The House of Doctor Koolhaas

Françoise Fromonot

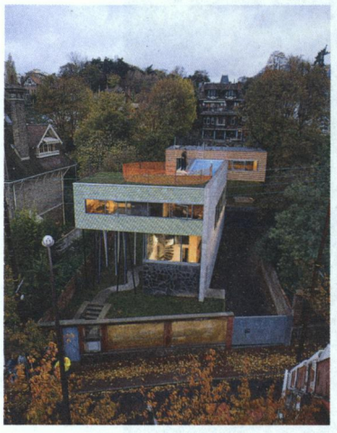
Madelon Vriesendorp,
Villa dall'Ava: St Cloud, View B, 1987
Courtesy Madelon Vriesendorp

Bastille Day 2009. As they do every year, the Bs are hosting a little garden party at their Saint Cloud villa. The garden is calm and fresh, the house delicious. At the end of the evening we'll all go up to the terrace to admire the fireworks over the Eiffel Tower. But for the moment it's still light. Most of the guests are already here: friends of the Bs, family, a few architects. The couple show their visitors around the place – she, in an elegant black dress that sets off her piercing eyes; he, in a white shirt and heavy-framed glasses. They wax lyrical about 'the villa', as they call it, saying how happy they are to have lived for almost 20 years in this little haven overlooking Paris.

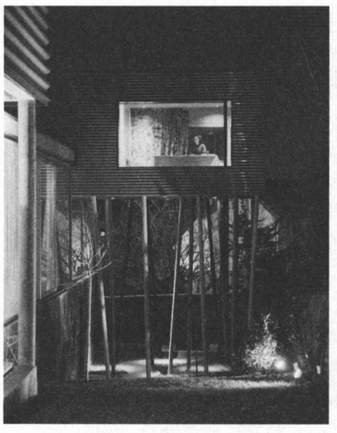
As day blurs into dusk, the swimming pool on the roof lights up, a trench of aquamarine. The Air Parif balloon floats in the distance like a full moon, a milky globe suspended in the dying light. Standing on the deck, we try to make out the skyscrapers of La Défense – and to resist the pull of the void that beckons from behind the soft mesh fencing. Down below, a vaguely familiar silhouette flits across the garden, her hair pale gold, her summer dress sea-green. A round of introductions. Everyone babbles their name – what do you say to an apparition? She's used to it by now. She extends her hand: 'Catherine'. The Bs take her on a tour of the property in the company of the young French OMA *associate. He is handsome, very enthusiastic. He blushes a lot. She looks around. The pick-up sticks at the entrance, the vertiginous stairs in the hall, the translucent apron around the kitchen, the pipework spilling like entrails over the shower wall, the oculus at the foot of the swimming pool – her presence seems suddenly to bring out all the strangeness, the irony of the place. Belle de jour, belle de nuit. The tour pauses in the Bs' bedroom, in front of the striped ply that covers a partition wall: 'There wasn't much money left over for the interior. Which gave us the chance to experiment', the young architect explains, his cheeks aflame. She sketches a dreamy smile. Like in a theatre foyer during the intermission, the guests have spread out between the buffet in the garden and the glow of the living room. The conversation rambles. 'You know,' she says suddenly, through the smoke of her nth cigarette, 'Marcello wanted to be an architect'. More than her face or her celebrated blondness, it is her voice – her delivery, a little rushed and monotone – that calls up a flood of images: so many characters, so many stories. Her every phrase colours the air with memories that make the evening and its setting even more unreal.*

At nightfall, we all gather near the swimming pool for the party's final spectacle. Is it the distance from Paris, or the breeze that has risen to the west, or a technical malfunction – for some reason we do not hear the explosion of fireworks that erupts from the Champ de Mars. Above the city plunged into darkness, the Eiffel Tower ignites noiselessly, as in a silent film.

My technique is to work up from a series of images to a whole state of things.
Michelangelo Antonioni, *That Bowling Alley on the Tiber*, 1986



Elevated view of the front facade of the Villa dall'Ava
© Hans Werlemann



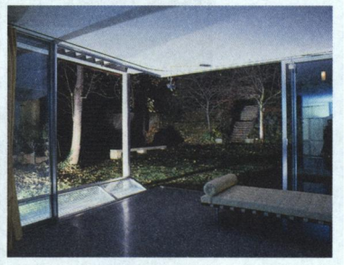
Nocturnal view of the *pilotis*
© Hans Werlemann

If the interest of a building derives from its capacity to surprise – to make you more confused the more you look at it, to play on your expectations only to overturn what you thought you knew – then the Villa Dall'Ava must be one of the most interesting examples of late-twentieth-century architecture. Each of us can picture its capsized volumes, its eccentric claddings and its aerial swimming pool, pointed like a dart at the Eiffel Tower. If one of the great pleasures of the critic is to take up the challenge posed by such a project – to use the curiosity it provokes as the means to try to decipher its intrigue, to drift through its tangled plot, unfolding hypotheses one by one as they arise – then the Villa Dall'Ava is undeniably a great critical subject.

Yet the analyses devoted to the villa are relatively few in number, and they seem mainly to have served to intensify the mystery around it, thereby increasing its peculiar attraction. Despite the fame of its designer – whose every act or gesture, however slight, has been systematically dissected for three decades – the villa itself remains a little folly, shielded by the paradoxes that it seems to cultivate at will. At once extrovert and sibylline, spectacular but difficult to capture on film, it can barely be seen from the street and is not open to the public. Ultimately, we know only two or three things about it, and these facts are endlessly rehashed like the official biography of a star who can be seen on every screen but is little inclined to let anyone get too close. The villa was commissioned in 1984 from Rem Koolhaas and his Office for Metropolitan Architecture by and for Dominique and Lydie Boudet and their daughter. (Monsieur works as an economics journalist for a large construction media group. Madame, *née* Dall'Ava, is a psychologist.) It was completed only in 1991, after a prolonged stoppage due to a lawsuit brought by the neighbours against the large glazed facade that was to border their property. It is made up of two mini-apartments contained in two boxes set on the first floor – the parents' one faces the garden, mademoiselle's the street. Below the apartments is a narrow glass box housing the living spaces; above them is the swimming pool. This layered confection is placed on a concrete base wedged into the slope; the base contains the service spaces and M Boudet's office. All these heterogeneous volumes communicate with each other via a circuit of stairs supplemented, between the entrance and the living room, by a ramp. How, then, to relate the analytical clarity of this spatial organisation to the evident confusion that its architecture provokes?

And the paradoxes of the Villa Dall'Ava don't stop there. To start with, it is the first – and to date the only – building Rem Koolhaas has realised in the Paris region. The French capital has always been alluring to the Dutch architect, and the projects he has invented in his attempt to seduce her have been among his most extraordinary works. However, between the international competition for the Parc de La Villette in 1982 and the consultations on Les Halles and La Défense in the last decade, he has met only with rejection. Yet each of these failures has left behind spoils that have become relics of sorts: the striped lung of La Villette, the chessboard of Nanterre, the box of ribbons at Jussieu, the gruyère of the Très Grande Bibliothèque, the seismograph of Les Halles. Although Paris and the architect have courted each other for three decades, their relationship has remained platonic, with one single exception – this villa perched in the heights of Saint Cloud, the precious fruit of a one-night stand.

As if by a further irony, this little house is one of the first works to have been built by Koolhaas after the publication of the book that established him as the theoretician of the modern metropolis. More exactly, the Villa Dall'Ava is situated between the publication of



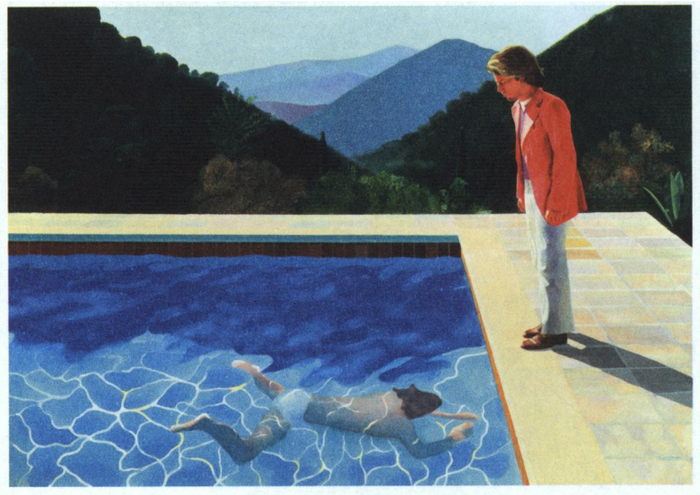
Le Corbusier and Mies van der Rohe furniture
All images © Hans Werlemann, except (*top*) © Peter Aaron/OTTO

Delirious New York[1] and the doctrinal texts that Koolhaas wrote at the beginning of the 1990s and published in his next book, *S,M,L,XL*.[2] In step with other OMA projects of the same period, each of these texts proclaims in its own way the primacy of urbanism over architecture, whether this is through 'Bigness', a trenchant meditation on how the invention of very large structures had caused the discipline to mutate, or 'Whatever happened to urbanism?', an impassioned plea for an 'urbanism of uncertainty' that would supplant architecture and its limitations, or 'The Generic City', an acerbic apologia for the contemporary city. A theoretician of the twentieth-century invention of 'metropolitan congestion' who is also the designer of a small house for the capital of the nineteenth century – another paradox, which cannot help but bring to mind Le Corbusier, also the author of villas on the doorstep of a Paris that he yearned to transform.

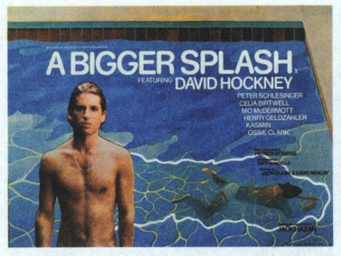
André Kertesz, *Underwater Swimmer*, 1917

To complicate things even more, Koolhaas likes to present the architecture of the villa as the rational resolution of the given constraints. The lapidary project description on the OMA website is a collage of brief affirmations that may appear objective, but are in fact rife with allusions, so in the end they raise more questions than they resolve. Whether out of modesty, a love of concision, or a dislike for sharing confidences, Koolhaas has always refused to comment on his projects. As if dealing with a simpleton asking for a joke to be explained, he responds to questions on this subject with a stubborn refusal to expand, not unreasonably pointing out that this is the role of the critic. The starting point of the small enquiry that follows is simple, perhaps naïve, and most certainly paranoiac. Beyond (or beneath) his theoretical texts – which he is not so stingy with – Koolhaas's orchestration of words and images offers many clues to his work as an architect. If, individually, one is as tortuous as the other, then putting them together sheds some light on them both. The Villa Dall'Ava is a privileged witness to the culture and thinking of the architect at a critical moment in his career. And since it seems to set up a game-like or dream-like chain of enigmas, then why not try to analyse it based on what the architect shows of it, or rather on what he says while exposing it to view?

