

Rappel au désordre: Architectural Aesthetics Between the Performative and the Sublime

Maria Hellström

Nordic Journal of Architectural Research
Volume 19, No 4, 2006, 10 pages
Nordic Association for Architectural Research
Maria Hellström, PhD. SLU, Inst för landskapsplanering

TOPIC: ARCHITECTS IN THE 21ST CENTURY – AGENTS OF CHANGE?

Abstract:

Rappel au désordre: Architectural Aesthetics Between the Performative and the Sublime.

An increasingly aestheticized society has inevitably changed architecture's role and function. By some enthusiastically embraced as a longed-for recognition of architecture's scenographic, artistic or entertaining potentials, this change has also given rise to a scepticism as to the role of slippery aesthetics and a subsequent recall of a more decent, tectonic "form-power". But do architects necessarily have to be either uncritically engulfed by aesthetics or the obstinate defenders of a decent, but boring, alternative? A constructive answer to this question, however, requires a critique of aesthetics as formal or normative order, in favor of a performative, view of aesthetics as a means to do justice to a 'disorderly' world.

Key words:

aestheticization processes, architectural aesthetics, art, the sublime, performativity, relational aesthetics

Introduction

Over the last decades, an increasingly globalized economy of symbolic exchange has transformed the presuppositions for spatial planning and architectural practice. Even though this transformation could be described in exclusively economic terms – as the speculation in supply and demand – its aesthetic dimension is conspicuous. What we are witnessing is a situation where things and behaviors, forms and structures are becoming pure symbolic value. Referred to as a *generalized aestheticization* (Baudrillard and Nouvel 2002), this process has however not only brought into focus the importance of symbolic exchange. It has also given rise to a confusion and scepticism as to the role of aesthetics and the meaning of aesthetic judgment.

Within planning and architecture, the responses to this conditional change have varied. On the one hand, the new ‘state of the art’ has been embraced as a final recognition of architecture’s representative and scenographic potentials (Venturi, Izenour, Scott-Brown 1972), enthusiastically explored in the development of “toolkits” for urban innovation (Landry 2000), competitive cultural strategies (Florida 2002), strategies for city branding, politics of identity or place marketing (Patteeuw 2002, Kelley 2005, Hospers 2005). On the other hand, the response has been one of explicit contestation, articulated either as a ‘new urbanist’ return to a naturally grounded “civic art” based upon common, natural values (Duany, Plater-Zyberk, Alminana, 2003) or as a *rappel à l’ordre* (Frampton, 2002); a recall of a culturally and tectonically sustainable order, representative of an undisputable real. Aesthetics has in this context acquired a bad reputation as a misdirected discourse of empty gestures and promises, which denies the material, the grounded, and the social – all that which supposedly constitutes the premises for the phenomenon we call ‘architecture’.

These strong reactions reveal an unresolved tension between aesthetics and the spatial disciplines. What they also reveal is the difficulty to spatially and historically situate ‘the aesthetic’; to grasp the spatial consequences of what Marcuse chose to call ‘the aesthetic dimension’ (Marcuse 1978); or to understand ‘the aesthetic’ not in terms of what it *is* or *should be* (an order of values, a logic of ‘beauty’) but what it *leads to*, which is a spatial aspect, an orientation, a spatially formulated relation to the world.

The question is whether architecture and architects are doomed to an existence either as prey, helplessly engulfed by aesthetics, or as saviours, taking on the role as promoters of the decent, but boring, alternative. Is it not possible that architects, due to their specific spatial sensitivity, could play an active role, as agents of an aesthetically conscious change? A positive answer to this question, however, requires not only a rethinking, but a reorientation of the aesthetics/architecture love-hate relationship, which still, more or less intentionally, rests upon the confusion concerning the role of aesthetics, either as normative order of (symbolic) elevation or as disinterested spirituality of a similarly elevated kind. Spatially, this reorientation requires a shift from verticality to horizontality, from erection to extension, and from ideal form to situated performance, thereby uncovering a disturbing disorder, potentially constituting ‘the world’ in relation to which architecture gains its significance.

