstrosities? What is the point of this deformed beauty, this elegant deformity? Those loutish apes? The savage lions? The monstrous centaurs? The half men? The spotted tigers? You can see a head with many bodies, or a body with many heads. Here we espy an animal with a serpent’s tail, there a fish with an animal’s head. There we have a beast with a horse in front and a she-goat behind; and here a horned animal followed with hind-quarters like a horse. . . . In the name of God! If we are not ashamed at its foolishness, why at least are we not angry at the expense?

Bernard of Clairvaux, 1130¹¹

Michelangelo’s license greatly encouraged those who saw his work to try to imitate it, and shortly new fantasies appeared in their ornament, more grotesque than rational or disciplined. Hence artisans have been infinitely and perpetually indebted to him because he broke the bonds and chains of a way of working that had become habitual by common usage.

Giorgio Vasari, 1550¹²

Classicism, in imitating man through its orders and symbols, subsumed the object within the man-nature relationship. . . . [Modernism] was always fundamentally moving away from classical mimesis toward a concern for its own objecthood.

Peter Eisenman, 1978¹³

[In Eisenman’s work] as grids become double and redouble, they repeatedly shift, oscillate, and alternate. It becomes impossible to locate stable axes that provide orientation. Layered grids function like moiré patterns that tremble ever so slightly. Angles of vision constantly shift, erasing any sense of centeredness.

Mark Taylor, 1989¹⁴

If man's sickly understanding would not set plain truth at defiance, but humbly submit this common infirmity to the tonic of wholesome doctrine until . . . it regained strength, those who think straight . . . would have no need of many words to correct the errors of baseless assumption.

St. Augustine, 412¹⁵

The spirits of men grew degenerate, and all the arts declined from sheer neglect. . . . Some offered vapid songs and inane words, captivated solely by the sweetness of their voice. Love of the Muses died, despicable pursuits straightway took their place and everyone flung himself into the acquisition of riches.

Marco Girolamo Vida, 1530¹⁶

State and church, laws and customs, were now torn asunder; enjoyment was separated from labor, means from ends, effort from the whole, man himself grew to be only a fragment. . . . We need some instrument which the state does not afford us, and with it open up well-springs which will keep pure and clear throughout every political corruption. This instrument is the Fine Arts, and these well-springs are open in their immortal examples.

Friedrich Schiller, 1793¹⁷

Our own past is moving away from us at such frightening speed, . . . to keep open the lines of communication which permit us to understand the greatest creations of mankind we must study and teach the history of culture more deeply and more intensely than was necessary a generation ago.

Ernst Gombrich, 1969¹⁸

to the perceived strictures of modernism. In a similar vein, Giorgio Vasari defended Michelangelo's artistic "fantasies" as freedom from the "bonds and chains of convention." The argument was repeated again and again by nineteenth-century romantics: for example, John Weale in 1844 — not unlike Libeskind today — protested against the "academic formalities of the Greek and Latin grammars" and hoped for a "triumph of picture over geometry, . . . poetry over mathematics," and imagination over reason.³⁴

The Crisis of Confusion

Defenders of phantasia were easy targets for Sphinx diehards. Humphrey Repton, the nineteenth-century English landscape theorist, despairing at what he perceived to be the parallels between the dissolution of social order and architects' destabilizing lust for disorder, railed against James Wyatt's Sheffield Park as "a heterogeneous mixture of Abbey, Castle, and Manor House . . . a mongrel breed of architecture . . . propagated by buildings of all dimensions from the Palace to the Pigsty."³⁵ Augustus Pugin, the early nineteenth-century champion of the ostensibly civilized and ethical Middle Ages, saw in the designs of his contemporaries "the Babel of confusion . . . and the carnival of architecture . . . where the Turk and the Christian, the Egyptian, and the Greek, the Swiss and the Hindoo, march side by side, and mingle together."³⁶ The topos of confusion and the plea for a restoration of order had its origins in Livy's famous opening remarks in his *History of Rome*, where he used the discourse of history as the instrument of a negative revelation exposing cultural "disintegration" and "the dark dawning of our modern age."

I shall find antiquity a rewarding study, if only because, while I am absorbed in it, I shall be able to turn my eyes from the troubles which for so long have tormented the modern world, and to write without any of that over-anxious consideration which may well plague a writer of contemporary life. [I will] trace the process of moral decline, watch the sinking of the foundations of morality as the old teaching was allowed to lapse, then the rapidly increasing disintegration, . . . the dark dawning of our modern day when we can neither endure our vices, nor face the remedies needed to cure them. The study of history is the best medicine for the sick mind.³⁷

The equation Livy drew between "modern confusion" and the need to study history arose from his attempt to explain

the causes of disorder while simultaneously pleading for a restoration of order. Common to the topos was its plea for civility, its desire for calm, and its concern with permanence. Common also was the ubiquitous disruptive agitator made responsible for the cultural demise. John Ruskin, for example, used the topos of confusion to attack those “insolent” designers who destroyed the link between art and God:

But once quit hold of this living stem and set yourself to the designing of ornamentation, . . . there is but one word for you, Death: death of every healthy faculty, and of every noble intelligence. You have cut yourself off . . . insolently from the whole teaching of your Maker in His Universe.³⁸

The “death list” could be expanded to include the action painter, the eclectic, the vagrant, the “spiritually weak,” or Margaret Thatcher’s “maladjusted.” The notion of law and harmony and restoration was concomitant with that of punishment, violence, and reprisal — all in the name of a good cause.

In the early twentieth century, defenders of modernism engaged in a bitter but much-overlooked attack on expressionism that first brought this opposition into the context of twentieth-century theory. Karl Groos, Ferdinand Avenarius, and Paul Klopfer, all members of the Werkbund and supporters of Peter Behrens, took a hard line against the increasingly popular art of the expressionists. Groos, in his polemically entitled *Unser Bedürfnis nach Aesthetischer Kultur* (Our need for an aesthetic culture), defended the “moral unity of society” and argued that expressionism was “sick, chaotic and unclean.” Avenarius diagnosed expressionism as a dangerous and disruptive disease. Klopfer, friend of Walter Gropius, pointed out, in rapturous self-congratulatory praise of the Werkbund, that modern architecture, in touch with advanced industry, was “modern in the good sense” as it contributed to the well-being of society; expressionism was modern “in the bad sense.” In the 1930s Georg Lukács identified expressionism with irrationalism and even fascism; he wanted the artist “to strive to represent reality as it truly is [as] the totality . . . the essential . . . not as a surface phenomenon.”³⁹

Ironically, Clement Greenberg, though a defender of abstract expressionism, borrowed the language of early twentieth-century opposition to expressionism. For him, good artists

[We are faced with an] abundance of disparate impressions greater than ever: cosmopolitanism in foods, literatures, newspapers, forms, tastes, even landscapes. The tempo of this influx is prestissimo; the impressions erase each other; one instinctively resists taking in anything, taking anything deeply, to “digest” anything; a weakening of the power to digest results from this. A kind of adaption to the flood of impressions takes place: men unlearn spontaneous action, they merely react to stimuli from the outside.