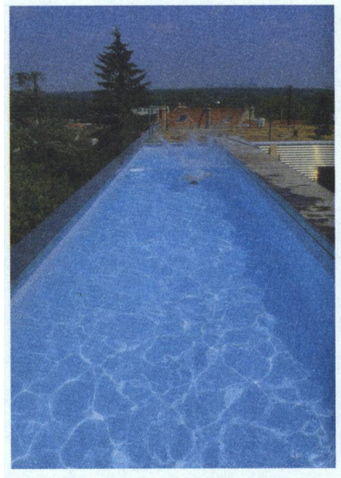
So let's return to the book in which he presents the villa in detail, his famous monumental monograph *S,M,L,XL*. Like Le Corbusier with his *Œuvre complète*, Koolhaas conceived this thick container of a publication as a work on his work, an architecture in itself.[3] Compressed between its metallic boards are 20 years of OMA production as reformulated by the architect himself – all the better to arouse curiosity. The blurb on the back cover places the book in the dual category



David Hockney, *Portrait of an Artist (Pool with two Figures)*, 1972
Photo Steven Sloman
© David Hockney



Film poster, *A Bigger Splash*, directed by Jack Hazan, 1973



The rooftop pool at the Villa dall'Ava
© Hans Werlemann

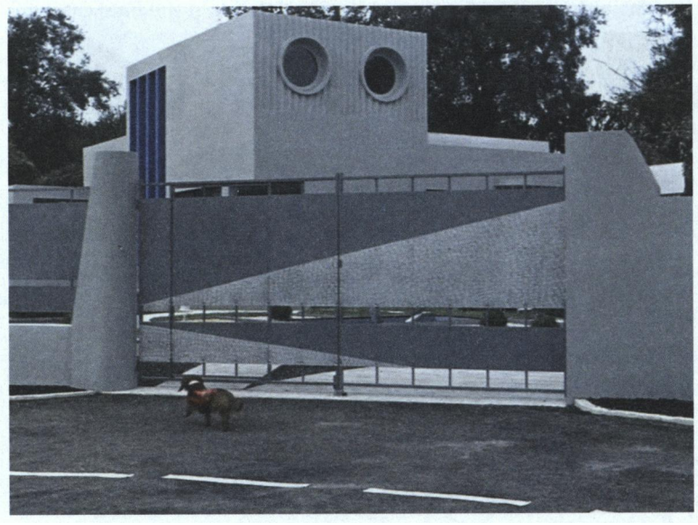
1. Rem Koolhaas, *Delirious New York: A Retrospective Manifesto for Manhattan* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1978). Page references in this text are to the second edition published by Monacelli Press in 1992.
2. OMA, Rem Koolhaas and Bruce Mau, *S, M, L, XL* (New York: Monacelli Press, 1995).
3. See the article by Joseph Cho, '*S, M, L, XL*, suivez le guide', *Le Visiteur* 7, Autumn 2001, pp 112–33.

Street view of the front facade of the Villa dall'Ava
© Hans Werlemann

of fiction and vision: this is 'a novel about architecture' that proclaims itself a 'free fall in the space of the typographic imagination', an 'accumulation of words and images that illuminates the condition of architecture today' – all the better to feed speculation. The order of appearance of the projects eschews the usual registers or arrangements of this type of publication (chronology, information, justification) in favour of a structure more conducive to the chance encounters (objective or not) of undirected exploration – all the better to stimulate the imagination. Besides the approach to grouping the projects, which are ranged along with their associated texts in increasing size like clothes along a rail, a single connecting thread weaves through the book: a glossary that runs down the left-hand margin, sometimes breaking off for no apparent reason and then picking up again equally mysteriously. The terms and the quotations chosen to illustrate them are distributed in such a way that their content seeps into the adjoining images, influencing their meaning. The list of sources for the quotes, given at the end of the book, offers what is undoubtedly a very calculated overview of the library of the architect – all the better to speculate on his culture. In order to give a fresh cast to projects that had already been seen and reviewed a hundred times before, the visual space developed with the graphic designer Bruce Mau builds up a profusion of iconography within a structure of independent 'events'. These sequences are peppered with textual and visual interruptions, inserts and inlays that are sunk like mines into the flesh of the volume – all the better to encourage exegesis. To paraphrase Koolhaas in his memorable introduction to *Delirious New York*, *S,M,L,XL* is a mountain range of evidence clearly assembled to trigger interpretation.

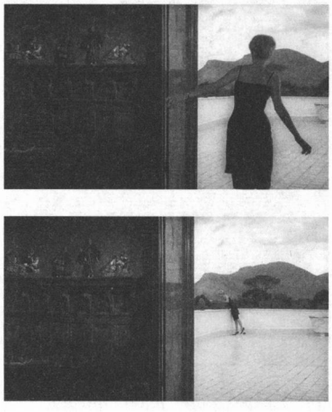
1 Freeze-frames

The sequence devoted to the Villa Dall'Ava appears in the section S, between the renovation of a hotel in the Swiss Alps and a bus stop in Groningen. Koolhaas evidently attaches great importance to this small building, since it occupies 62 pages, or 31 spreads. At first glance, the ingredients of the presentation resemble those of any monograph: texts, images and plans. But Koolhaas only invokes these conventions in order to subvert them, to load them with anomalies seemingly designed to sow doubt and confusion. The first spread appears to fulfil the liminal role of the site plan. Except it reproduces, at a scale at which the villa is invisible, a satellite image of a Paris rendered unrecognisable by its centring – on its southwest quarter. However, this displacement towards Saint Cloud does not

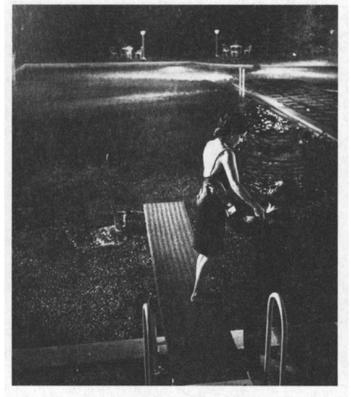


Film still, *Mon Oncle*, directed by Jacques Tati, 1958

put the building at the centre of the picture – on the contrary, the thick black circle that marks its location is found at the very edge of the photo, sliced in two by the glossary that runs down the margin. On the other hand, this arrangement sets up a symmetrical relation between the Eiffel Tower on one side of the centrefold and the villa on the other. In the absence of a title, we may note that the longest entry in the accompanying glossary is headed 'Cities'. The villa could thus be seen as a metonym: despite its scale, it takes as its subject the metropolis – a Paris symbolised by the monumental standard-bearer of its modern splendour, which it engages in a private dialogue.



The villa makes its entrance on the following spread, this time pictured from a bird's-eye view. Yet still we do not *see* it: its volume has been cut out and assimilated into a white surface that at the same time delineates and obliterates it. Koolhaas seems to deliberately want to delay the moment of its unveiling. Is it his way of relating its silhouette to the dimensions imposed by planning regulations (an argument frequently invoked to explain the villa's appearance, which could at the very least be described as 'special')? This seems unlikely, as the image in no way explains the villa's context and even serves to accentuate the contrast with it. Flattened under this inverse *poché*, white on black, as if cloaked in tarpaulin – in short, hidden by the thing that designates it – the villa floats like a spectre among the other houses.

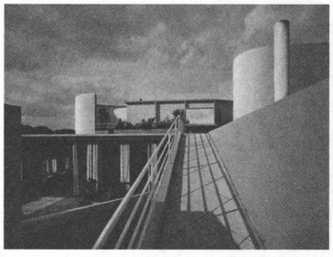


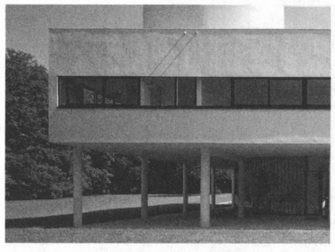
And its appearance is postponed still further. For facing this abstract and vaguely baleful form, Koolhaas places the third canonical element of any monograph, the text of the architect. But in place of the expected explanation or theoretical justification, he delivers a brief history of the 'Obstacles' of the project that reads like the screenplay for some sort of retrospective drama. Its very short episodes, each one matched with a title, are also printed white on black like the intertitles of a silent film. The tone of the narrative echoes various film genres, from thrillers to slapstick – an impression reinforced by entries like 'classic' and 'clichés' in the lexicon that continues to nod and wink at us from the side of the page. From the origin of the commission, the pretext for a *film noir*-style opening ('Letter. It was handwritten in blue ink, obviously by someone who was very passionate about architecture ... It had a desperate tone: 'you are our last chance') to its paradoxical denouement ('They moved in because it was still not finished ... We became friends') Koolhaas sketches in successive strokes a parable of the condition of the architect that is reminiscent of many of his reflections on the subject: 'Only the desperate advance of the horrifying conditions from which contemporary architecture is descended – which could easily take on the dimensions of a Greek tragedy – can reveal the paradoxical fact that to be an architect today is, regardless of his worth, to be a hero', as he has written elsewhere.[4]

This tragi-comic scenario of an act that has already been played out is followed, at last, by a pictorial tour of the completed villa.

Film stills, *Le Mépris*, directed by Jean-Luc Godard, 1963 (*top*); *L'Avventura*, directed by Michelangelo Antonioni, 1960 (*left*); *La Notte*, directed by Michelangelo Antonioni, 1961 (*right*)

4. 'Architecture: Pour qui? Pourquoi?', *L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui* 285, April 1985, p 71.'





Interior view, ramp, *pilotis* and rear facade at the Villa Savoye, 1929

The progression of this sequence, the conspicuous staging of the shots, the ghostly figures that appear here and there, all contribute to the feeling we're being shown the storyboard for a plot in which the house is both the protagonist and the backdrop. Still seen from above but now finally unveiled, it glows, fragile, among the sludge-coloured burrstone of its heavy-set neighbours. Then the camera touches down in the street and we see the villa, all made up with lighting, emerge over the boundary wall. A fire seems to be consuming it from within: the incandescent mask of its facade leers through two half-open windows at the street below. The familiar, reassuring picture of domestic life has become a disturbing phantasmagoria.

And there's no let-up in this disruption of our established terms of reference in the images that follow. Destabilisation of gravity: frontal views accentuate the imbalance of the object they frame. In the garden facade, for example, the volume of the Bs' apartment rests on the fragile glass box of the living room, which is itself displaced towards the post that constitutes its sole identifiable support. Voyeurism: a young woman appears in the light of an upstairs window, a sleeping body can be made out in a reflection. Illusion: the lighting paints the spaces in unreal colours, accentuates the kitsch materials, and reveals hidden recesses through reverberation. Personification of the inanimate: chairs and stairs are portrayed as living sculptures; objects are used to simulate genre scenes; a Le Corbusier LC1 basculant chair at the head of a Mies Barcelona daybed mimics a psychoanalysis session in front of white curtains drawn like a cyclorama. Mixing of scales, implausible details, humour: looking out through the windows, we see a giraffe appear in the driveway – in this madhouse, the pet is bigger than his master. Incomprehensible graphic inserts: a press photo of a screaming trader at the Paris Bourse is suddenly dropped into a double-page spread. A Vermeer painting is embedded into a view of the side facade, with its opalescent glazing. An evocation of the quiet domesticity, the seclusion, of these interiors, which admit only faint glimmers of the outside world? An affectionate memory of a Dutch cultural stereotype, or a sarcastic allusion?

