Autonomy and the Will to the Critical

Within current debates on architecture, one topic seems to be in question more than ever and that is a concern for the critical. Our understanding of the critical previously rested upon Immanuel Kant’s conviction that the critical represented the possibility of knowledge within knowledge. In other words, the critical traditionally meant a possibility lying within any discourse. In architecture, for example, this might mean the possibility of being within being. Because the nature of possibility implies options, it relies on some form of judgment that could be seen to modify, question, or change the dominant space/time condition at any moment in history. Consequently, the critical was often understood to be the new and the original. This correspondence can easily be confirmed by looking at the various avant-garde movements of the twentieth century. Today, poststructuralism’s critique of history both as progressive — that is, as an agent that historicizes time in the form of the zeitgeist — and, simultaneously, as a construct that depends on an origin of value has problematized the idea of the new and the original. In architecture the repercussions of poststructuralism’s upending of the given Kantian definition of the critical have generated two important responses, one articulated by R. E. Somol and the other by Jeffrey Kipnis.

Somol defines his position as the “postcritical.” For him, the critical is something reactive, dialectical, or oppositional and thereby requires something in place to which it can then respond. Somol’s opposition to the critical is grounded in the literal, the matter-of-fact, the “just life.” The critical, he says, turns up attention, causing an awareness, a self-reflexive search for meaning, as in a formalism or in a writing. Somol’s postcritical instead attempts to privilege the literal or the sensible over the abstract; it produces multiple kinds of subjects who are at once intoxicated, numb, fascinated, and seduced. For him, the postcritical is not about the representation of a meaning, but rather, concerns the performance of what something does. For example, he advocates increasing background noise so as to blur focus and attention. This last point constitutes my initial difference with Somol. I, too, am not interested in the message, or for that matter in the visual. The critical, in my terms, begins with the becoming unmotivated of the sign, the potential reduction of the culturally sedimented meaning of signs, so that the message itself becomes the interference. It is interference as foreground and not background that begins to define a fundamental characteristic of the processes of what is, for me, a necessarily existent critical project in architecture.

Unlike Somol, Jeffrey Kipnis argues that the critical is not merely reactive but that it always constitutes some form of resistance to the status quo. As such, it questions, explores, and proposes strategies that make manifest these resistances. These manifestations, while not dependent on, clearly relate to judgments that question the space/time regimes that are in place at any given time. In modernist thought, for example, abstraction was seen as a resistance to figuration. But eventually abstraction became absorbed into and identified as a trope of modernism. Clearly, when modernism became the dominant space/time regime, abstraction was no longer a resistant trope. The same can be said of collage as a process of abstracting one form of meaning and narrative into a non-narrative but still meaningful context. Today, collage, like montage, has been absorbed into every form of media as the dominant means of deploying visual information. If abstraction and collage no longer provide forms and processes of resistance, then the question that Kipnis would ask is, what are the forms of resistance today?

Kipnis rightly argues that there always will be two forms of resistance: one that resists change, that attempts to maintain the status quo — in this case, the sedimented interiority of architecture at any given time — and the other that resists and thus displaces the status quo. He then again rightly asks what is the nature of the judgment that decides what remains and what is displaced. For him, it is this judgment that constitutes the possibility of criticality today. For example, Jacques Derrida’s claim that “architecture will always mean” and Rosalind Krauss’s statement that “architecture will always have four walls” are the kinds of judgments that Kipnis’s idea of criticality would challenge. He replaces the former conceptual and mental domains of the critical with the sensible and the affective. My differences with Kipnis lie with his idea that such external judgments — judgments of a subjective sensibility as opposed to judgments of architecture’s interiority — are primary critical tools. For me, Kipnis’s critical ignores the possible inherent criticality that is unique to architecture.

To understand this idea of a unique criticality within architecture, it is necessary to turn to the question of signs and their meaning. While signs play a role in all of the arts — music, literature, painting, and sculpture — they do not contain an immanence in these various disciplines as they do within architecture. A figurative or abstract piece of sculpture is not the signs of sculpture; it is the thing itself, because it is self-evidently so. A column in architecture, on the other hand, is both a structural element and the sign of that structure; that is, the sign is immanent to its own being. Their distinction is not self-evident. This is a unique condition, because unlike the other arts, such conditions as abstraction and figuration in architecture are both the sign and the form of the sign. Such a condition constitutes a singularity of architecture, in that, while it is a unique instance, it is not an original one.

Singularity is a useful term for understanding criticality; it distinguishes a unique instance, like a black hole, from an original instance, such as the beginning of something. A black hole is unique but not original. Krauss has said that to preserve the singularity of objects we must cut them off from their previous modes of legitimation. This idea will be seen to be important to any project of autonomy. Originality and newness have traditionally comprised the two dominant modes of legitimation in architecture. Radical or resistant behavior was always linked with the avant-garde, with the pursuit of the ever new and thus the original. With the loss of the continuity of history as a value of the origin, and the weakening of the dialectic economy of the model and its copy, the question of singularity becomes relevant, in particular in architecture’s condition of the sign. Singularity does not displace the thing itself — a column, for example — nor deny its usefulness, but rather, denies that which formerly

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legitimated the thing’s being — the sign of the column’s structuring function. It is this possible singularity that evolves from the cutting off of the sign function — in other words, architecture’s sedimented history as meaning — that begins to suggest architecture’s autonomy. While traditionally any project of autonomy was primarily formal, autonomy is being proposed here as a means of unmotivating the architectural sign; that is, as a means of cutting the sign off from its previous value in function and meaning. This autonomy is neither formal nor semiotic per se; rather, it opens the internal processes of architecture to their own internal possibilities. It is the manifestation of these processes that will constitute the critical.