1. Aestheticization Processes

Historically, architecture and urbanism have been regarded as aesthetic or even artistic disciplines, sometimes even faculties of Fine Art. Nevertheless, ‘aestheticization’ has a false ring in many architectural ears. Aestheticization is a process of degeneration, implicitly associated with what Kenneth Frampton in a recent essay attacks as a “wholesale commodification of the environment.” In his attempts to rehabilitate an intellectually and politically conscious architectural position, Frampton feels obliged to sharply condemn an aesthetics that he sees as nothing more than a wallet-driven, either populist “architainment” or elitist “spectacle of neo-avantgarde kitsch (quasi-radical in form but nihilistic in content)” (Frampton 2005). Aestheticization is the total surrender to the pleasure principle, an un-critical de-humanization of mankind, a flattening and levelling of any remaining individuality, “a randomized, spread-out delirium” (Hayes 2002).

Such categorical denouncements call for a closer inquiry into aesthetics. What does aesthetics stand for today? Is it really all that manipulative? Does ‘the aesthetic dimension’ automatically disqualify social and spatial concerns or has it, on the contrary, been emptied of its original, social and cultural relevance?

According to the dictionary, ‘aesthetic’ is that which is

“concerned with beauty or the appreciation of beauty,” and similarly, ‘aesthetics’ “the branch of philosophy which deals with questions of beauty and artistic taste;”¹ a definition harmless enough one might think. However, as Jacques Rancière points out, aesthetics emerged as a *logic* of ideal or natural taste, a regulation through the idea of *mimesis* of the relation between a human ‘doing’ (*poiesis*) and the sensual experience (*aesthesis*) (Rancière 2004/2006). As such, aesthetics developed into an *archi*-aesthetic, an overarching logic with a normative function also in relation to other *poietic* orders, such as that of architecture.

Another problematizing fact, absent from the encyclopaedic explanation, is the historical association between aesthetics and modernity, exemplified by Baudelaire’s ambiguous experience of a vibrant and unstable presentness, by the Nietzschean break with traditional forms of representation and sociation, by Schiller’s claims for a non-hierarchical sphere of “free play.” This close rapport between an emergent modern life and processes of aestheticization – embodied by the metropolis – also explains the discomfort and resentment, often articulated as a socially concerned anti-modernism, not the least within the field of architecture. Aestheticization is in this respect considered to have a dissolving effect on architecture as a societal order, and rather than opening up for an agitating and creative awareness of the arbitrariness of spatial configurations, architecture has to a great extent dissociated itself from the aesthetic, in search of more solid grounds like the vernacular, the tectonic, the ethical, or the spiritual.²

The annoyance with the general aestheticization of society may also be understood in terms of a *disappointment* with an aesthetics that does not stick to its enlightening, beautifying, and ordering ambition. Instead, the aesthetic embraces ‘everything’ and elevates everything to art, slyly modifying its pledge into an unreasonable promise of an aesthetic revolution that would transform life into art. The only effect of such an aestheticization is, according to its critics, the obscuring of political (and spatial) conflicts by appeals to a spiritual absolute, now represented by High Art.³

The Baumgartian attempts to define aesthetics as a natural logic – “a theory of Fine Arts, a minor logic of experience, the art of cognition, the art of analogous reason, the science of sensuous judgment”⁴ – can, consequently, not be understood separate from an emerging urban consciousness

of divergence, of heterogeneity, and of multiplicity. Already initially, aestheticization thus unfolds as an emancipatory levelling, a process actively targeting the elevatory element of aesthetics. Walter Benjamin described this process as a *de-auraticization of Fine Art*, a general elimination of institutional halos and taboos; a subsequent de-heroization or de-monumentalization also of architecture. Representativity, as the reference to a real or an origin, is here replaced by reproducibility, by a displacing repetition, a mass-mediated, expressive and continuously re-negotiated in-between, manifested in the expansion of the street, the station, or the arcade, architectural forms allowing for the dream or the illusion of the real to settle in space.

A noteworthy aspect of levelling de-auraticization is its radical transgression of distance – especially that between objective order and subject. The real *aesthete* does not need to identify herself in relation to a reified world of objects, but transforms the Self into a plastic matter of aesthetic expression, realizing the Self in many different forms and by thousand different ways. In this respect, aestheticization unfolds as an awareness also of the mechanisms of *subjectivation*. In aesthetic terms, subjectivation is neither simply a matter of submission to an order, nor a question of identifying the I proper, the unity of the Self, but the formation of a relation between a self and an Other. It is in this respect as much a desire to enlarge the self, to transgress the limits of the self, or as Foucault expressed it, to “invent” the same. It is a process that “does not ‘liberate man in his own being’” but rather “compels him to face the task of producing himself” (Foucault 1984).