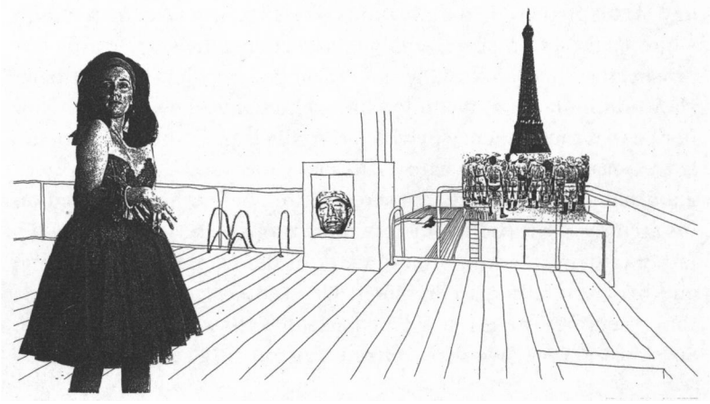
Both the angles of the images and their ambience reinforce the references to modernism that are threaded through the project for the villa. We recognise the suspended prisms pierced by the long continuous bays of the purist Le Corbusier, followed in turn by the glass boxes of Mies and Philip Johnson – all antecedents to which Koolhaas himself has drawn attention.[5] The gliding fabric of the drapes in the living space recalls the sumptuous hangings designed by Lilly Reich for the Villa Tugendhat ('All of Mies's later work used silk, velvet and leather as supple counter-architectures', Koolhaas writes just a few pages before this in *S,M,L,XL*).[6] The atmosphere also brings to mind some examples of the more marginal or more deviant modernism of the interwar period. The line of bamboo behind the perfectly smooth glass, the corrugated polycarbonate of the kitchen above the speckled floor, the silk of the curtains against the grain of the concrete – these piquant juxtapositions of sensuality and coldness, dandyism and asceticism, read like homages to Carlo Mollino. The Turin architect also used theatrical devices in photographing his interiors: this 'creative documentation' of his artificial worlds would eventually be published, but it was in the first instance directed towards self-exploration.[7]

All of the photos are from a one-week shoot in 1991, just before the owners moved in, by two preferred collaborators of OMA: the photographer Hans Werlemann and the video-maker Chiel van der Stelt. They appeared first in published reviews of the building and were then

Interior view, ramp, *pilotis* and rear facade at the Villa dall'Ava, 1991

All images © Hans Werlemann, except (*bottom*) © Peter Aaron/OTTO

5. In *La villa Dall'Ava*, a film by Richard Copans, Arte et les Films d'ici, 1995.
6. Rem Koolhaas, 'The House that Made Mies', in Rem Koolhaas and Bruce Mau, *op cit*, p 63.
7. See Giovanni Brino, *Carlo Mollino: Architecture as Autobiography* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2006).



Early OMA sketch collage of the rooftop terrace of the Villa dall'Ava, *c* 1985
© Dominique Boudet

reused in *S,M,L,XL*. Conceived as an antidote to the clichés of architectural photography, they set out to explore certain scenarios: 'the idea was to test the perennial qualities of the villa by imagining it in 20 situations 50 years from now', Werlemann has said.[8] The resulting images are saturated with cinematic references. A checklist might include: the films of Hitchcock's American period (the voyeurism of *Rear Window*, the phobias of *Vertigo*), various classic scenes involving a swimming pool, the theatres of anxiety (*Cat People*, Jacques Tourneur), of melancholy (*La Notte*, Michelangelo Antonioni) and of hedonism (*A Bigger Splash*, Jack Hazan), films that have been able to grasp the droll side of modern environments (*Mon Oncle*, Jacques Tati) as well as their underlying tensions. Koolhaas has acknowledged the influence of the 'sceptical, disillusioned modernity' of Italian cinema of the 1960s.[9] The skulking presence here is the trio of films Antonioni made with Monica Vitti, where the characters look for or lose each other in ordinary places that are transmuted by the director into surreal settings. Think, for example, of the opening of *L'Eclisse* – a woman breaks up with her lover within the confines of an apartment that becomes more and more suffocating as the night wears on. The scene ends at dawn, when she draws back the curtains to reveal the silent landscape of the EUR district of Rome. This is followed by a scene of stock market hysteria that might just explain the insert of the trader in *S,M,L,XL*. As for the wholesale mobilising of a house to turn it into the protagonist of a fiction, this inevitably evokes the part played by the Casa Malaparte in Jean-Luc Godard's *Le Mépris*. The (mis)quotation that opens that film ('Cinema', said André Bazin, 'substitutes for the real world one that accords more closely with our desires') could equally well serve as an epigraph for Werlemann's oneiric transmutation of the Villa Dall'Ava.

In a deliberate anticlimax to the disquieting sorcery of the images, the presentation of the villa in *S,M,L,XL* ends with the plans and sections. Here again the format is disconcerting: black-and-white working drawings annotated by the hand of the architect in red ballpoint pen. The collision between the disciplinary dryness of these architectural representations and the volubility of the commentary, which is by turns explanatory, assertive and prescriptive, this time turns the spotlight on the creative process, on the means that are used to shape a future reality on paper. The notes appear to have been written after the event on an intermediate version of the plans, so as to make it easier to retrospectively trace the impact of these remarks and instructions on the work one has just seen. Their content seems precisely calculated to distil information on the architectural intentions – something the opening scenario pointedly avoided. 'I hate the

8. 'What will it look like in 50 years? Will people have giraffes in their gardens?; We had the villa to ourselves, finished but not yet inhabited, for a week', Werlemann explained. Jean Nouvel makes an appearance in one of the scenes, used on the cover of the issue of *De Architect* in which the villa was reviewed. Lecture given by Hans Werlemann at the Berlage Insitute, Rotterdam, on 16 December 2008.
9. François Chaslin, *Deux conversations avec Rem Koolhaas et caetera* (Paris: Sens et Tonka, 2001), p 162.

Madelon Vriesendorp, *Arrival of the Floating Pool*, 1976
Courtesy Madelon Vriesendorp

ship metaphor', Koolhaas insists, as a way of explaining the absence of railings – and the vertigo that accompanies a visit to the house.

The whole presentation of *S, M, L, XL* thus rearranges the chronology of the project in an ambiguous way: first, we have the scenario – but it's for a retrospective fable; then comes the storyboard – for prospective film; and finally the drawings – of what has just been shown in built form. Writing, film, architecture: how could we not notice that the sequence in which the villa is presented mirrors the stages of its designer's career? As everyone knows, Koolhaas was a journalist at 19, and then a screenwriter, before he embarked on his architectural studies.[10] These professions were also those of his father (a writer and the first director of the Dutch Film Academy) and his grandfather, an architect. The '*Casa come me*' ('The house that resembles me') is how Malaparte describes his villa on Capri. So is the Villa Dall'Ava also a reflection, a mirror, a self-portrait?

II Wayward Savoye

Let's keep this hypothesis at the back of our minds while we take a look at the last spread in the series. Curiously, this is a black-and-white shot of the garden facade taken when the building was only a raw concrete carcass. Often, in monographs, an image of the construction site is inserted into the presentation of the successive phases of a project as a way of testifying to its *progress* towards its final form. Here it appears as a flashback, a Parthian shot, a final *coup de théâtre* before the curtain falls. And since the same facade was shown a few pages earlier from an identical angle, but in completed form, this final reformulation of the chronology of the building gives the impression that its outer layer has *disappeared*. Stripped of its raspberry corrugated siding, the concrete prism of the parents' apartment extends the width of the double page, all symmetry restored by the central line of supports uncovered by the removal of the building envelope.

Why does Koolhaas show us the building stripped bare in this way? Is it to give us a glimpse behind the scenes of the project? Or to emphasise the crudeness of the activity of construction, to recall the base material so that we will understand everything that the architect has to do before he can work his enchantment? Or is this final, rather cruel manipulation an attempt to dissolve the charm and open our eyes to the reality? Could it be that he is whispering, not without a hint of malice, a clue about the genealogy of the building, and therefore about the intention behind it? For the *undressed* villa reveals the raw truth that had been concealed by its cladding and its make up. With the lights doused, the spell broken, the flamboyant

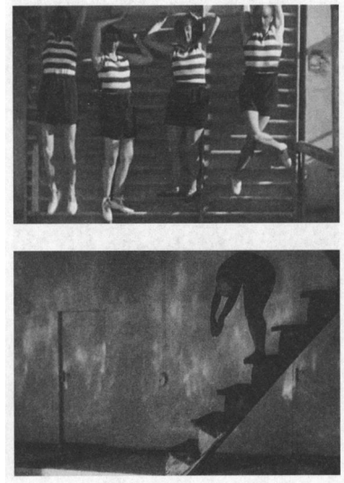
10. See Bart Lootsma, 'Now Switch off the Film...', *Hunch* 1, 1999.

The rooftop pool at the Villa dall'Ava
© Peter Aaron/OTTO

Choreographed swimmers at the Villa dall'Ava © Hans Werlemann

actress lets slip her mask and reveals the old lady underneath. Poking out from behind, or rather underneath the Villa Dall'Ava is the subliminal image of one of the 'intimidations' that is acknowledged in the opening scenario but – it suddenly seems very clear – in fact haunts all the images: the Villa Savoye.

Parallels have often been drawn between the two houses. Writing in *l'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui* shortly after the villa's completion, the critic Jean-Paul Robert was probably the first to evoke 'its aggressive, dislocated Villa Savoye silhouette', its 'upper floor torn by a horizontal window, served up on a floating ground floor, with the requisite *pilotis*'.[11] Since then, there has not been a single essay or graphic reconstruction of the villa posted on the internet by a student of architecture anywhere on the planet that does not refer to these similarities in one way or another.