Friedrich Nietzsche, 1885¹⁹

I do not admire the irrationality of the imaginative life. I have, if I may say so, made the intellectual grade. I have made the complete return to nature, and nature is, as well all know, primarily an intellectual idea. I am satisfied that painting also is, like nature, an intellectual idea and that the laws of nature as presented to the mind through the eye are the means of transport to the real mode of thought: the only legitimate source of aesthetic experience for the intelligent painter.

Marsden Hartley, 1928²⁰

The perpetual to and fro excites and robs man of the meditation and reflection that was once his as he lived and walked under clean sky among the green woods to which he was born companion. . . . For the Book of Creation he has traded the emasculation of substitutes. . . . The weed goes to seed.

Frank Lloyd Wright, 1932²¹

In the sixties, a certain confusion existed in contemporary architecture, as in painting; a kind of pause, even a kind of exhaustion. . . . I have no doubt that this fashion born out of inner uncertainty will soon be obsolete. . . . There is universal agreement that the values lost to our period must be restored.

Sigfried Giedion, 1967²²

The classical standard of artistic form has retained its validity throughout the ages: [that because of the Industrial Revolution and scientific advance] true reality was seen to recede to ever-deeper subliminal levels until it appears quite unfathomable. . . . Now we face action painting, absurdities, multi-form dadaism, the display of objects, or objects as fragments, of our overcrowded and disrupted world.

Erich Kahler, 1968²³

Somewhere . . . is an old secret we have lost. . . . The secret of being quite sure what to do: a secret that has been held in turn by Egypt, by Greece, by Rome. . . . This is what draws us to Corbusier's Chandigarh, its patrician sense of space, its calm, its control. It is a place where you can breathe and feel like a man . . . civilized, mind-releasing. . . . It has no rhetoric.

Alison and Peter Smithson, 1973²⁴

The construction of local forms of community within which civility and the intellectual and moral life can be sustained through the dark ages which are already upon us. . . . The modernizing world . . . rejected the ethos that enabled us to judge and act. A hidden catastrophe has thrown language, politics and morality into disorder.

Alasdair MacIntyre, 1981²⁵

The abandonment of our traditional artistic technique is manifesting the consequences of some kind of spiritual breakdown in our Western Civilization.

Arnold Toynbee, 1946²⁶

We appear to be living amidst a meaningless mosaic of fragments. From ape skull to Mayan temple, we contemplate the miscellaneous debris of time like sightseers to whom these mighty fragments, fallen gateways, and sunken galleys convey no present instruction.

Loren Eiseley, 1969²⁷

know that they function "in the midst of the decay of our present society" and thus aim "to keep culture moving [despite its] ideological confusion and violence."⁴⁰ Opposed to this process was the unrelenting force of kitsch, which he interpreted as a troublesome irritant in a democratic society. Kitsch was associated with "the culture of the masses," and beyond that with fascism itself. Le Corbusier shared this sense of frustration with society and the conviction that it *must* be returned to its equilibrium through a purge. He demanded that "the old and hostile environment and its stifling accumulation of age-long detritus" be thrown out to reveal the purity of geometry, "our greatest creation," and the desire for "purity, economy, [and] the reach for wisdom."⁴¹

So speaks the angry Sphinx. But the moral high ground evoked here is linked with a radicalism that recognizes no boundaries. In the pre-World War I writings of Georg Fuchs, another Werkbund supporter and a German patriot, one encounters an extreme example of neo-Aristotelianism, interpreted neither as a conflict with "babbling expressionists" nor as a purging of "age-long detritus," but on a broader, more tragic scale, as a battle with all *Entartete*, or those who "don't belong." Among them, Fuchs included Jews and other "degenerates" who could get in the way of an "organic and harmonious society." In a passage that foreshadows the concept of *Entartete Kunst* under Hitler as well as the terror of the Holocaust, Fuchs wrote in 1904:

Who is it that infests our chambers and tears our children from our arms. It is the *Entartete*. We have now recognized him and we know his origin and we know his goals. We can't get rid of him, but we can make him ineffective. We cannot prevent that he propagates himself among our masses but we can exterminate the dens out of which he crawls. . . . We can now direct our weapons in the right direction and create a new positive organization based on an attack.⁴²

The Topos of Liberation

Law, order, and harmony, conceived in the universal sense, were all too often disguises for a discourse — if not a politics — of removal, purging, and even extermination. It was precisely this undercurrent of extremism in the neo-Aristotelian, post-Enlightenment position, masked by a hypocritical ethos of cleanliness, comprehensibility, and civility, that induced the

discourse of individualism, avant-gardism, spontaneity, health, and phantasia back into life.

Early twentieth-century defenders of expressionism leaned heavily on the liberation topos and its notion of resistance. Adolf Behne, for example, in opposition to Groos, Averanius, and the Werkbund as a whole, welcomed expressionism because it rejected oppressive Wilhelmine society. He argued that “in replacing laws of nature with laws of art,” expressionism could create “a purification and a liberation from long-established customs; its aim is a better air and a freer breath.”⁴³ Ernst Bloch continued the argument in his famous confrontation with Georg Lukács; aiming to acquit expressionism of the recurrent charges of cultural nihilism by stressing its latent humanist aspects and its healthy protest against cultural and political imperialism, Bloch challenged Lukács’s implicit assumptions of “unified realism . . . as a hangover from the system of classical idealism.”⁴⁴ Bloch saw the break-up of form, “living and combative,” as the only route to inner spirituality. He praised the “disruptive and interpolative techniques” of the expressionists, valuing them precisely *because* “they undermine the schematic routines and academicism to which the ‘values of art’ had become reduced.”⁴⁵ This call to spirituality resonates strongly in Libeskind’s writings:

[I seek] to explore the deeper order rooted not only in visible forms, but in the invisible and hidden sources which nourish culture itself in its thought, art, literature, song and movement.⁴⁶

But expressionist spirituality, as those familiar with the times know, was defended from different sides. The appeal to liberate humanism from science, implicit just as much in Libeskind’s architecture as in Chagall’s paintings, stood in uncomfortable proximity to such theories as that generated by the German art critic Karl Scheffler in the early 1920s. In *Geist der Gothik* he used the argument to define Gothic architecture as a style conceived in opposition to the classical language of harmony, eternity, and rules. Whereas Greek architecture was supposedly rooted in the notion of stability, the Gothic “improvised, personal and temporary,” was built on the principle of instability.⁴⁷ Scheffler’s argument (repeated as recently as 1960 by Joseph Chiari in *Realism and Imagination*) claimed that the unique quality of German architecture has gone unrecognized due to the hegemony of Mediterranean classicism and rationality.⁴⁸ This nationalist

One finds in the work of the Expressionists all the moanings and troubles of daily life without artistic cleanliness; this misguided artistry will lock us in with it and send us into an agitated domain that is abnormal, overstrained, sick, and perverse.

Karl Groos, 1906²⁸

[Radical artists] feel themselves as representatives of decay; they are probably proud of it and feel themselves, along with their related hysterical friends, as “better” than the healthy ones. They need to whip up exaggeration, shrillness, rawness, and sensationalism. The main danger for culture is that it might catch [like a disease].