There have been two previous projects that posited a nonformal autonomy. Both occurred almost simultaneously in the late 1960s. The first was the Italian project of Aldo Rossi and Manfredo Tafuri. While their objectives were quite different, they nevertheless both relied on the reintroduction of history. Rossi’s project concerned the development of archetypal elements that iterate in the course of history — domes, pediments, cylinders, and the like — while Tafuri proposed history as an autonomous condition outside of the architectural project. The second project of autonomy, which was entirely different from the Italian ones, was the architectural analogy to linguistic and semiotic “deep structures.” What these two projects had in common was their denial of the historicist propelling energies of the zeitgeist in favor of something more permanent, essential, and universal: for Rossi and Tafuri, that essential was the autonomy of history; for the structuralists, it was language per se. The latter translated into architecture as the supposedly given structural relationship between the sign and the object. In other words, while both projects went beyond modernist formalism, they nevertheless had a more conventional conception of autonomy than can be conceived today. This is because with the weakening of dialectics and the advent of computational technology, architecture’s interiority has been expanded to include previously repressed possibilities. Whereas prior autonomies were created between architecture and other disciplines as difference for its own sake, today, autonomy — and thus architecture’s criticality — is the possible articulation of dynamic processes of difference between being and sign within architecture itself. Computation has opened these possibilities to a performance, which allows autonomy to be the continuous unfolding of possible being, wrenched from any preference for the functioning of the sign. In other words, criticality can be understood as the striving or the will to perform or manifest architecture’s autonomy.

Today, it is possible to see autonomy in a new light, not as categorical permanencies and universals, but as dynamic processes of difference. In this sense, criticality can be further understood as the striving to perform this difference in architecture’s autonomy. For Walter Benjamin, this striving in architecture was a will to the consciousness of the image in order to compensate for its lack, or its repression, in the zeitgeist (which defines itself by manifesting its normality as a form of repression). It is helpful here to read Benjamin’s use of the term image in the larger sense as architecture’s necessarily figural condition.

These processes of architecture’s autonomy will lie primarily in the becoming unmotivated of the sign; that is, the sign no longer only manifests use, meaning, and structure, but also this will to difference. This will to difference, which remains as the sign’s internal motivation, will be seen to be the processes of its being, of its becoming figural, the ebb and flow between abstraction and figuration. To become unmotivated, then, is to become both autonomous and singular: to cut from previous modes of legitimation and, simultaneously, to unmotivate. Autonomy thus becomes a critical project when it performs this will to either figuration or abstraction; that is, as a condition of possible being. This is not an external judgment, but an inevitable internal process.

The critical is an inevitable condition of autonomy, but is not synonymous with it. The critical determines how disciplinary processes such as abstraction and figuration are deployed and displayed. The locus and nature of such displays clearly change in relationship to the existing space/time regime. The display of criticality is not merely the performance of an architectural trope, such as abstraction, but also the display of the struggle between that which is in place and that which is being abstracted from it. Architectural autonomy, on the other hand, is always the struggle between a dominant mode — abstraction, for example — and the latent figural.

In and of themselves, abstraction and figuration are neither resistant nor compliant; these determinations depend on external conditions. The becoming figural does not. It is a will always attempting to overcome the normal relationship to the architectural sign. Thus it is similar to Gilles Deleuze’s idea that the figural lies as an immanent condition within the plane of the unpainted canvas. In this sense, there can be no sign within architecture without some form of figuration. The autonomous is what always strives to overcome the sign’s resistance to this figuration. When the figural is performed not as a model — that is, as the maintenance of the existing values of the discourse — but rather, as a unique instance — that is, as a singular difference lying within architecture as an enfolded figural possibility — the presentation of this autonomy then becomes critical.

According to this logic, the critical does not rely on an external, subjective judgment of taste or value, but a necessary internal articulation of a figural condition, which is singular to architecture’s autonomy. While a choice of one thing over another will always involve a judgment — how and why one chooses — architecture’s autonomy presents no need for judgment. It is precisely autonomy’s inextricable will to manifest its singularity as the becoming unmotivated of the sign, and the cutting off of the object from previous modes of legitimation, that becomes a constant repetition within architecture. This repetition becomes a critical vehicle that disrupts the economy of the idea of the original and its copy, which exists as a present mode of legitimation. Architecture’s singularity is, in a sense, an autonomy from which there can be no copy. Instead, it generates a constant iteration of internal difference between its sign and the form of its being. It is this difference that articulates the becoming unmotivated of the sign.

Here, autonomy is seen in a new light, as engaged in the survival of the discipline. The discipline is critical within its own project when it detaches itself from other projects rather than from difference in itself. Here, the critical becomes generative as opposed to being reactive or resistant. It becomes part of a dynamic internal condition, continually opening architecture’s discourse.