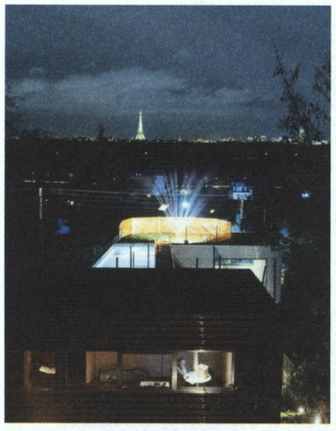


Film stills from *Les mystères du château du Dé*, directed by Man Ray, 1929

However, the two houses are linked by a perverse acquaintance that goes beyond a few stylistic borrowings. The five points of a new architecture are all present, but in a distorted form, twisted to the point of irrationality – and it's this spectacle of their systematic misuse that Koolhaas is inviting us to witness. Independent frame? Rather than being a stable prism lifted from the ground by a visibly regular structure, the raised volume is cut in two halves, which are then arranged in the shape of a hand-crank and maintained in a shaky equilibrium by a central structure that is encased in an interior facade – deliberately made illegible. *Pilotis*? Too many on one side, and not enough on the other. On the side facing the street, a forest of poles supports the upper floor, or ties it to the ground – who knows which – while the only thing that seems to prevent the lopsided garden apartment from toppling over is the meagre post that props it up at the far end. Freely designed facade? Horizontal window? With Le Corbusier, the framework of the glazing is continuous and symmetrical; with Koolhaas, a concrete shear wall brutally truncates the street facade and horizontal window, delivering a body blow to the alignment. Free plan? Le Corbusier explored the effects of uncoupling the internal organisation from the load-bearing constraints; in the Villa Dall'Ava Koolhaas pushes this uncoupling to the point of making the domestic uses practically nomadic. Released from its utilitarian chores, the plan promotes a generalised circulation in which function is accommodated only reluctantly. The kitchen seems to be hanging around in a hallway. The study has taken refuge in the basement, where the single light socket punctures the ceiling like a hole in a trepanated skull. Roof terrace? In the place of the 'dry, salubrious' cloister prescribed by Le Corbusier,

11. Jean-Paul Robert, 'Villa Dall'Ava à Saint-Cloud', *L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui* 280, April 1992, p 11.

Eiffel Tower postcard from the collection of Salvador Dalí
© Fundació Gala-Salvador Dalí



The illuminated rooftop of the Villa dall'Ava on axis with the illuminated Eiffel Tower
© Hans Werlemann

what we find up there is the swimming pool, a water-filled hollow beam that holds the structure together, extended by a lichen-covered platform and an orange plastic mesh fence that impersonates railings. 'Sun bathing', announced Le Corbusier in the *Œuvre complète*;[12] 'midnight dip', replies Koolhaas in *S,M,L,XL*, with his fully clothed bather immersed in the simulated darkness of a *nuit américaine*.

As a consequence, the architectural promenade, which in Le Corbusier describes a spatial composition experienced in a continuous upward movement, here becomes an agglomeration of singular spaces skewered by paths of circulation. The ramp, now very narrow and very steep, is squeezed between the lower entrance and the living room; from there it hands over to metal flights of stairs that form a looping route (the exquisite corpse is also a palindrome) up to the two apartments and the pool. The key invention of cinema – montage – makes it possible to fabricate a continuous narrative out of autonomous 'takes' in time and space. In the same way, Koolhaas sets out to assemble a coherent spatial narrative from discontinuous spatial fragments – both in reality, in the house, as well as in the 'visual tour' offered in the book. Even his frontal views reverse the logic of Corb's preferred framing in the *Œuvre complète*, a perspectival mode of composition that Thomas Schumacher has suggested corresponds to that of Piero della Francesca's *The Flagellation*.[13] With Le Corbusier, the asymmetry of the framing aims at visually fixing the dynamics of the spatial relations set up by the plan; with Koolhaas, the symmetrical views enhance by contrast the precarious relation to gravity of the volumes they depict. And it's not just the photographs, but the whole model of *S,M,L,XL*, with its iconographic choices, that seems designed to outdo Le Corbusier's efforts to break away from the traditional format of the book through the use of visual montages inspired by 'vernacular' publications such as commercial catalogues or advertisements.[14]

Thus, in reality as well as in his representation, Koolhaas methodically tortures each of the ideas tested by Le Corbusier at the end of the 1920s, stretching them to breaking point in order to extract their untapped potential. It's a form of appropriation, to be sure, but also a challenge to an oedipal duel, an eye for an eye (and point by point). The Villa Dall'Ava has all the traits of a Villa Savoye that has been cannibalised, perverted by this Sadean, or sadistic, enterprise of converting an emblem of purism into an obscure object of desire. Far from invoking concepts or dogmas, Koolhaas justifies his strategy in terms of logistical constraints (programme, budget, regulations, context), which only serves to confuse our gauge of reason still further. Another layer can be added, then, to the interpretation of the framing of Paris in the *S,M,L,XL* site plan. What lies midway between the Villa Dall'Ava and the Eiffel Tower, at the centre of the double page, in the fold of the binding, is of course Le Corbusier's first villa in Paris, Villa La Roche – in other words, the guardian of the temple, the Fondation Le Corbusier on square du Docteur Blanche.[15]

What's Koolhaas up to? Is he 'just' trying to rearrange the basic elements of the language of modern architecture? Or to upset their established equilibrium and order by highlighting the arbitrary nature of the hierarchies that govern them, an agenda shared by the proponents of 'deconstructionism' with whom he would be associated through the MOMA exhibition of 1988? Although the project for the Villa Dall'Ava was wrapped up by that time, it was not among the works that represented OMA at the show. Or is this an attempt to reprise mannerism's deliberately monstrous subversion of the vocabulary of the classical orders – a violent and troubled era's conscious

Madelon Vriesendorp, *Greed*, 1973
Courtesy Madelon Vriesendorp

Film poster, *King Kong*, directed by Ernest B Schoedsack, 1933

12. Le Corbusier and Pierre Jeanneret, *Œuvre complète*, 1929–1934, edited by W Boesiger and O Stonorov (Zurich: Les Éditions d'Architecture, 1964), p 27.
13. See Thomas Schumacher, 'Deep Space, Shallow Space', *The Architectural Review*, January 1987, pp 37–42.
14. This subject has been dealt with in detail by Beatriz Colomina in *Privacy and Publicity: Modern Architecture as Mass Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994) and by Catherine de Smet in *Le Corbusier: Architect of Books* (Baden: Lars Müller, 2005).
15. This Doctor Esprit Blanche happened to be a psychiatrist who ran a mental asylum famously modelled on a family guesthouse, whose inmates/residents included Nerval and Maupassant, among others.

Jean-François Millet, *L'Angélus*, 1858

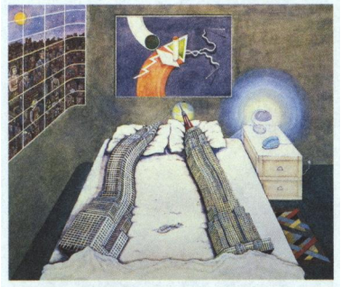
Salvador Dalí, *Réminiscence archéologique de l'Angélus de Millet*, 1933

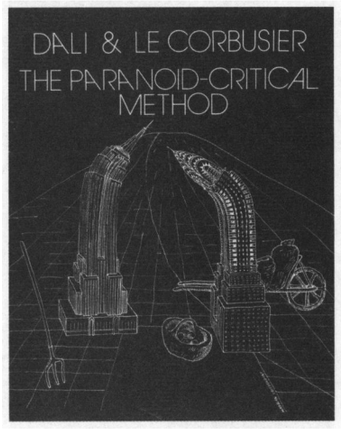
assault on the harmony of Renaissance values? Viewed in this way, the Villa Dall'Ava would anchor OMA in the lineage of a critical modernity that was born with modernity itself. Robert Venturi's rereading of this unloved period of history famously nurtured, from the late 1960s on, his controversial rehabilitation of 'complexity and contradiction' in architecture, as opposed to the elitist simplification enacted by modernism. 'I think it's a harvesting of some of the remnants [of modernism] that are left in a kind of collective consciousness. For me it's an interesting point where modernity maybe is almost a vernacular',[16] Koolhaas said after a presentation of the Villa Dall'Ava in the US in 1986, reprising one of the arguments of a text he'd written the previous year, 'The Terrifying Beauty of the Twentieth Century'. Does this make the villa a device that would help to rebuild modernism by accelerating its absorption into mainstream culture, in line with his reading of the history of Manhattan, which – he declared at the opening of *Delirious New York* – had developed an architecture that was 'at once ambitious *and* popular'? Or, responding more directly to contemporary debates in architecture, is the villa an attack on the claims by a certain strand of postmodernism to have reconciled the avant-garde with historical precedents – the most conspicuous example being Colin Rowe, with his famous stylistic rapprochement between Le Corbusier's villa at Garches and Palladio's 'La Malcontenta'?[17] Whatever the case, the Villa Dall'Ava could be seen as the product of a critical project, directed not only against modernism – which purported to create a new tradition but had by then become at best elitist and at worst oppressive – but also against postmodernism, which sought salvation in the resurrection of ties with past tradition but was mired in historicism.

III Flagrant Dalí

The presentation of the Villa Dall'Ava on the OMA website highlights a photograph that does not feature on the pages of *S,M,L,XL*. So often reproduced that it has become an icon, it shows the terrace and its swimming pool at dusk, on axis with the Eiffel Tower, which is lit up in the distance. In the foreground of the picture stands a statuesque swimmer in black swimsuit and cap, bending forward with her arms outstretched and preparing to dive – though quite how she'll manage this is not too clear as she's facing the narrow end of the pool. This beguiling, absurd image, credited to the photographer Peter Aaron, echoes another series of images taken by Hans Werlemann during the one-week shoot at the villa, showing a staged aquatic display alongside a nocturnal scene on the terrace, with characters in costume. Dressed in one-piece swimsuits reminiscent of 1920s beachwear, the OMA staff requisitioned for the occasion stand in a row on the edge of the pool, arms extended, in a demonstration of coordinated gymnastics.