Ferdinand Averanius, 1899²⁹

Industry and art have found themselves . . . in the development of space . . . in the use of glass and steel, in the reduction of ornamentation and in the use of historical forms; they have all united into a true art; [it is an architecture] that is modern in the good sense.

Paul Klopfer, 1909³⁰

Good modernity results in an ethical . . . and healthy culture that forms our life in a way that is simultaneously happy, healthy, moral, and meaningful.

W. Schumann, 1919³¹

[In expressionism] we found an open mouth without Ego, drinking, babbling, pouring it out . . . full of puns and slips of the tongue that you normally find at moments of fatigue . . . and in dreamy or slovenly people — it is all here, only completely out of control . . . a random collection of notes on crumpled scraps of paper, gobbledygook, a tangle of slippery eels, fragments of non-sense.

Georg Lukács, 1977³²

Make bombardment echo on the museum walls.

Vladimir Mayakovsky, 1920s³³

But all of this, proposing an order of release through the media of both utopia and tradition, through the city as museum, through collage as both exhibit and scaffold . . . through the complete absence of certainty, is also to propose a situation (which may seem utopian) in which the demands of activists have receded, in which the time bomb of historical determinism is at last defused.

Colin Rowe and Fred Koetter, 1966³⁴

The malaise from which architecture suffers today can be traced to the collusion between architecture and its use of geometry and number as it developed in the early modern period. . . . Western thought seems to be floundering in the excessive formalism of systems, unable to accept the reality of specific phenomena. . . . Gianbattista Vico was perhaps the first to speak up for the primordial knowledge of all people, a knowledge that stemmed not from reason but from imagination.

Alberto Pérez-Gómez, 1985³⁵

But a new mode of direct action is emerging, the rebirth of a democratic mode and style, where everyone can create his personal environment out of the impersonal subsystems, whether they are new or old, modern or antique. . . . The present environment, blank and unresponsive, is a key to idiocy and brainwashing.

Charles Jencks and Nathan Silver, 1973³⁶

interpretation of expressionism was celebrated to the extreme by the anti-Semite Emile Nolde, who critiqued the scientific basis of art, the stupidity of blind academic imitation, and the dangerous superficiality of rationality, while welcoming the emergence of what he felt was an inherently Christian art form.

Despite its complex and checkered history, the liberation topos was revived in the 1960s to become an essential aspect of the growing antimodernist critique. It was used with particular effectiveness by Alberto Pérez-Gómez in evoking the dangers of Enlightenment rationalism for architectural invention; by Colin Rowe and Fred Koetter in pointing out how the evils of modernist totalitarianism had derailed the advancement of tolerance; by Charles Jencks in announcing the death of “impersonal subsystems”; and by Paolo Portoghesi in defining postmodernism as a vibrant mixture of Renaissance historicism and Glasnost experimentation. More recently, Mark Wigley has used this topos in defense of a vibrant, deconstructivist architecture against stagnant architectural rationalism.⁴⁹

Its appeal to inclusivism and populism aside, the current incarnation of the Chimera labors under the rhetoric of “presentness” and the posture of a politically correct pluralism. And there remains in the critique of science, despite its neo-Nietzschean legitimacy, an omnipresent danger. The dynamiting of the Pruitt-Igoe Housing complex, which has come down in history as a victory against hegemonic modernist mistakes (“boom, boom, boom,” said Jencks), reminds us that most liberations start with heroic acts of destruction, even if legitimized in the name of humanism. Today, ironically, “tradition” is the target, a temporary code word that obscures the old target, namely, Aristotelian mimesis. Since “traditionalists” have come to be identified with uncritical artists, “traditions” are reduced to straw figures purposefully alienated from any kind of critical-historical explanation and rhetorically enlarged to legitimize their dismissal. Eisenman has written that

the traditional role of architecture has been not only to realize a sheltering function, but to represent and symbolize it as well. . . . In breaking down the traditional image of a museum. . . . Architecture traditionally has been related to human scale. . . . This project proposes to employ an *other* discourse. . . . As biology today dislocates the traditions of science, so the architecture of our Biocenter project dislocates the traditions of architecture. . . . We departed from the traditional representation of architecture by

abandoning the classical Euclidean geometry on which the discipline is based in favor of a fractal geometry.⁵⁰

Sympathy for the underdog, admiration for Jeffersonian revolutionaries, and hatred for the evil witch of orthodoxy and “tradition” are so inbred in American culture and so cleverly exploited by its defenders that the topos of liberation cannot be criticized without running the risk of being counted a member of the opposite camp. Who, after all, will admit to “institutionalized habits of thought and action,” “techniques of deception,” and “pre-destined and correct expressions” once Libeskind has pinned these attributes on his opponents? The Sphinx-witch must be burned on the altar of a post-structuralist liberation.

That in many instances the liberation topos proved as valuable as a poison as it did a remedy has been clear from its earliest manifestations in the critique of modernism. Take, for example, Julius Langbehn’s immensely popular *Rembrandt als Erzieher* of 1890, a cult book in its own time. Langbehn attacked the hegemony of science, the crisis of rationalism, and the rise of modern mercantilism, all of which had ostensibly corrupted creativity, individualism, and spontaneity. Whereas science produced technicians of value-free truth and deprived mankind of its sense of rootedness, *Kunst* could fuse philosophy, religion, and society. “To regard art as something alien from real life is always a sign of artistic decadence; art should deepen everyday life, not turn from it.”⁵¹ This argument, however, is encumbered by a dreadful shadow, for Langbehn, though he claimed to be unpolitical, was unabashedly bigoted. Society was to free itself not only from its admiration of science and rationalism, but also from what he perceived to be the controlling interests of Jews, Catholics, and capitalist industrialists.⁵² The book, read by millions of German high school students prior to World War I, was a favorite among the Nazis.

Thus the liberation topos should not be all-too-innocently equated with the wonderful world of democratic freedoms, antitotalitarian righteousness, and a joyous antitraditionalist recovery of lost humanistic values. Just as the search for order has been conjured up by liberal democrats and fascists alike, the topos of liberation knows no single home in the world of politics. Its moral high ground can easily be betrayed, and indeed has been so often that — just as with the defense of

Happily we can date the death of modern architecture . . . to July 15, 1972, at 3:32 when the infamous Pruitt-Igoe [housing project in St. Louis] was given the final coup de grace by dynamite . . . boom, boom, boom. . . . When the present students of architecture start practising, we should begin to see . . . more examples of radical eclecticism, because it is only this group which is really free enough to try their hand at any possible style — ancient, modern, or hybrid.

Charles Jencks, 1977³⁷

Postmodernism is a New Renaissance . . . a refusal, a rupture, a renouncement . . . of orthodoxy, and the product of the fall of centered [political and aesthetic] systems.

Paolo Portoghesi, 1982³⁸

The necessity of rigorous imagination and the project of discovering possible means of emancipation in architecture must be recognized as crucial, as the concrete sources of inspiration in progressively more advanced societies expire in institutionalized habits of thought and action.

Daniel Libeskind, 1981³⁹

Architects have always dreamed of pure form . . . producing objects from which all instability and disorder have been excluded.

Mark Wigley, 1988⁴⁰

We write the unreadable.