This self-productive or self-demonstrative dimension of aestheticization refers more specifically to aestheticization as the immersive flow of images, signs and symbols characteristic of the modern. Associated with Marxist theorizing of commodity fetishism, aestheticization is here more or less understood as synonymous with the economy of symbolic exchange. The freedom of emergence and reproduction here coincides with a commercial exchange of dreams and desires through advertising, displays, designs and spectacles, entailing a constant de-realizing of reality. An ambiguous interplay, aestheticization has by and large been seen as an equivalent to the exploitation of natural resources, an exhaustion of meaning through superficial embellishment, which, furthermore, transforms the architectural object

into a hedonistic and escapist phantasm.

In a way, there is no need to condemn aesthetics, since, as Jacques Rancière puts it, “[t]he uneasiness before the aesthetic is as old as aesthetics itself” (Rancière 2004/2006:86). Yet, it is its immanent unsettlement that appears as a threat: the peculiar and arbitrary correlation that suddenly appears between an architectural masterpiece and the expressions of the street, or in Rancière’s blunt words: “between the artistic sublime and the noise of a water pump” (Rancière 2004/2006:79);⁵ a correlation that a simple rejection of aestheticization as nothing but semantic ‘furnishing’ or cosmetic image-production will not help us understand.

The question is then, whether it is adequate to understand aestheticization simply as the more or less efficiently running software of a ‘hardware’ real, or if it entails a more radical, operational shift in attitude towards the ‘real.’ Is aesthetics simply an instrumental means to produce or invent a surplus value? And what about this ‘surplus value’; is it really nothing but an expressive and shiny lustre with no significant purpose at all?

2. Spatializing Aesthetics – Ending Verticality

An inevitable point of reference in this discussion is the economical aspects on aesthetics as formulated by Jean Baudrillard (1981, 1983). From an architectural and planning point of view, his specific de-auraticization of representational space has been regarded as controversial, also by the author himself. At times interpreted as an acknowledgement of the global economy of signs, at times as a groundbreaking critique of a floating post-modernity, Baudrillard’s interrogations of orders of representation nevertheless play an important role also for the understanding of architecture.⁶ What I would like to discuss here is first and foremost the spatial implications of Baudrillardian thinking, his developing of what could be described as a ‘spatio-aesthetics,’ which takes into consideration not only the representative production of signs, but also the emergent field of representational performances and actions.

In a step-wise un-doing of representationalism, Baudrillard *de-realizes* reality just in order to *re-realize* it anew. The point of departure is his early interrogations of the hidden affinities between use-value and exchange value. In Marxist analysis, the characteristic of use-value is its “incomparability,” its meaning in a specific situation, whereas exchange-

value (as it appears in its most ultimate form as *commodity*) is based upon the possibility to equate it with abstract, social production of meaning, which means that it will work as an abstract asset, a conductor of status, in a situation of social differentiation. However, for Baudrillard, it is crucial to point out that, for there to be an exchange-value, it is necessary that the value be grounded in something, i.e. an idea of utility, which then works as a “reality principle”, a rational or natural referent, or *fond* (Baudrillard 1981). A specific need is in this respect produced by the framework of utility, and thus ex-changeable within this system. This leads to Baudrillard’s overturning of the direction of signification. It is no longer the signified or the referent (the ‘real’), which is the ‘ruler’ or the warrant of meaning, but the *signifier*. An apparent devaluation of the system of symbolic exchange, this reverse in direction may be compensated for through a ‘re-auraticization’ or mythologization of the signifier’s status as an ideal ‘content/form’.

Why is this important? Which are the consequences? The most obvious consequence is that it unveils what Baudrillard ironically labels “the magical” (Baudrillard 1981), the ingenious forming which bourgeois culture, through normative aesthetics, tends to enshrine. As *form* the ideological gains an autonomy, an evidence, and a sustainability. It *materializes* a content, which means that it simultaneously produces that content and, as form, the potential of receiving a content – an adequate definition of architecture.