The explicit reference for both Werlemann and Aaron here is of course the 'The Story of the Pool', one of the endpieces of *Delirious New York*, written by Koolhaas and illustrated by Madelon Vriesendorp, which tells of the mythical constructivist architects who propel their floating pool towards Manhattan by the power of their synchronised swimming. This connection has also often been noted. But is this parody of sporting choreography a further ironic allusion to Le Corbusier – and specifically a response to the early morning exercises on the roof terrace of the villa at Garches, filmed by Pierre Chenal in his short, *Architecture d'Aujourd'hui*?[18] We have Corb's edifying scene – an exposition of the simple pleasures of suburban life (a little exercise before setting off for work in town) and rosy-cheeked health and





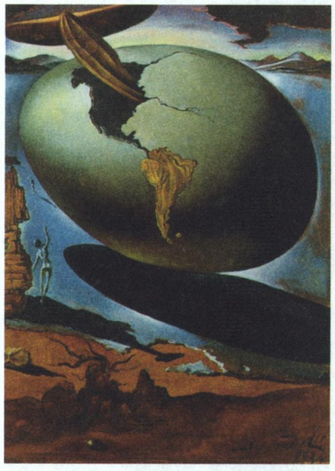
Rem Koolhaaas and Elia Zenghelis, with Madelon Vriesendorp and Zoe Zenghelis, *Exodus, or the Voluntary Prisoners of Architecture*, 1972
© Scala, Florence, 2014

Madelon Vriesendorp, *Après l'amour*, 1975
Courtesy Madelon Vriesendorp

Rem Koolhaas, 'Dalí and Le Corbusier: The Paranoid-Critical Method', lecture poster, 1975

16. Rem Koolhaas, discussion of the Villa Dall'Ava with transcripts of conversations with Thomas Beeby, Peter Eisenman, Frank Gehry, Michael Graves, Léon Krier, Rafael Moneo and Susanna Torre, published in *The Chicago Tapes* (New York, NY: Rizzoli, 1987), p 172. I would like to thank Dominique Boudet for having drawn my attention to this document. See also the two occurrences of the word 'cliché' in the glossary that runs down the margin of the scenario for the villa, *S, M, L, XL*, *op cit*, p 134.
17. Colin Rowe's famous essay was first published in *The Architectural Review* in March 1947 and then reprinted in the anthology *The Mathematics of the Ideal Villa and Other Essays* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press 1982).
18. *Architecture d'Aujourd'hui*, directed by Pierre Chenal (1930), script by Pierre Chenal and Le Corbusier. (http://vimeo.com/67793221)

Detail from Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *Patientia*, *c* 1561



Salvador Dalí, *Allégorie d'un Noël américain*, 1934

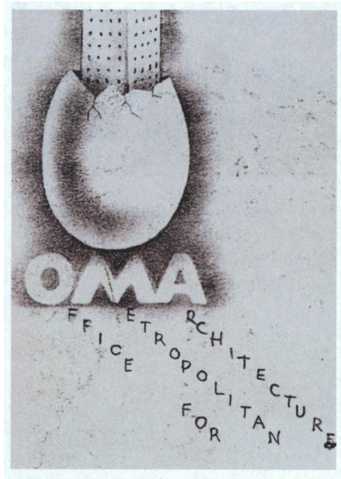
Philippe Halsman, *Dalí, Mémoire prénatale*, 1941

hygiene (the whole family inhaling the fresh air up on the rooftop garden). And OMA's retaliation: a ludic ballet of bachelors performing under the gaze of the metropolis at nightfall.

But more than anything else Werlemann's poolside fiction, with its improvised cast in their retro costumes, brings to mind another cinematic short, which predates Chenal's: *Les Mystères du château de Dé*, filmed by Man Ray at the Villa Noailles at Hyères – another domestic masterpiece of the 1920s designed by another Parisian star of the modern movement, Robert Mallet-Stevens. The Noailles, noted patrons of the avant-garde and ardent promoters of surrealism, had given Man Ray carte blanche to make a film on their 'château' and their art collections, garnished with some shots of their 'guests disporting themselves in the gymnasium and the swimming pool'.[19] Man Ray goes out of his way to make the house's geometric architecture look bizarre, framing its assemblies of cubes, the windows punched in the garden wall and the empty interiors in such a way that they smoulder with a feeling of strangeness. ('Where are we?', wonders one of the intertitles.) Filmed in winter, the Villa Noailles takes on the air of an isolated retreat, high in the hills overlooking the sea – a sort of modernist counterpart to the Château de Silling.[20]

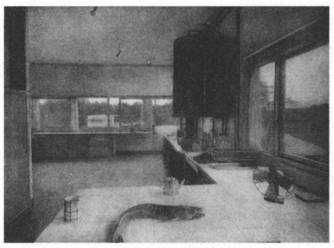
The swimming scene comes as a playful interlude after this disturbing sequence. Lingering on the kinetic reflections produced by the water lapping against the walls, the camera captures the Noailles and their friends from every angle as they frolic in the water, dressed in striped bathing costumes, with black shorts and matching swimming caps, until they exit single file along the edge of the pool. The fleeting scene of a young woman diving – evidently the model for Aaron's shot – is one of the most memorable moments in the film. Man Ray uses reverse-motion to create the illusion that the diver – defying both reason and gravity – is leaping back towards the staircase she has just jumped from. Man Ray christened this experiment in cinematic sorcery with a portmanteau word of his own invention: 'piscinéma'.

What Man Ray did with the Villa Noailles, Werlemann therefore does with the Villa Dall'Ava. Could we say, then, that the agent for OMA's licentious, critical distortion of early modernism is the spirit of this other avant-garde that was contemporaneous with, and a rival of, purism – and that Le Corbusier himself was for a brief period vaguely affiliated with? It would not be the first time that Koolhaas had borrowed from surrealism to mock Le Corbusier. *S,M,L,XL* opens with facsimiles of the beginning and the end of *Delirious New York*, a kind of symbolic synopsis of the prehistory of the author's thinking and career. Among the pages reproduced is 'The Story of the Pool', which places the Villa Dall'Ava, with its pool, in a direct line of descent from the first book, in which Koolhaas presents himself as the theoretician and advocate of the 'culture of congestion' engendered by the metropolis. He postulates that this condition – this other modernity – was unconsciously invented by Manhattan at the beginning of the twentieth century and developed in parallel with the declared avant-gardes. Its theory remained implicit, he says, but if it could be deciphered and retroactively formulated, then it could be used to renew the very idea of modernism and give it a fresh start. 'Manhattanism', he writes, 'is a movement which, from all points of view, is the exact opposite of the one we call modern, which is in fact a simple blend of Puritan dogma and repressive good taste'.[21] To prove it, he evokes Le Corbusier's denigration of the vitalist landscape of Manhattan as immature 'child's play ... tumult, hairgrowth, first explosive growth of the new middle ages'[22] and his proposal to introduce a little order into this chaos by



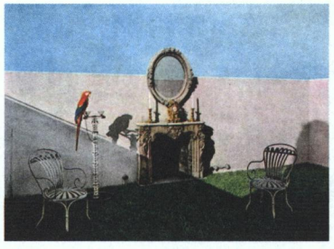
Madelon Vriesendorp, design for a logo for OMA, 1975

19. Man Ray, *Self-Portrait* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1963), p 226.
20. Marie-Laure de Noailles, a descendant of the Marquis de Sade, financed the purchase and publication of the manuscript of Sade's *The 120 Days of Sodom*, the novel from which Luis Buñuel would take the character of the Duc de Blangis for the scandalous final scene of *l'Âge d'or*, also financed by the Noailles.
21. Rem Koolhaas, 'Delirious New York', *L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui*, no 186 (special issue on New York), August–September 1976, p 36.



A fish on the kitchen counter of the Villa Stein, *L'Architecture Vivante*, 1929

Elephants from the Hagenbeck circus outside Le Corbusier's Maison Blanche, 1914
© Bibliothèque de La Chaux-de-Fonds



Le Corbusier and Pierre Jeanneret, a parrot on the terrace of the Beistegui apartment, *Vogue*, 1932

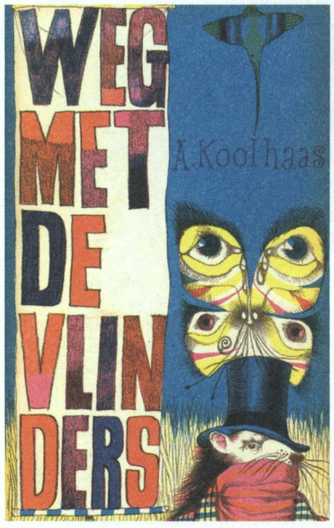
replacing it with the identical rows of Cartesian skyscrapers of his Radiant City. Now that was something *truly* modern.

Against this will to power over the tumultuous landscape of Manhattan, Koolhaas opposes (in order to make his own) Salvador Dalí's natural affinity with the delirium of New York, the city the Catalan painter had understood as the manifestation of a total surrealism from the moment he set foot in America. A psychoanalysis of Manhattan, *Delirious New York* is impregnated with surrealism, with Koolhaas's declared use of the paranoid-critical method – the means Dalí invented of tapping into the unconscious based on his interpretation of Millet's *Angelus* – mingling with the sources and atmosphere of the illustrations by Madelon Vriesendorp, who uses the paranoid-critical method in her own way. Where Dalí mutates the figures of the *Angelus* into anthropomorphic buildings, Vriesendorp turns the skyscrapers into characters endowed with emotions. Her iconic paintings, found on the book jacket and at the beginning of each chapter, not only incarnated the Koolhaasian fiction but helped to fuel it, as was made clear a few years ago by the catalogue and exhibition, *The World of Madelon Vriesendorp*.[23] Photographs taken by the couple's daughter show the impressive collection of postcards they amassed to serve as raw material for their work, following in the footsteps of Dalí, who saw these mass-circulation images as the 'most vivid documents of modern popular thought' and as natural sources for his painting.[24]

It is the spirit of surrealism, much more than its ideological statements or protocols, that animates Vriesendorp's paintings. In line with surrealism's inbuilt propensity to make any reality a reservoir of meaningful associations, she takes mass-produced objects – not just postcards but also cinema posters, gadgets, plastic figures – and mines them for their naturally fantastic themes. Both Koolhaas and Vriesendorp grew up in families of artists whose aesthetic choices took them far away from abstraction. Surrealism remained influential in the Netherlands in the 1960s, especially in painting, through the work of Moesman, Pyke Koch and Carel Willink.[25] It was still in the air in London too, when the couple moved there in 1968. As a student at the AA, Koolhaas wrote an essay for Charles Jencks on Dalí and his paranoid-critical method. The *Angelus* appears in pre-OMA works from 1972: in the form of the Millet characters that pop up in one of the scenes of *Exodus*, or in the Dalí reworking of it that sits on

22. Rem Koolhaas, *Delirious New York*, *op cit*, p 251.
23. Travelling exhibition originating at the AA in January 2008. Shumon Basar and Stephan Trüby (eds), *The World of Madelon Vriesendorp* (London: AA Publications, 2008).
24. For an illuminating discussion of this subject see the chapter 'Position morale du surréalisme' in Astrid Ruff, *Dalí et le dynamisme des formes* (Lausanne: Les presses du réel, 2009).
25. Rem Koolhaas gives some insights into this context in his conversation with Shumon Basar and Stephan Trüby, 'Worrying Kindness and Ultimate Wisdom', in *The World of Madelon Vriesendorp*, *op cit*, p 258.

Christopher Wood, *Zebra and Parachute*, 1930
© Tate, London, 2014



Book covers, Anton Koolhaas, *Gekke Witte*, 1959 and *Weg met de vlinders*, 1961

one of the granite plinths of *The City of the Captive Globe*, symbolising the paranoid-critical method. After this, the reference expands into the unforgettable scenes of *Flagrant Délit* and *Après l'Amour*, with their wonderful skyscrapers turning towards each other in bed. While he was working on *Delirious New York* – a Dalínian title if ever there was one – Koolhaas gave a number of lectures on 'Dalí & Le Corbusier: The Paranoid-Critical Method', a topic that clearly absorbed him at the time.[26] In 1978, the year the book appeared, the chapter on Dalí and Le Corbusier was published in a special issue of *AD* magazine devoted to the relation between architecture and surrealism. Dalí's *Architectural Angelus of Millet* featured on the front cover.[27] In the following decade, in the Villa Dall'Ava, Koolhaas would distort some of the possible significations of the Villa Savoye – without doubt the best known of all of Le Corbusier's buildings – taking his cue from Dalí's treatment of *The Angelus*, one of the most popular paintings in the whole history of art.