Ramm-ell-zee, New York train artist, 1980s⁴¹

mimesis — it collapses under the dreadful weight of its uses and abuses. The topos of liberation, like its opposite, is shadowed by its own tragedy. What remains important, assuming one wants to play the game, is how, when, and with whom one plays.

Skepticism in Theory, Criticism, and History

In *Negative Dialectics* Adorno presented the thesis that in today's world "finding yourself" may be impossible: for philosophy, instead of providing the firm ground on which to base our knowledge of existence, should reveal the inadequacies of our social order. But Adorno's equation of philosophy and critique does not mean that all critiques fit into his model. Theories based on the topos of opposition, for example do not go far enough, as they are still integrally tied to an attempt to define and control practice and thus to provide a secure basis for operating in the world. Theory in the post-Adornian world must first discover the inadequacies of theorizing itself, which can only be done through a medium that allows speculation to regain contact with the repressed and chaotic realities of self-encounter. Theoretical speculation as a form of "finding yourself" — and hence as an affirmation of practice through oppositional critique — will, of course, remain the norm in architectural theory; for is it not what the educational system in some sense demands? But if theoretical speculation were to include an "unfinding" based on the negativity of its immanent historicity, it could deconstruct the quasi-utopian union between thought and object toward which it secretly gropes. Only when theory is made to confront its metaphysical homelessness does its position as a controlling agent over practice become apparent.

Today, however, the word *theory* is still generally understood in one of two ways. It is explained as the significant expressions of important individual artists or as a meaningful stylistic essence (expressionism, modernism, eclecticism). In the first case, the *history* of theory is studied in terms of ideas that might have influenced an artist and, in the second, in terms of the impersonal power of abstract ideas in time. Both approaches close off the domain of history before it has even been entered. A "history of modernism," for example, can be written, but as a concept it is an oxymoron and bears little resemblance to the history of theory.

The idea that the history of theory might also contain rhetorical traditions, and that it might be dependent on discursive practices, has been one of the least pursued avenues in understanding theory and its role in intellectual and artistic speculation. The history of the oppositional theories discussed in this paper is a history of retracings and transfusions, of bizarre misplacements and ingenious reconnections, but, above all, the history of urgency and of self-righteousness (on all sides). There exists to date no official academic discourse that can adequately deal with these issues in one breath, as they are not only interdisciplinary, but move between the high language of philosophy and the perhaps even more powerful language of clichés, jargon, and unreflective discursive ready-mades, all interwoven with overt, hidden, and disguised motivations — sometimes benign, sometimes sinister. It is a history stretched out over time, place, language, and culture, dependent not on singular authority, but on multiple layers of authorities and shifting political realities. Taken as a whole, however, the role of these oppositional theories — their social contract, so to speak — lies in their purported renunciation of the object lessons of history, especially in those cases where texts demand to be understood as riding on the fervor of personal conviction, insisting that life, as it is felt, be changed, altered, or transcended. Though theory uses topoi to assist in this, these connections with history remain incestuously concealed within the day-to-day performance of theory. As a result, history becomes not something "of the past," but a forced absence from the present, calculated to preserve the stature of a thought's contemporaneity.

There is no dialectical synthesis and no possibility of resolution of historicity and contemporaneity. Theory thrives on the repressed voice of its troubled historicity. And herein lies the continued power of oppositional theory, its rhetoric, its moral force, its inspiration, and even its pattern language of "us" and "them," of good and bad, and of violence and healing. The opposition — portraying itself on *both* sides not as passive, but always as an active, ethically superior act of opposing, eager to win converts — in revolving around a missing center has given a charge to history that history as an independent academic discipline could never have without this antihistoriographic dynamic.

In John Keat's "Lamia" of 1820, the young Lycius has fallen in love with the beautiful and clever goddess of the title. In her love Lycius sees truth and eternity; in actuality, Lamia lives only for the day ("I neglected the holy rites"). Lycius is the theorist who has "found himself" in the seeming certainty of Lamia's love. As they prepare their wedding feast, the goddess warns Lycius to stay away from his former teacher Apollonius, the balding cynic who sees beyond temporal reality. Lamia's anxiety proves well founded: for Lycius, unknown to her, invites the scholar to their wedding; Apollonius, staring at Lamia ("He looked and looked again"), reveals her for "a mere illusion."⁵³

Oppositional theory, like Lycius in love with Lamia, who makes him forget the history of love's abuses, must continue to justify itself as inspirational, authenticated in the making of art itself, with the result that the source of meaning is displaced from history and its contextualizing terms. Theory, though based on an act of opposing in order to establish and legitimize "critical" distance, collapses this distance in its basic assumption that theory has a singular vision that can be read, taught, and understood. This parapedagogical act — which protects itself from critique by making it "personal" as opposed to discursive, a "testimony" as opposed to a document, and something appropriate to teach and guide the young as opposed to something that endangers and threatens society even if it preaches violence as the path toward salvation — claims thus to recover its true, nonoppositional, power at the source, which is presumed to be the unstoppable thrust of individual artistic creativity. The act of opposing would question any reading that could shatter the absolute subject of authenticity.

It was one of Wilhelm von Humbolt's profoundest insights that intellectual activity is constantly directed toward something already given. But this "already given-ness" is not reconstituted without a great sense of anxiety. For the process of restoring the terrible historiographic shadow to the body of theory, the process of "looking and looking again" at the illusions of the present, is neither a laying bare of the truth nor a discourse on what was "done"; history has *already* been acted on by the needs of practice, which repressed it as a form of self-protection and self-activation. (Lamia warned Lycius to keep Apollonius away in order to protect their love.)

Therefore not only is history already absent in the affirmations of theory and pedagogy, but theory in the process acquires a unique itinerary in the interplay in intellectual history between drift and evolution, between *dérive* and derivation. The historian, faced with a thought that demand to be understood as authentic and that is formative in the sense that history is de-formative, is limited, however, by that which is unrevealed and works as an intruder in the present, skeptical of its claims and its needs to substantiate itself. Apollonius, on crashing Lamia and Lycius's wedding party, would explain

Tis no common rule . . .
Lycius, for uninvited guest
To force himself upon you, and infest
With an unbidden presence the bright throng
Of younger friends; yet must I do this wrong,
And you forgive me.⁵⁴

History, in the form of an "uninvited" *Aufhorchen* (hearken-ing), searches to question the truths of the here and now rather than to find verity in the past. The unskeptical phenomenological *Aufhebung* from history into the present becomes, as a result, a strategy that, just as potent as illusory, underlines the authenticity of practice as well as exposes the limits of reflection.

What wreath for Lamia? What for Lycius?
What for the sage, old Apollonius?⁵⁵

Postscript: Now You See It, Now You Don't

Theories based on the oppositional logic I have just outlined act as Saussurean signifiers of what is presumed to be a precisely defined field of cultural activity. In this sense, they become figurative, protecting themselves and also the field in which they exist not from attack (for they welcome it) but from the problematic slippages inherent in the historical other to textual originality at work within and against the text. The consequence of treating figural theory as "theory" itself, as is so often done, is that the history of theory becomes merely a series of recenterings in which the text and its associated object claim to overlap perfectly within a framework that it simultaneously articulates *and* represents. In closing, I would like to turn to the visual, not to give it a



2. Cy Twombly, *Untitled*, 1972

formalist priority over the text, but to complement my discussion that interprets both the making of a text and the making of an object as operations at the *edge* of a discourse, a discourse that, in turn, will always remain as a beyond to the expressions that claim to define it.