What it also actualizes is the relational activity or the symbolic work behind this formalization – a spatial unfolding of aesthetics into a “performativity of representations” (Smith 2005). In *Simulations* Baudrillard develops this spatio-aesthetic idea further, in an interrogation of the “divine irrelevance of images”; whereas *representation*, as a natural system of meaning, starts from the principle of equivalence between sign and real, *simulation* starts “from the utopia of this principle” (Baudrillard 1983), the “divine” or ‘extra-ordinary’ fact that natural referentiality is a ‘non-place’. While representation tries to appropriate simulation as a ‘false’ representation, simulation instead “envelops the whole edifice of representation as itself a simulacrum” (Baudrillard 1983).

This idea is further developed in what Baudrillard sees as the historical orders of appearances, which he calls *counterfeit*, *production*, and *simulation*. The first of these orders,

counterfeit, is the dominant scheme of the period from the Renaissance to the industrial revolution. As such, it replaces the signifying system of “cruel societies,” societies of strong symbolic meaning, where signs function with its full interdiction, with no room for interpretation. The counterfeit, by contrast, is arbitrary; it does not build upon obligation, but upon a nostalgia of natural reference. The counterfeit, as a simulacrum of nature, is in this sense a ‘modern’ sign, aesthetically inventing its reference, at the same time ‘masking’ and distorting an underlying, yet still indisputable, ‘authenticity’.

The second order of simulacra is the order of industrial production, where theatricality is replaced by a machinery, a robot, a system of (re-)production, no longer representational and therefore, through the *series*, masking no more than a fundamental *absence* or loss of ‘reality.’ The consequence is a revaluation of the technique; no longer a passive, productive force, it becomes a medium, a principle for the production of meaning.

The third stage, finally, the order of simulation, is a total cancellation of the very difference between representation and real. It marks a step into a *hyper-reality*, where the *series*, as the repetitive product, is replaced by the *module*. Rather than negatively defined, this could be understood as a situation where the real eventually *returns*, now as an embodied and present, material and highly manifest ‘modulability,’ a coded space of representational agency.

The decisive point here is subsequently the *re-realizing* of representations and signs as plastic modules, as symbolic ‘matter,’ as an actuality, which, as British geographer Richard Smith puts it, is “performed, not pre-formed” (Smith 2005). Since there is nothing behind, third order simulacra have agency in-themselves; they are not the causes or effects of actions, but expressive ‘workings’ in and by themselves – perpetual tests, samples, agents of a binary sign system – tactical, yes, and thus also *tactile* – dependent upon contiguity, upon touch. The order of simulation is not merely an order of phantasm, but an order of immediacy, of contact, of connectivity.

Clearly spelled out in Baudrillard’s non-representational aesthetics is thus a step-wise de-construction of the “edifice of representation;” the idea of a natural, mimetic ‘architecture of aesthetics,’ reflecting an authentic spatial order. Baudrillard illustrates this with the architectural example

of Manhattan and the World Trade Center Towers; an example of the sign duplicating itself in order to simulate pure meaning. “As high as they are [were...], higher than all the others, the two towers signify nevertheless the end of verticality” (Baudrillard 1983). This end of verticality is the end also of aesthetic value as elevation, as *oeuvre*, as masterpiece. Aesthetics, as ideal erection, is replaced by aestheticization, by an ongoing process of inter-referentiality, of propagation and intermediation.⁷ However, aestheticization is not necessarily simply a successive dissolution of reality into a detached flow of images, nor is it an alienating covering up for a distressing ‘Nothingness.’ It is also opening onto a space of interference, in which the subject acquires a new role as expressive and inventive agent, as actor and director. Baudrillard is thus not merely representing, explaining, or presenting the world, but also provoking us to consider the possibility that our own representational actions actually generate the world (Smith 2005).

3. The Sublime, the Performative, and the Aesthetics of Disorder

A spatio-aesthetics such as the one proposed by Baudrillard presupposes an entirely different understanding of the production of aesthetic value, indirectly calling into question not only elevation or verticality, but also its articulation as beauty, unity and harmony. Aesthetics is neither a logic of sensuous judgment, nor a mimetic law, nor is it an order of beauty. Instead, in its de-verticalized form, aesthetics has to be understood as a certain kind of non-hierarchic regime for dealing with and identifying values. As regime, it is both an actualization and continuous regulation of relations and reciprocities; horizontalities rather than verticalities.