IV Avidall'Ava

Dalí's surrealism is therefore pivotal to *Delirious New York*, as one of the wellsprings of its iconography and, more broadly, of Koolhaas's thinking at the time. The emphasis on the swimming pool seems to suggest that the Villa Dall'Ava is the fruit of this engagement, but does Dalí also have a role to play here? Let's go back to the series of photographs in *S, M, L, XL,* and specifically to the zaniest, most inexplicable plate of all – the view looking down the ramp where we glimpse, off to the left, behind the glazed facade, a giraffe being led on a leash by an unidentified person. The near-silence of almost every single commentator on the subject of this giraffe recalls a set-piece of comic cinema: important people doing everything in their power to ignore the ministrations of an embarrassing intruder in their midst.[28] So what could be the meaning of this giraffe that is apparently so hard to see? Is Koolhaas's choice of an image that brings the villa face to face with a large animal of flesh and blood part of his strategy of one-upmanship over Le Corbusier? Because it may possibly hark back to the sinister still-*death* – the photograph of a fish in the kitchen of the villa at Garches – taken for *L'architecture vivante*. Or to the one project by Le Corbusier that falls under the rubric of surrealism, the terrace of the Beistegui apartment, where a parrot – actually an automaton perched on a Murano glass pole – presides over a baroquely furnished open-air 'living room'. In the same vein, the appearance of an African herbivore in a pretty coat may be – as Roberto Gargiani has suggested – a response to a 1930 painting by the English surrealist Christopher Wood depicting a zebra posing on the terrace of the Villa Savoye.[29] Similar to Wood, Koolhaas seems to want to trigger a poetic reaction with this meeting of opposites – wild animal and rational dwelling, primitivism and machinism – within a single image.

But does this allusion also point towards the persistence of the Flemish tradition of surrealism, in which animals, familiar or fantastic, occupy a place of choice? An offshoot of this tradition was very much part of Koolhaas's childhood. His father Anton, an acknowledged expert on wildlife and producer of documentaries on the subject, is famous in the Netherlands for his surreal animal novellas, which have largely remained untranslated and are therefore little known outside the Dutch-speaking world.[30] Among the minuscule heroes of these tales are a spider, a sparrow and a bat (aka a 'flying rat', a supreme example of nature's talent for fabulous hybridisation). Werlemann has said that he'd planned to use other beasts, including a large snake, during his shoot at the villa, but in

J J Grandville, *Au jardin des plantes*, 1842

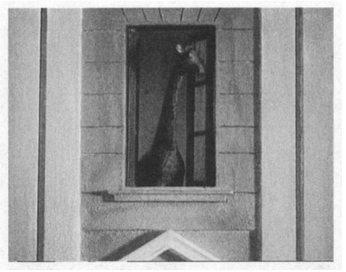
26. As confirmed by Elia Zenghelis in a recent conversation with Cynthia Davidson. See *Log* 30, Winter 2014, pp 69–105. Zenghelis also recalls the meeting between Koolhaas and Dalí in New York, which was as burlesque as it was disastrous.
27. *Architectural Design* nos 2–3, 1978, pp 152–66. Koolhaas's article is titled 'Dalí and Le Corbusier: The Paranoid-Critical Method'. The issue also contains a translation, introduced by Dalibor Vesely, of Dalí's text 'Art Nouveau Architecture's Terrifying and Edible Beauty' (first published in *Minotaure* nos 3–4, 1933). The infatuation with surrealism at this time also spread to a more general public, with major exhibitions at the Hayward Gallery in London and the Pompidou Centre in Paris, the latter attracting some 840,000 visitors.
28. An example of this schizophrenia is the article on the villa in *AMC* in which the giraffe appears in two of the images while Jacques Lucan's text unfolds its argument as if it wasn't there. See 'La villa Dall'Ava, construction moderne', *AMC*, no 28, February 1992. One of the rare exceptions to this rule is Roberto Gargiani. See the chapter he devotes to the Villa Dall'Ava in *Rem Koolhaas/OMA: The Construction of Merveilles* (Lausanne: EPFL Press, 2008).
29. Roberto Gargiani, *ibid*, p 141.
30. So far as I know, only one of these animal novellas (*Baldur S: Quorg, Spider*) exists in English, in the collection *The Dedalus Book of Dutch Fantasy*, edited and translated by Richard Huijing (Sawtry: Dedalus, 1993).

the end had to make do with Romeo, a young giraffe borrowed from a nearby zoo. The art of the surrealists, from Max Ernst to Leonora Carrington, teems with a multitude of animals, as does the work which inspired them in turn, from John Tenniel's illustrations for *Alice in Wonderland* to JJ Grandville's extraordinary social caricatures. (Grandville had a particular fondness for giraffes – the arrival of the first one in Paris in 1827 created a mania for all things giraffe-themed, from impossibly tall hairstyles to giraffe-spotted wallpaper.) The glossary of *S,M,L,XL* contains an entry on 'Animals', in which Koolhaas quotes an extract from Demetri Porphyrios quoting Foucault quoting Borges quoting the famous taxonomy of animals in a Chinese encyclopedia. Is this an allusion to the endless circulation of references and the rhizomatic propagation of their possible meanings? Carel Willink, one of the surrealists active in the Netherlands in the 1960s, produced a series of canvases showing large African animals wandering around famous classical French gardens, including one of a couple of giraffes stationed at the foot of the Orangerie staircase at Versailles. Willink developed a style of magic realism where the imaginary landscapes and scenes are assembled out of existing elements documented by photography: so many montages of true facts – faces, buildings, ruins, panoramas, animals – pressed into the service of alternative visual realities.

Salvador Dalí, sketch for a Marx Brothers' film, *Giraffes on Horseback Salad*, 1937

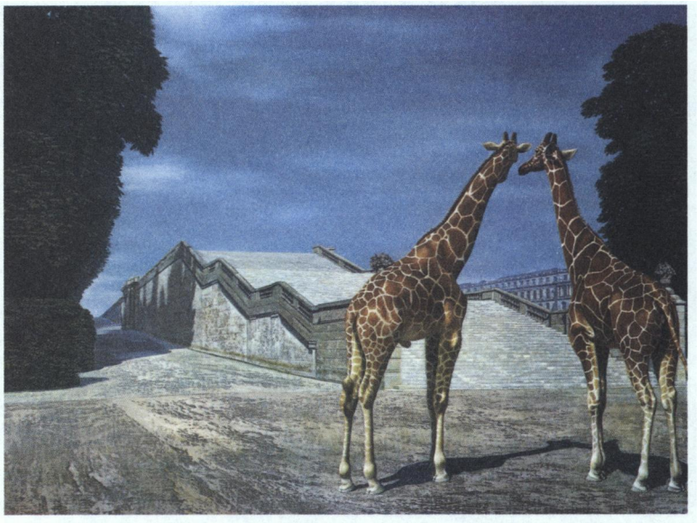
But more than anything else, the giraffe is one of the fetish animals in the Dalí bestiary. You don't have to look for long at his paintings, drawings or installations before a specimen wanders into the scene, its mane in flames. With its phallic neck, the burning giraffe represented 'the masculine cosmic apocalyptic monster', Dalí proclaimed in 'The Terrifying and Edible Beauty of Art Nouveau Architecture', an essay (with illustrations by Brassaï and Man Ray) for the avant-garde journal *Minotaure*, in which he held forth about his loathing of rationalist modernism and his love for Gaudí and art nouveau.[31]

The giraffe, an animal of strange proportions, with the head of a ruminant and the coat of a wild cat, has been an enduring source of fascination for scholars, artists and the population at large ever since its arrival in Europe. Its species name, *camelopardalis* (camel-marked-like-a-leopard), describes a chimerical creature, an aberration, an overturning of nature's order. Hieronymus Bosch painted a giraffe alongside an elephant and a unicorn in the *Eden* panel of his *Garden of Earthly Delights* (1503–04); Ambroise Paré has one being led on a leash in his book *On Monsters and Marvels* (1628). The prodigious creatures that inhabited the iconography of the Middle



Film still, *L'Âge d'or*, directed by Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dalí, 1930

Ambroise Paré, *On Monsters and Marvels*, 1628



Carel Willink, *Two Giraffes*, 1956

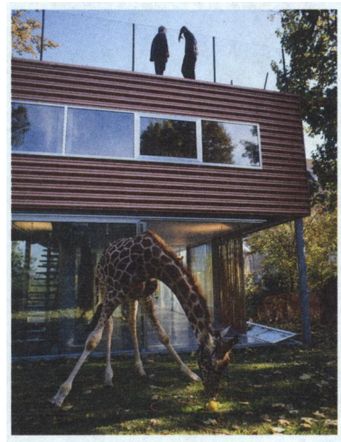
31. In 'Art Nouveau Architecture's Terrifying and Edible Beauty', *op cit.* Dalí's title of course inspired Koolhaas's 'The Terrifying Beauty of the Twentieth Century'.

Romeo the giraffe at the Villa dall'Ava
© Hans Werlemann

Ages continued to prowl around the margins of the Renaissance, kept alive by the Flemish artists that the surrealists found so appealing. Riffing on the imagination of Bosch, Dalí modifies the anatomy of other animals to conform with that of the giraffe: for example, in his *Temptation of St Anthony* – a subject well suited to the visual expression of all manner of delusions, treated by Bosch in his time, along many others, and also adapted by Méliès in the early days of cinema – he gives a horse and elephants spidery legs and has them carry heavy burdens on their backs: an obelisk, a baroque basilica, a gigantic sculpture.