The House of Imagination at the Epcot Center is probably one of the few places in the world where the person on the street can know what it *feels* like to live the battle between the Sphinx and the Chimera. Visitors, who are given the role of the hegemonic Sphinx, are locked into an open car that, once it has entered the theater, remains motionless and static while all else is buffeted about by an oncoming (simulated) storm. Their role changed from travelers to spectators, visitors are confronted by the god Imagination, who — together with a dinosaur, representing unpredictability and whim and singing the glories of fantasy — rides Chimera-like through the air on a multilimbed flying object, part ship, part submarine, part airplane. As the ride ends, visitors are cunningly reminded of their former attachment to the static by a huge freeze-frame of each person projected onto a wall.

But if Disney World wants to claim that it is champion of the unusual and the different, one should remember that its success lies in its expensive hotels, friendly waitresses (“smile or you’re fired”), and attention to cleanliness, all carefully crafted to recreate white upper-middle-class America in the full glory of its potential “harmonious” purity. It wants to be the best of both worlds, the Sphinx *and* the Chimera, both cleansed of their shadow of violence: the topos of liberation and the topos of order, but *without* the crisis of confusion and *without* the challenge to authority. One illusion hides the other.

Cy Twombly’s paintings are in some sense the opposite; they are all about the crisis of confusion combined with the crisis of order, united by the common thread of violence. Twombly begins with the mimetic act of the sketch; grids, lines, circlings, rectangles, and even written words. It is like the Sphinx scratching the alphabet of civilization in the sand. But the directed and orderly world of the Sphinx never takes full shape in the mind of the artist, for things become displaced seemingly chaotically and hastily across the canvas, as if the impulse toward reason and order gave way suddenly to chaos, imagination, and action. By beginning and beginning

again, ending and ending again, the artist reenacts the irresolvable nature of the conflict. Neither the Sphinx nor the Chimera gain the upper hand.

Twombly finds that in yearning for the mimetic moment to occur while simultaneously withdrawing from it, he is at once empowered as an artist and deprived of the art-making skills. Twombly cannot get beyond the most primal manifestation, the mark, the scratch, the square, the word, to representation, to the tectonics of precision, or to the world of “proper meaning.” He cannot go into an aesthetic that hides its erasure. But he does go “beyond,” ironically, in the very form of his erasures, which are not representations of voids but the voiding of representation — a process that critically and almost cynically reflects back on the squares to reclaim, if only for a moment, their lost innocence.

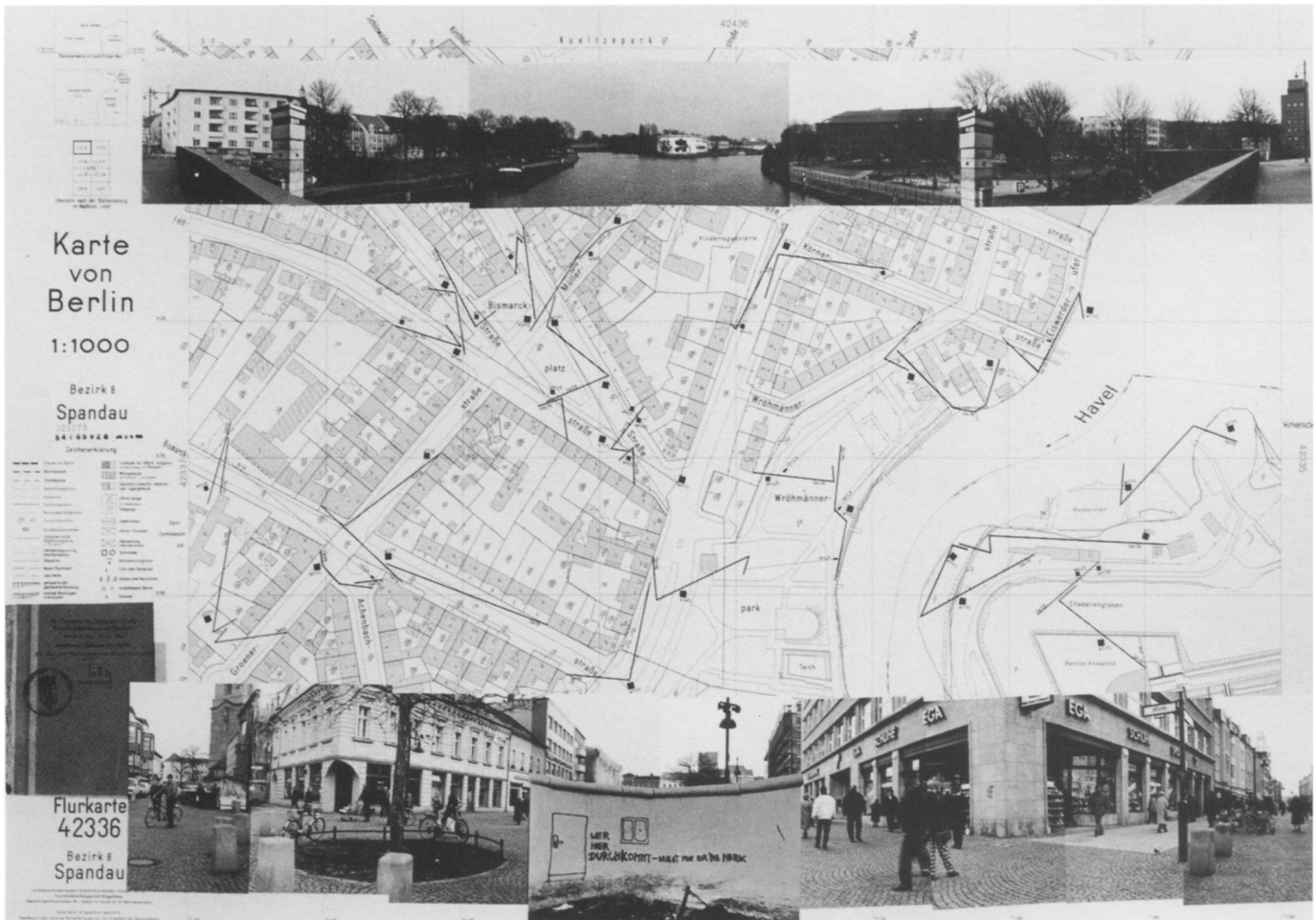
Is an architecture possible that, like Twombly’s art, weaves the oppositional line into a continuous fabric of reversals and counterreversals? Is an architecture possible that “opposes,” but does not allow a single oppositional debate to dictate the course of thought? Is an architecture possible that removes from architecture, temporarily, its confidence as to the locus of architecture itself, but permits that locus to exist, nonetheless?