In the following, I will discuss two different ways of describing this spatial reorientation of aesthetics, both of which should have great implications for architectural thinking. The first of these concerns the differentiation of Fine Art, and the subsequent questioning of the notion of beauty as unifying recognition. The second concerns the activation of aesthetic experience and a similar questioning of the contemplative element in art.

A point of departure is Kant’s privileging of the aesthetic judgment as the sustaining means to make sense of any perceptual manifold. When imagination freely combines a manifold of intuition into a formal arrangement,

aesthetic pleasure – or *beauty* – arises, thus reflecting the “purposeless purposiveness,” decisive for our cognitive apprehension. This discovery of a specific kind of formal and aesthetic purposiveness – a unifying sensitivity fundamental to basic cognition – is also what we first and foremost associate with Kant. What is often disregarded, however, is the fact that from this does not automatically follow that only completely unified manifolds count as relevant, or that there is only one way of unifying manifolds (Gracyk 1986). Even though Kant grounded aesthetic pleasure in a transcendental and intuitive principle of beauty, he also opened for the possibility of deviations and complications. There is consequently, besides beauty, a touch of ‘something else,’ an unsettled principle of an otherness; a less defined and less purposeful potentiality of experience, developed in the analytics of the *sublime*.⁹

In idealist aesthetics, the sublime has been interpreted as a more violent, immediate, and strong form of beauty.¹⁰ Literally signifying “height” or “loftiness,” it has been understood as a reinforcement of the principle of elevation, associated with the emotionally impressive, the heroic, or exaggerated. Articulated in metaphorical terms, as mountainous peaks, eruptive volcanoes, merciless icebergs, or other spectacular natural phenomena, the discourse on the sublime has constituted a monumentalism with moralizing undertones. As a result, the sublime has been crossed out from the spatial agenda as a politically compromised form of megalomania.

However, the sublime has also been interpreted differently. Derived from an antique tract of rhetoric, the term was imported into the emergent aesthetic discourse. In the original text by Longinus, the sublime (in Greek *hypsous*) referred to the expressive and unpredictable *turns* of discourse; a linguistic ability not aiming at convincing but at bringing about the open, active and, above all, relational state of *enthusiasm*. An important aspect of an orally performed aesthetics, the sublime designated not only the hyperbolic, exaggerated, or elevated, but also the transient and less grandiose stylistic figures of amplification or gradual intensification, like rings of water reinforcing the *outreaching* and *moving* effect.

It is also as expressive and outreaching stroke that the sublime re-enters the aesthetic discourse. In Jean-François Lyotard’s critique of idealisms of all kinds, the sublime ap-

pears as the transient, widening and dislocational aspect of the modern human being (Lyotard 1984, 1986). In fact, Lyotard goes so far as to say that “perhaps [the sublime is] the only mode of artistic sensibility to characterize the modern” (Lyotard 1984). Actualizing both the cognitive restlessness of the subject and its more concrete *Formlosigkeit* (Kant KU:§ 27), Lyotard brings the aesthetic experience down to an open-ended but striking and generative level of an “I don’t know what” (Lyotard 1988:12), to the everyday level of the unexpected encounter, where a fundamental *un-finish* opens up; an apparent lack of form and finalized order which ultimately threatens also the *elementa* of architecture.

Rather than a strike from above, the notion of the sublime describes an up-front confrontation with the World; a horizontal encounter, discomfiting and agitated rather than contemplative and pleasurable. While beauty facilitates recognition of the manifold in relation to a harmonized ideal, the sublime agitates a fundamental insufficiency calling for interaction with the ‘raw’ realm of Otherness. While beauty is directed towards higher spheres, the sublime is directed toward the outside, negotiating the occurrences of a World that is always only ‘fair enough.’¹¹

The reorientation of aesthetics staged through the notion of the sublime is thus a reorientation towards the outside, towards that which is something other than itself. Through the sublime, an aesthetic aspect emerges which is not absolute, but situational; an attempt *to do justice* to that which is different. This shift in orientation renders to the aesthetic a relational and ultimately ethical dimension, grounded not in consensus, but in the un-prejudiced encounter with the Other.¹²