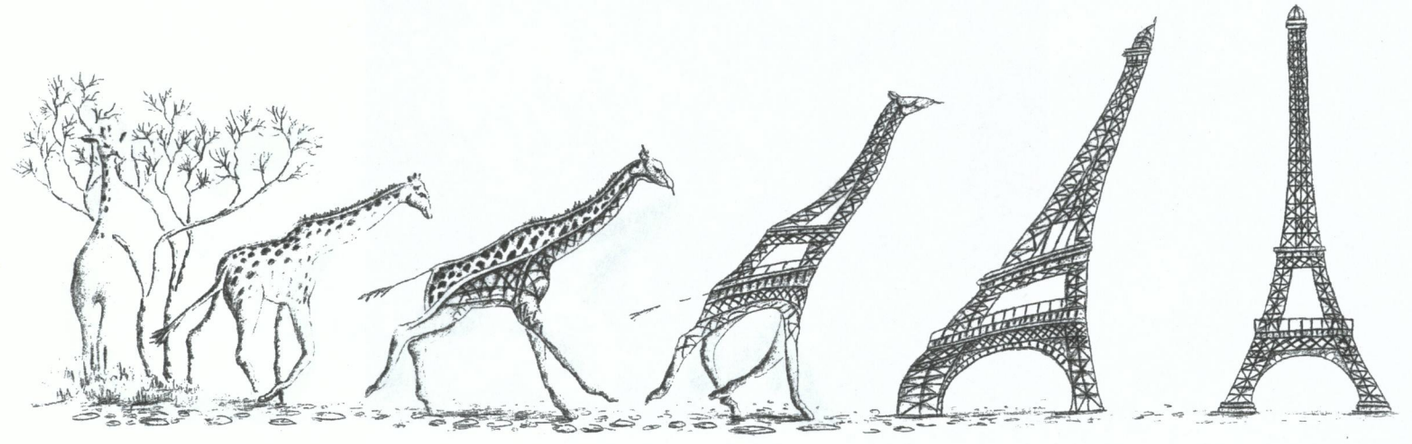
Roberto Gargiani sees in Koolhaas's visual quotation of the giraffe, a paradoxical animal, an analogy with the inversion of gravity staged in the villa: the mass of the swimming pool carried by the indecisive *pilotis*.[32] Extrapolating from there, one might discern a doubly surrealist intention in the photo in *S,M,L,XL*. In confronting the villa with a real-life giraffe – a naturally mannerist animal, a living anamorphosis – and capturing this encounter on film, Koolhaas is deploying a device suggested by surrealism, and more specifically by Dalí, to trigger and then fix an association between several elements of the project that up to then had remained latent. Most obviously, there are the slender stilts that raise the heavy living quarters as if by magic. But added to this, there is the pattern of the *opus incertum* – brown with light mortar – that clads the base of the villa (the stone, cold and mineral, evokes by antiphrasis the warm and sensual skin of the giraffe, which only underscores the artificiality of the building). And then there is the resonance of both of these metaphors with the symbol of the capital: the distant silhouette of the Eiffel Tower, an iron giraffe on crutches, a rational enterprise (by an engineer) taken to the point of irrationality (its lack of obvious function), whose illumination, in equal parts ritual and magic (thanks to the 'electric fairy') transforms its abstract structure into an animal of fire. The many recurrences of the association between the Eiffel Tower and a giraffe in popular representations only reinforce this interpretation.

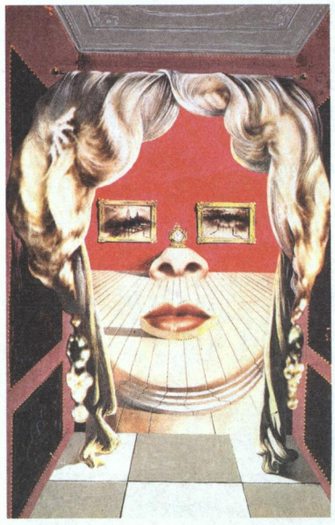
The presence of the giraffe would therefore point to Dalí being the secret agent behind this mutation of the rigorist Corbusian *machine à habiter* into a theatre of delirium. In a transport of Dalínian surrealism Koolhaas enacts, word for word, the anatomical fiction that Le Corbusier deployed to denigrate the skyscrapers of Manhattan: 'Imagine a man undergoing a mysterious disturbance of his organic life; the torso remains normal, but his legs become 10 or 20 times too long.'[33] In this light, the inlaying of a Vermeer painting into the villa's litigious facade acquires an additional meaning: that of a salute to Dalí, who, as we know, identified with the Dutch painter in an obsessive manner.

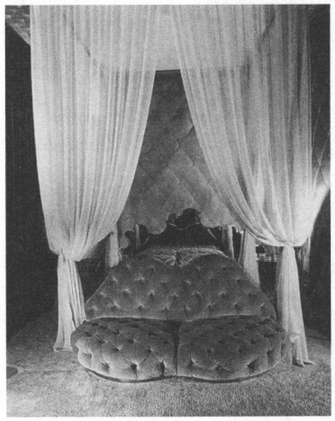


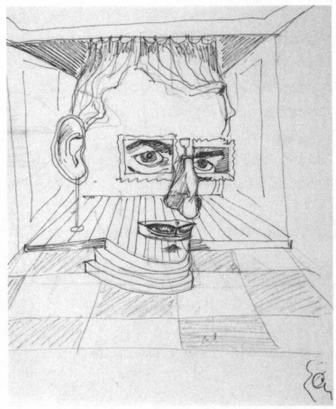
32. Roberto Gargiani, *op cit*. On the debt Koolhaas and *S, M, L, XL* owe to surrealism, see also Angelika Schnell, 'Der Berg muss ein Buch werden', *Archplus* 175, December 2005, pp 78–82.
33. Le Corbusier, *Quand les cathédrales étaient blanches – Voyage au pays des timides* (Paris: Plon, 1937). Quoted by Rem Koolhaas in *Delirious New York*, *op cit*, p 251.

Giraffe-Eiffel Tower, Paris street artist, date unknown









Salvador Dalí, *The Face of Mae West (Usable as a Surrealist Apartment)*, 1934
© Fundació Gala-Salvador Dalí

Carlo Mollino, bedroom at the Casa Devalle, 1940

Madelon Vriesendorp, *Sketch for Dalíing Around (Portrait of Rem Koolhaas)*, 1991
Courtesy Madelon Vriesendorp

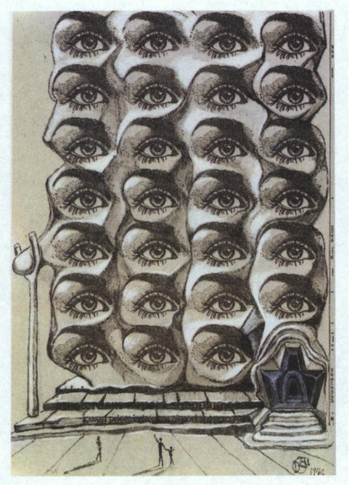
There is, moreover, a precedent for the idea of fomenting a retroactive plot against Le Corbusier by means of a covert surrealist operation. Research by the historian Philippe Duboy suggests that Marcel Duchamp was acting out of the very same motive when he spent a considerable amount of time in the archives of the Bibliothèque Nationale tampering with drawings by Lequeu, one of Emil Kaufmann's troika of 'revolutionary architects' who anticipated the modern movement.[34] Duboy's extraordinary book, which pieces together the fragments of an enquiry into an 'enigma' as detailed as it is paranoiac, was published in London in 1986, that is, at the very moment when OMA was fine-tuning the project for the Villa Dall'Ava.

v Eyes Wide Shut

Now we've got to this point, let's sum up our charade. The Villa Dall'Ava, the perverted twin of Le Corbusier's purist houses, is a built critique of functionalist modernism, the outcome of an underhand operation directed by the corrosive forces of functionalism's best enemy within the avant-garde – Dalí's radical surrealism. It's also Koolhaas's *'casa come me'*, his cultural self-portrait, which by extension embodies his project for architecture in the period immediately after *Delirious New York*. These hypotheses acquire a special piquancy if set alongside a sketch by Vriesendorp dated the year of the villa's completion: a portrait of Koolhaas, humorously titled *Sketch for Dalíing Around*, in which the architect's face overlaps with architectural elements of the villa. This drawing is an explicit corollary to Dalí's *The Face of Mae West (Usable as a Surrealist Apartment)* (1934) and to an earlier paraphrase of that work: the bedroom Carlo Mollino designed for the Casa Devalle in Turin, with its curtains and lips sofa (1939).[35]

Besides the suggestive juxtaposition of worlds that are *a priori* alien, the Villa Dall'Ava contains other themes shared by both Dalí and Koolhaas: exposing the body to danger, voyeurism, an ambiguous interest in the accursed share of any virtuous intention and the manipulation of its most troubling aspects. In 1929 Dalí and Luis Buñuel made the surrealist film *par excellence*, *Un chien andalou*. In its famous – unbearable – opening scene, a man stands in front of a window, slowly sharpening a razor, and then, inspired by the sight of a thin cloud passing over the moon, slices through the eye of the woman sitting next to him. This act of wanton cruelty, synonymous with absolute horror – psychoanalysis has shown that the fear of losing our sight is one of the most deep-rooted of all human terrors – is triggered by the association between the white orb of the moon and the globe of the eye on the one hand, and the blade and the cloud on the other. In *S, M, L, XL* Koolhaas chose precisely these terror-charged images to illustrate two of his reflections on the negative power of architecture, in which he looked first at confinement and its paradoxes, using the example of the Berlin Wall (a totalitarian denial of freedom which guarantees freedom within the enclave it encloses), and then at social control (the all-seeing gaze), through his project for the renovation of a panopticon prison in Arnhem.[36]

But this repellent act that deprives us of sight is also the one that, quite literally, *opens* our eyes. Also, when we consider Dalí's and Koolhaas's intersecting allusions to this ambiguous and morbid spectacle, does it not bring us back to the curses uttered by Le Corbusier, the slayer of 'eyes which do not see'? Le Corbusier, with his delicate eyesight, held vision to be the supreme faculty, while the eye was one of the major obsessions of surrealism. The subject acquires a tinge of irony when we recall that the lawsuit filed by the



Salvador Dalí, *Projet d'architecture*, 1976

34. See Philippe Duboy, *Lequeu: An Architectural Enigma*, preface by Robin Middleton (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press 1986) and Emil Kaufmann, *Three Revolutionary Architects: Boullée, Ledoux, Lequeu* (Philadelphia, PA: American Philosophical Society, 1952). Kaufmann thought he detected a certain mental instability in Lequeu's drawings.
35. According to Federica Rovati, Mollino had seen this work by Dalí displayed at the Galerie Pierre Colle while on a trip to Paris to see the 1937 World's Fair. See her article 'La camera incantata: Carlo Mollino e la scena artistica torinese, 1935–41', in *Carlo Mollino Architetto* (Milan: Electa, 2006).
36. *S, M, L, XL, op cit*, pp 233 and 235.