In the form of an autobiographical essay on his home city, Michael Delfs approached the famous competition site of the former Berlin Wall by deciding that “to build,” or even “to think to build,” on this site would only perpetuate the ironies and conflicts inherent in its tragic history.⁵⁶ Delfs’s project takes its name from the site’s nickname “Death Zone” (*Totes Streife*). The implication is that though the wall has been removed and the area made ready for “building,” this remains a spot where there can be “no” architecture, and further, “no” theory, because no one person, not even a native born, can understand this site sufficiently to build on it. Theory, even deconstruction, is at once too personal and too impersonal when placed in the hands of an architect, who might be tempted to counter the tragedy of the site with personal poetry or fantasy, which in its very aesthetic extravagance amounts to an affirmation of transcendence. In this sense, Delfs challenges the aesthetic beauty inherent in Libeskind’s drawings.

Delfs’s first thought was to extend the absence of the Berlin Wall to *all* of Berlin by fabricating wooden replicas that could be assembled and placed in the middle of the night at street intersections, in people’s back yards, or across train tracks, as a bitter recognition that the past still haunts the city. This architecture as graffiti would serve as a reminder to Berliners that their history cannot be as easily repressed as its politicians would hope. It will pop up where one does not want it and be constructed by people one does not want around, namely, commandos. But the walls are impermanent; they would remain a day or so, temporary inconveniences, as all repressed traumas want to be interpreted. Their removal (speeded up by the violence they would provoke) and the return to normalcy simultaneously replicates and defies the removal of the Berlin Wall and the political-governmental ideal that the city can now be healed. Delfs’s commando walls, like Twombly’s scratching, make erasures visible. Drawings of the planned locations of the walls are traced in imitation of bureaucratic-government drawings showing lots and dimensions. Were these plans stolen from the underground commandos, or were they taken from the German government, which, now that the Berlin Wall has been removed, is secretly planning wall interventions to further its goal of social terror?

Delfs’s second move was to turn to the design problem itself, the construction of apartments in the Death Zone. He tackled this by handing the design over to children, who, lacking both cynicism and political awareness and without career or reputation to consider, designed buildings in true innocence. In this sense, the originality of the child outshines that of the architect working in the limelight of his performance. The children in Delfs’s studio relished their task. But in hiding behind the children, by exploiting their talents and stalking their shadows, Delfs points not only to the impotency of architecture, but also to the underlying perversity of normalcy: the project prevents Hitler’s infamous exploitation of children in the Battle of Berlin, which took place on this very site, from being erased by “grown-up” architecture.

Rather than a singular critique that sets up a platform of ethical, theoretical, or professional superiority, the project revolves around multiple layers of critique that incorporate their own negation. The political activist — whether in the

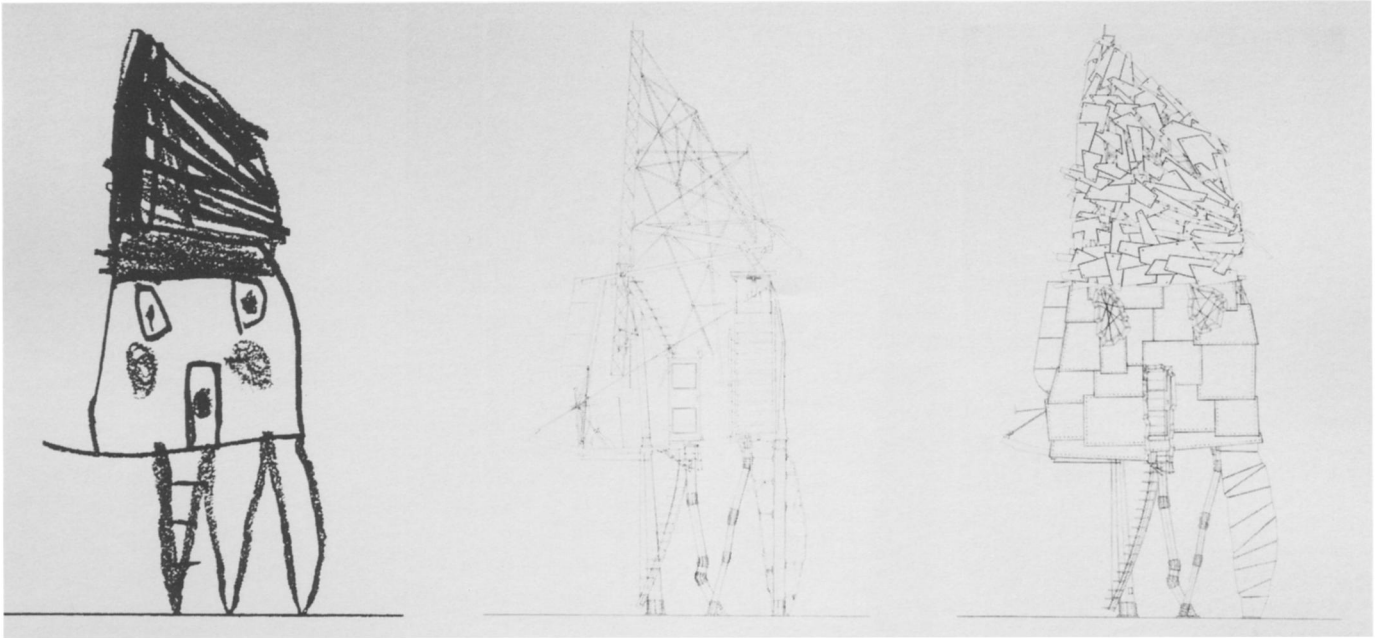


3. Michael Delfs, *Death Zone*, 1993, site plan

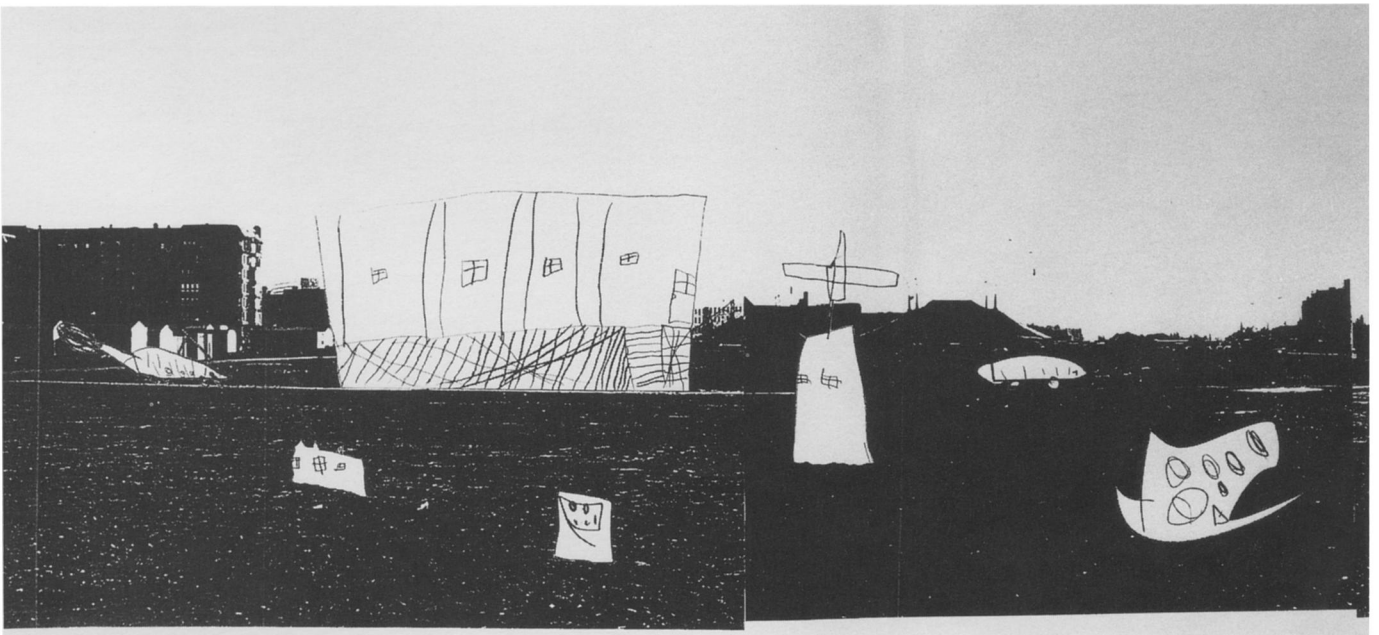
form of a leftist terrorist or a communist organizer — is matched by the innocent child. But the commando operation — itself a form of activism — is in some sense false, for it destroys nothing and reproduces normalcy every time the wall is removed. And the use of children as a form of ready-made innocence is equally false, if not cunning and abusive. Just as the commando operation (unlike architecture) is taken seriously by the stodgy middle class precisely because it is a form of extremism, the child is still viewed through the patronizing gaze of bourgeois culture.