Turning its back on auratic beauty and ideal form, the aesthetics of the sublime opens up a sphere of events, of striking difference, of all the singularities and deviating phenomena that ‘culture’, as normative aestheticization, tends to oppress. In a dialogue with Jean Nouvel, Jean Baudrillard also opposes such de-differentiation, which he sees in rational modernity and its elimination of the sublime, of the “aesthetics of the secret” (Baudrillard and Nouvel 2002). Oriented towards the outside, towards that which is situated outside of ‘culture,’ such an aesthetics presents also monstrous forms; architecture as monster, as animal, as non-cultural interceptions into culture, “those objects that have been catapulted into the city from someplace

else” (Baudrillard and Nouvel 2002). The first, according to Baudrillard, was Centre Beaubourg; an architectural synthesis of total aestheticization, at the same time, a singular, historical event, completely opposed to existing symbolic orders.

Apart from this turn towards the sublime, another re-direction of aesthetics may be discerned. Interpreting the hyper-real as an active sphere, as a sphere where representations and signs are understood first and foremost as plastic entities, as ‘matter’ for symbolic agency, as something “performed” rather than “pre-formed”, aesthetics unfolds as the regime of such performances and workings, a regime dealing with the continuous stream of micro-events that brings different things, phenomena, and people together in co-existence. Different from the aesthetics of the sublime, which fearlessly looks after the un-cultural, the dissensual, the aesthetics of the performative is of a modest kind. Its critique of idealism is unobtrusive; it claims neither to change the world, nor to present emancipating differences. Instead, it builds upon the un-remarkable rearrangement of those objects and images that constitute the common surrounding in its present form. It is what Michel de Certeau has called a “faire-avec;” a continuous establishing of micro-situations that “despite all” hold the potential of modifying postures and relations (de Certeau 1980).

If the radicality inscribed in the aesthetics of the sublime attracts philosophers and conceptual architects like Baudrillard and Nouvel, the performative attitude is the one favored by many contemporary artists and activist architects, who to a great extent also have chosen to play down the sublime element of Dada, Situationist and Fluxus aesthetic strategies. Today, individual artists and architects like Sophie Calle, Rirkit Tiravanija, Francis Alÿs, or Santiago Cirugeda Parejo, collectives like Superflex, Park Fiction, BAR (Base for Architecture and Research), Raumlabor, and Exyzt,¹³ all focus on the realization of minor displacements of everyday whereabouts, often presented as ironical turns or playful ruses, which, rather than agitating provocation, aim at tactical intermediations, dealings, transactions. Operating through ‘trivializing’, performative aesthetics blurs not only the boundaries between familiar and different, between here and there, but also between disciplinary practices, not the least the boundary between artistic and architectural performance.

While the aesthetics of the sublime can be described in terms of differentiation, performative aesthetics is best characterized as a tendency of interceptive propagation. This is also the aspect developed by Nicolas Bourriaud through the notion of “relational aesthetics.” According to Bourriaud, the aesthetic paradigm today has to be understood in relation to a culture of interaction. In a culture where sociality has been replaced by spectacle, the aesthetic unfolds as a specific kind of sociability – an immanent, social mobilization or counterforce, which at anytime and anyplace can recharge space. Bourriaud furthermore associates this new paradigm with the city as the historical setting that “has ushered in and spread the hands-on experience” of sociability. The city is no longer an institutional structure to be walked through, but “a period of time to be lived through” (Bourriaud 2002).

Emphasizing “social interstices,” the relational aesthetics of Bourriaud shows not only ethical ambitions, but presents itself as an “ethical-aesthetics,” entirely oriented towards the public. With notions like “inhabitation”, “co-habitation” and “co-existence,” the ethical is further underlined. German philosopher Wolfgang Iser has developed similar ideas. In a thorough “un-doing” of idealist aesthetics he has coined the neologism *aesthet/hics* (Iser 1997:60-77). A contraction of ‘aesthetics’ and ‘ethics,’ this notion is “meant to designate those parts of aesthetics which *of themselves* contain ethical elements” (Iser 1997:61). As recombinant concept, the aesthet/hical proposes a dissolution of elevatory aesthetics, re-directing it towards a heterogeneity of form, constantly acted out. “Aesthetic work,” he claims, “instead of exercising dominion, has to follow the ‘singular impulses’ and attempt to do them justice” (Iser 1997:70).