Film still, *Un chien andalou*, directed by Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dalí, 1929

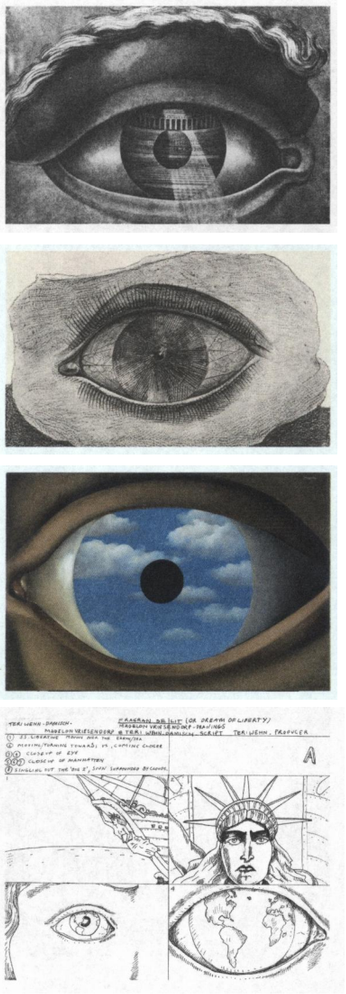
neighbours of the Villa Dall'Ava was based not so much on aesthetic objections as on their fear that their privacy would be violated by the large glazed surfaces of the side elevation: in short, it was a trivial question of overlook which forced the architect to voluntarily blind his facade. Unsurprisingly, the word 'eyes' is the subject of three entries in the *S,M,L,XL* glossary. The first is illustrated by a quote from Le Corbusier (the anathema hammered out in *Towards a New Architecture*), the second by a Proustian aphorism about how true discovery 'consists not in seeking new landscapes but in having new eyes', and the third by an eye-gouging scene taken from Jerzy Kosinski's novel *The Painted Bird* (1965). The three entries precede a definition of the word 'facade', in which Koolhaas points out once more that the 'heroic' condition of the architect is a superficial illusion.[37]

But the gaze is also that of the camera, whose glass eye captures the world, enchants it and eroticises it, just as Werlemann does when he translates the fictional potential of the villa into images. And more than architecture, it was cinema – the fantasy technology *par excellence*, the most popular modern medium and the most machinic visual art – that Dalí sought to conflate with surrealism. In 1937 he declared in *Harper's Bazaar*:

Nothing seems to me more suited to be devoured by the surrealist fire than those mysterious strips of 'hallucinatory celluloid' turned out so unconsciously in Hollywood, and in which we have already seen appear, stupefied, so many images of authentic delirium, chance and dream... I am just back from Hollywood, and there I heard the word surrealism in every mouth. They have even officially announced surrealistic passages in forthcoming films. This only goes to prove that Hollywood has suddenly discovered all that it has always dimly desired in the subconscious... Reduced to idiocy by the material progress of mechanical civilisation, the public and the masses demand urgently the illogical and tumultuous images of their own desires and their own dreams.[38] For Dalí, surrealism was the retroactive manifesto of cinema.

Other surrealists were devotees of the 'seventh art' (for Breton, film was better suited than literature or painting to 'promoting *real life*').[39] But none was so involved in cinema as Dalí, with some 20 projects over a period of 50 years. Dalí designed sets for Buñuel (the giraffe appears for the first time in *l'Âge d'or*, 1930), wrote screenplays (notably *The Surrealist Mysteries of New York*, 1935) and collaborated with many of the greatest figures in Hollywood. With the Marx Brothers, whom he adored, he planned the shooting of a film, *Giraffes on Horseback Salad*, 1937.[40] This never materialised, but some preparatory drawings for the sets survive: one shows a formal dinner on a terrace lit by giraffes transformed into candelabras, another a swimming pool in a grand piano. He also devised a set for a scene in *The Father of the Bride* (Vincente Minnelli, 1950) and, for Walt Disney, invented a crossfade technique that allowed for a continuous metamorphosis of one image into another: the translation into celluloid of one of the graphic fantasies of Grandville, whose imagination Dalí drew heavily on.

But Dalí's most fruitful collaboration was with Alfred Hitchcock. Many of the English director's chosen themes intersect with those of the surrealists and, consequently, with those of Koolhaas too: voyeurism, black humour, extreme experiences such as vertigo, anxiety, psychosis, the impenetrable world of animals... In 1944 Hitchcock asked Dalí, then at the height of his New World fame, to design the set for a dream sequence in what would become *Spellbound*, the screen adaptation of Francis Beeding's *The House of Doctor Edwardes*. 'I requested Dalí because of the architectural sharpness of his work. Chirico has



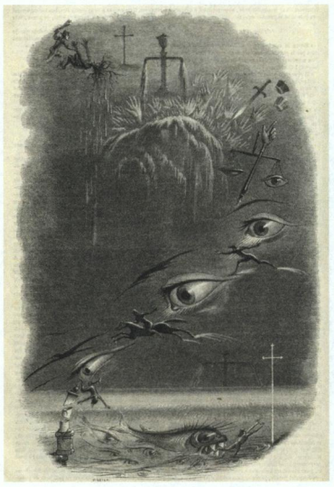
Claude Nicolas Ledoux, 'Coup d'œil du théâtre de Besançon', in *L'architecture considérée sous le rapport de l'art, des mœurs et de la législation*, 1804

Max Ernst, *La Roue de la lumière*, 1926
© Scala, Florence, 2014

René Magritte, *Le faux miroir*, 1929

Madelon Vriesendorp, *Flagrant Délit: The Animation* (with Teri When-Damisch), 1980
Courtesy Madelon Vriesendorp

37. *Ibid*, pp 402 and 442.
38. Salvador Dalí, 'Surrealism in Hollywood', *Harper's Bazaar*, 1937, p 68; reprinted in its entirety in Matthew Gale (ed), *Dalí and Film* (London: Tate Publishing, 2007).
39. Italics in the original. André Breton, *Second Manifesto of Surrealism* (Paris, 1930) and 'Comme dans un bois', *L'Âge du cinéma* nos 4–5, August–November 1951.
40. In *L'Âge d'or* (1930). See also Luis Buñuel, 'Une girafe', *Le Surréalisme au service de la révolution*, no 6, 15 May 1933, pp 34–36. The Marx Brothers' film had giraffes stuffed with dynamite exploding in Manhattan. See *Dalí & Film, op cit.*



J J Grandville, *Premier rêve: crime et expiation*, 1847

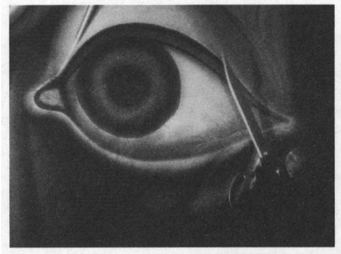
Alfred Hitchcock at the opening of the Broadway show, *The Seven Lively Arts*, 1944

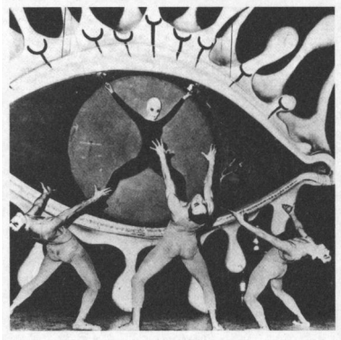
the same quality, you know', said Hitchcock, who wanted a set with 'a very hard image', a hallucinatory precision: 'This was again the avoidance of the cliché. All dreams in movies are blurred – it isn't true!'[41]

Spellbound is set in a mental asylum that has the ambiance of a family home (which, as the title of the book suggests, could equally well be the house of Dr Blanche). The plot revolves around the double resolution, through psychoanalysis, of a crime and a mental disorder. The denouement sees the patient cured of amnesia and the identity of the murderer revealed – to be none other than the director of the asylum. This theme, along with the film's final scene, flags the influence on Hitchcock of *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari* (Robert Wiene, 1920), a film that so fascinated the partners of OMA that they initially wanted to name their office after it.[42] The first masterpiece of German expressionist cinema, Wiene's film astonished contemporary audiences with its sets – painted canvases which were conceived as integral to the story. This was probably the reference Hitchcock had in mind when he hired Dalí, even if he waters down Wiene's destabilising intention to suit the tastes of Hollywood and gives the film a rather syrupy ending. And the same goes for Dalí, who visibly attempts to reconnect with the avant-garde with his set for the dream sequence related by the patient – a fiction in a fiction.

The large painted decorations that Dalí designed for the set assemble three of the commonplaces of modern architecture – a 'curtain' wall, a terrace and a ramp – in order to turn them into agents of anxiety and vertigo. A man falls like a stone from a flat roof. The patient runs down a tilted plane, pursued by a terrifying flying shadow. A man armed with giant scissors cuts, one by one, the open eyes that cover a curtain, revealing another cloth underneath, then another: Dalí fuses the inventions of Wiene and Buñuel into a parable of blinding. However, these eyes which no longer see will recover their powers. The psychoanalytic interpretation of the dream will prove that the ramp was the cause of a tragic accident in the patient's childhood, the memory of which he had repressed, giving rise to his guilt and amnesia. Re-enacting the scene in reality, the patient is freed from his psychosis.

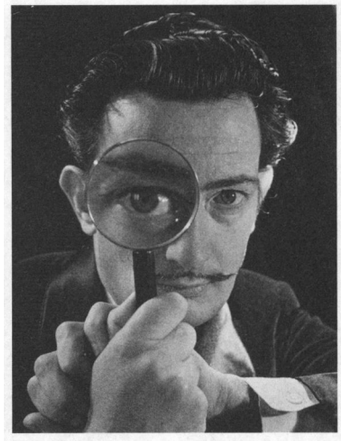
The Dalínian episode in *Spellbound* could be the stuff of one of those fables that OMA were so fond of around the time of *Delirious New York*. This would tell of how the resolution of modernity's amnesia, thanks to a dream, led to its resurrection through a project of 'hallucinatory precision' – the Villa Dall'Ava. The emblematic architectural moments of this project – the facade that is free but blind, the descending ramp and the vertiginous roof terrace – would then be recomposed by the camera and diffused via the freeze-frames of *S,M,L,XL*. A living set, a modernist parody, a Dalínian joke, a fictional object – the villa is all of these things at once. As such, it is designed as a concrete demonstration of a second modernism that seeks to give new life to the first one by whetting it with the avant-garde most adept at combining elements of all the others – surrealism. Koolhaas replays what Le Corbusier did in his own time, not so far away from here, using the same programme as his testing ground: a villa, the one commission for which the client is singular enough, and strong enough, to demand a heroic work from the architect – and to accept the consequences. As Hubert Damisch has noted, 'one of the lessons of Manhattanism is that physical presence may grow in proportion to artifice'.[43] The Villa Dall'Ava thus stands as the prototype for a metropolitan architecture for the present day, where the exhilarating madness of modernity can express itself anew, liberated from the depths in which it had been submerged by the functionalist superego.





Film still, *Spellbound*, directed by Alfred Hitchcock, 1945

Ludmilla Tcherina performing within an eyeball set designed by Salvador Dalí, Teatro La Fenice, 1961



Philippe Halsman, Salvador Dalí, 1946

41. In interview with François Truffaut recorded in 1962. The full 12 hours of the interview are available online at http://www.openculture.com/2012/02/truffauts_big_interview_with_hitchcock_12_hours_of_free_mp3s.html
42. This anecdote was related by Robert Gargiani, *op cit*, p 6 and more recently by Elia Zenghelis in Cynthia Davidson, 'A Conversation with Elia Zenghelis', *Log* 30, Winter 2014, p 84.
43. Hubert Damisch, 'Cadavre exquis', *AMC* no 18, December 1987, p 21.

Translated by Pamela Johnston