Delfs's *Death Zone* thus cannot possibly constitute a solution to the problem: for as an ending that releases aggressions and a beginning that rekindles innocence, the process would leave Berliners, Delfs included, frustrated and ashamed. The

Mercedes Headquarters that will in fact be built on the site emerges, ironically, as the arch reality that in its very purposiveness without purpose (to borrow Kant's famous words) replicates the Final Solution: its violence, and historical association with violence, is veiled by normalcy. Delfs's project thus returns us tragically "to where we are." It is not an "unbuilt" architecture, in the sense of "what might have been" had the city council voted for it, like Libeskind's Jewish Museum. Delfs's project does not need the city council; it has no clients and no program. It needs only some willing militants and some willing children. As a consequence, it will not become "unbuilt," but remain incomprehensible. These reversals, overlappings, and slippages have left reality intact and serve only as a pause for thought.



4. *Death Zone*, apartment structure derived from child's drawing



5. *Death Zone*, apartments in the landscape

Notes

1. Daniel Libeskind, "Symbol and Interpretation," in Daniel Libeskind, *Between Zero and Infinity* (New York: Rizzoli, 1981), 27–29.
2. My purpose is not to analyze Libeskind's architecture in accordance with his "theoretical" statements. I hold that theory is primarily a form of writing and has first to be analyzed as a text among texts. To use an architect's "theory" to explain his or her architecture (or vice versa) is to complete the narcissistic imperative that theory attempts to place on architectural practice.
3. John Keats, *Letters*; quoted in Joseph Chiari, *Realism and Imagination* (London: Barrie and Rockliff, 1960), 125.
4. See Peter Eisenman, *Yale School of Architecture Seminar Papers* 2:79; quoted in Mark Taylor, "Nuclear Architecture or Fabulous Architecture or Tragic Architecture or Dionysian Architecture or . . .," *Assemblage* 11 (April 1990): 11.
5. Patricia O'Toole, *The Five Hearts: An Intimate Portrait of Henry Adams and his Friends, 1880–1918* (New York: Clarkson Potter, 1990), 381.
6. Charles Baudelaire, "Further Notes on Edgar Allen Poe," in *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*, trans. Jonathan Mayne (New York: Da Capo, 1964), 93–94.
7. For the exchange between the Sphinx and the Chimera, see Gustave Flaubert, *The Temptation of Saint Anthony*, trans. Kitty Mrosovsky (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981), 223–24. See also Ginevra Bompiani, "The Chimera Herself," in *Fragments for a History of the Human Body* (New York: Urzone, 1989), 1:395–96.
8. F. Marinetti, *The Founding and Manifesto of Futurism*, first published in *Le Figaro* (20 February 1909). For an English translation of the complete text, see José Pierre, *Futurism and Dadaism* (London: Heron, 1969), 100–103.
9. Aristotle, *Poetics* bk. 4.
10. *Ibid.*, 8.4.
11. Alexander Tzonis and Liane Lefaivre, *Classical Architecture: The Poetics of Order* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1986), 5.
12. Clement Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch" (1939), in *Art and Culture: Critical Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961), 5–6.
13. Le Corbusier, *Towards a New Architecture*, trans. Frederick Etchells (New York: Dover, 1986), 73–75.
14. Le Corbusier, *The Decorative Art of Today*, trans. James I. Dunnett (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1987), 188.
15. *Ibid.*, 22.
16. Richard Neutra, *Survival Through Design* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1954), 3.
17. Eliel Saarinen, *Search for Form in Art and Architecture* (New York: Reinhold, 1948), 347.
18. *Ibid.*, 343.
19. Aristotle, *De anima* 428a ff.
20. Plato, *Republic* 488a.
21. See Joshua C. Taylor, *Futurism* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1961), 124, 132.
22. Aristotle grudgingly accepted it as long as it was part of the moral imperative: "If impossibilities have been put into a poem, that is a fault. But it is all right provided the art attains its end" (*Poetics* 25.3). It is this cautious acceptance of phantasia that one finds in Charles Jencks's defence of postmodernism. Jencks does not want a free-for-all or a radical challenge to meanings: "The pre-eminent role of the architect is to articulate our environment, not only so we can comprehend it literally, but also so we can find it psychologically nourishing, create meanings we hadn't even imagined were possible" (*The Language of Post-Modern Architecture* [London: Academy Editions, 1977], 99).
23. Philostratus, *The Life of Apollonius of Tyana*, trans. F. C. Conybeare (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1950), 6.19. Apollonius tries to claim phantasia for the Greeks, but is rebuked by the Egyptian, who claims that his countrymen understand its principles better: "You criticize our religion very superficially, for if the Egyptians have any wisdom, they show it by the fact that they fashion the forms of the gods as symbols of a profound inner meaning, so as to enhance their solemnity and august character."
24. W. J. Cash, *The Mind of the South* (New York: Vintage Books, 1941), 48.
25. Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgment*, trans. James Creed Meridith (London: Oxford University Press, 1952), 88.
26. Libeskind, "Symbol and Interpretation," 28, 29.
27. Alison de Lima Greene and Pierre Restany, *Arman 1955–1991: A Retrospective* (Houston: The Museum of Fine Arts, 1991), 38.
28. Benedetto Croce, *Lineamenti di una logica come scienza del concetto puro* (Naples: Accademia Pontaniana, 1905), 31.
29. William Tucker, statement in an untitled exhibition catalogue (London: Annely Juda Fine Art, 1987), n.p.
30. Quoted in Basil Taylor, "Art—Anti-Art," *The Listener* (London), 12 November 1959, 281.
31. John Cage; quoted in Calvin Tompkins, *The Bride and the Bachelors: The Heretical Courtship in Modern Art* (New York: Penguin, 1965), 73.
32. See Thomas M. Greene, *The Light in Troy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982).
33. *Ibid.*, 149.
34. J. Mordaunt Crook, *The Dilemma of Style: Architectural Ideas from the Picturesque to the Post-Modern* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 40.
35. Humphrey Repton, "Memoir"; quoted in *ibid.*, 26.
36. A. W. N. Pugin, *Apology for the Revival of Christian Architecture* (1843; reprint, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), 1–2.
37. Livy, *The Early History of Rome*, trans. Eubrey de Sélincourt (London: Penguin, 1960), 33–34.
38. John Ruskin, *The Two Paths: Lectures on Art* (Chicago: Belford, Clarke, 1873), 33–34.
39. Georg Lukács, "Realism in the Balance," in *Aesthetics and Politics*, trans. Ronald Taylor (London: Verso, 1977), 33.
40. Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," 5–6.
41. Le Corbusier, *Towards a New Architecture*, 17–168, and *idem*, *The Decorative Art of Today*, 103.
42. Georg Fuchs, *Der Kaiser und die Zukunft des deutschen Volkes* (n.p., 1904), 39.
43. See Bruno Taut, "Eine Notwendigkeit," *Der Sturm* 4, nos. 196–97 (February 1914): 174–75; see also "Zwei Ausstellungen," *Der Sturm* 3, no. 107 (April 1912): 19–20.

44. Ernst Bloch, "Discussing Expressionism," in *Aesthetics and Politics*, 22; see also Lukács's response, in *ibid.*, 30.
45. *Ibid.*, 23.
46. Libeskind, "Symbol and Interpretation," 29.
47. Karl Scheffler, *Geist der Gothik* (Leipzig: Insel, 1921), 29.
48. Joseph Chiari, *Realism and Imagination* (London: Barrie and Rockliff, 1960), 67.
49. See Alberto Pérez-Gómez, *Architecture and the Crisis of Modern Science* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1983); Colin Rowe and Fred Koetter, *Collage City* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1978); Jencks, *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture*; Paolo Portoghesi, *Post-Modern: The Presence of the Past* (New York: Rizzoli, 1982); and Philip Johnson and Mark Wigley, *Deconstructivist Architecture* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1988).
50. *Peter Eisenman: Recent Projects* (Amsterdam: Idea Books, 1989), 25, 81, 127.
51. Julius Langbehn, *Rembrandt als Erzieher: Von Einem Deutschen*, 33d ed. (Leipzig, 1891), 216.
52. *Ibid.*, 284. See also the 49th edition, 384–51.
53. John Keats, "Lamia," in *An Oxford Anthology of English Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1937).
54. *Ibid.*, pt. 2, ll. 164–69.
55. *Ibid.*, ll. 221–22.
56. Michael Delfs, *Death Zone*, M.Arch. thesis, Cornell University, School of Architecture, 1993.
- Vida, trans. Ralph G. Williams (New York: Columbia University Press, 1976), 73.
2. David Sutter, *Les Phénomènes de la vision* (Paris, 1865).
3. Irwin Edman, *Arts and the Man* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1928), 132.
4. Quoted in Peter McCormick, *Modernity, Aesthetics and the Bounds of Art* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), 164.
5. Ruskin, *The Two Paths*, 52, 59, 49.
6. Apollonius Rhodius, *Argonautica* 2.729–45.
7. Cash, *The Mind of the South*, 48.
8. William Wordsworth, *The Prelude* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), bk. 6, ll. 525–27, 532–36.
9. Joseph Conrad, *The Secret Agent* (New York: Doubleday, 1951), 39.
10. Vitruvius, *On Architecture*, trans. Frank Granger (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1934), 2:7.5.
11. Bernard of Clairvaux, *Apologia ad Guillelmum*, in *Patrologiae Cursus Completus*, ed. J. P. Migne, 221 vols. (Paris: Migne, 1844–64), 182:914ff. For an English translation of relevant passages, see Cecilia Davis-Weyer, *Early Medieval Art, 300–1150: Sources and Documents* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1971), 168–70.
12. Giorgio Vasari, *Lives of the Artists* (1550); quoted in James Ackerman, *The Architecture of Michelangelo* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1961), 76.
13. Peter Eisenman, "Postscript: The Graves of Modernism," *Oppositions* 12 (Spring 1978): 23.
14. Mark Taylor, "Eisenman's Coup," *Progressive Architecture* 70, no. 10 (October 1989): 89.
15. St. Augustine, *City of God*, trans. Gerald Walsh (New York: Image Books, 1958), 66.
16. Vida, *De Arte Poetica*, 15.
17. Friedrich Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, trans. Reginald Snell (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1954), 40.
18. E. H. Gombrich, *In Search of Cultural History* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), 45.
19. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Random House, 1967), 47.
20. Marsden Hartley, *Artists on Art*, ed. Robert Goldwater and Marco Treves (New York: Pantheon, 1945), 47.
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22. Sigfried Giedion, *Space, Time and Architecture* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University, 1967), xxxii.
23. Erich Kahler, *The Disintegration of Form in the Arts* (New York: George Braziller, 1968), 35, 43.
24. Alison and Peter Smithson, *Without Rhetoric: An Architectural Aesthetic 1955–1972* (London: Latimer New Dimensions, 1973), 14ff.
25. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), 3.
26. Arnold Toynbee, *A Study of History* (London: Oxford University Press, 1935–61), 4:52.
27. Loren Eiseley, *Unexpected Universe* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1969), 6.
28. Karl Groos, "Unser Bedürfnis nach Aesthetischer Kultur," *Kunstwart* 19, no. 14 (1906): 57–58.
29. Ferdinand Averanius, *Kunstwart* 12, no. 13 (1899): 3.
30. Paul Klopfer "Kunstgewerbe und Architektur," in *Schaffen und Schauen: Ein Führer ins Leben*, ed. Alfred Giesecke (Leipzig: B. T. Teubner, 1909), 1:159.
31. W. Schumann, "Über den Dürerbund," 1919, Dürerbund-flugschrift, 34.
32. Lukács, "Realism in the Balance," 34.
33. Quoted in Renato Poggioli, *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Gerald Fitzgerald (New York: Harper and Row, 1968), 53.
34. Rowe and Koetter, *Collage City*, 147.
35. Pérez-Gómez, *Architecture and the Crisis of Modern Science*, 3, 5, 325.
36. Charles Jencks and Nathan Silver, *Adhocism: The Case for Improvisation* (New York: Anchor Books, 1973), 15.
37. Jencks, *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture*, 9, 87.
38. Portoghesi, *Post-Modern*, 7.
39. Libeskind, "Symbol and Interpretation," 29.
40. Johnson and Wigley, *Deconstructivist Architecture*, 10.
41. Quoted in Kim Levin, *Beyond Modernism: Essays on Art from the '70s and '80s* (New York: Harper and Row, 1988), 205.

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2. White Chapel Art Gallery, London.
- 3–5. Courtesy of Michael Delfs.

Notes to Quotations

1. Marco Girolamo Vida, *The "de Arte Poetica" of Marco Girolamo*