This might seem to tie in also with the aesthetico-politics of Jacques Rancière, who in his writings has defined the political as a demonstrative process of subjectivation, a logic of ‘the Other,’ an idiomatic practice, directly associated with the “free emergence” upon which the aesthetic rests. However, while theoreticians like Bourriaud and Iser take pains in legitimizing aesthetics as ‘the new ethics,’ Rancière points out what he sees as decisive differences. ‘The aesthetic’ is not a sphere where you feel ‘at ease’. On the contrary; it is a surrounding of discomfort and confusion. Yet, this agitated state is what renders to aesthetics its significance.

According to Rancière, “[a]esthetics is the thinking of the new disorder” (Rancière 2006:88); a regime for subjectivation with the departure in this new disorder. When aesthetics emerges as a notion, writes Rancière, the idea of a social ‘nature,’ of a natural ethical order, disappears. Instead, what makes aesthetics a political praxis, and vice versa, is its intersection in ethical indistinction, in the acknowledgement of dissensus. Whereas the ethical presupposes consensus and thus replaces political praxis, aesthetics and politics in constitute two alternative and dynamically interrelated forms of sharing a non-finalized, sensuous space,.

In Rancière’s thinking, the association aesthetics-politics constitutes a dynamic horizontality, where singular emergencies and modest dislocations both play an important, differentiating and actualizing role. On the one hand, aesthetics embraces the idea of the sublime, of radical Otherness and expressive potentiality upholding a difference between art and life; on the other hand it also includes the idea of a revolutionized everyday, where art and life unite through a multiplicity of horizontal performativity.

4. Recalling Disorder, Drifting Towards the Unfinished

There is within contemporary architecture and urbanist practice an ambiguous relation to aesthetics in general and to the radical process of aestheticization in particular. On the one hand, there is an affirmative stance, a kind of wholesale embracement of aestheticization, providing a new role for the spatial practitioner as the tastemaker in command; with Michael Sorkin’s critical words “the ultimate agent of brand” (Sorkin 2002). Naively and short-sightedly capitalizing on a thoroughly aestheticized economy, this recast ultimately runs the risk of emptying itself, leading to *an-aestheticization*, or total de-differentiation of a diverse and socially complex exteriority. Associated with this risk, aestheticization has also given rise to an almost allergic reaction, a categorical rejection of aesthetics altogether and a recall of a socially responsible *form-follows-function* formula. A value with appeal to harmonious order, the functionalist credo is, however, often grounded in an ethics, often merely an excuse for the developing of a de-politicized aesthetics of ‘beautification.’

When Kenneth Frampton rhetorically asks where the “anachronistic culture of architecture [is] to situate itself in the face of all this [...] dematerialized representation and misrepresentation” (Frampton 2005), he expresses a quite common resignation as to the progressive potentials of aes-

theticization, proposing instead a “rappel” to an ethico-architectonic order. Yet, as a process by and large defining a contemporary situation, aestheticization should not be unconditionally dismissed. Instead, what is required is the development of a greater awareness and extended understanding of aesthetics, and this beyond the naturalized ‘use-values’ of beauty, harmony, and unity.

Recalling the disorderly aspects of aestheticization is in this respect not the same as reducing aesthetics to a matter of taste or brand. Nor is it a total an-aestheticization, relativization or dis-enchantment of a diverse exteriority. Instead, it entails what in this paper I have tried to outline as an engagement with a paradoxical World on an ‘equal’ basis, as a spatially staged encounter. Rather than defining aestheticization exclusively in terms of a detached flow of signs, I have tried to associate this process with the exploratory and performative project of a continuously expanded, out-reaching Self. As exemplified through the transgressive principle of the sublime, as well as through unpretentious and humble interference, aestheticization has to be understood as a relational and political process, an expressive questioning of all sorts of supremacy.

Broadening aesthetics, allowing it to emerge as difference and proliferate as life, therefore also means actualizing a desirable ‘more,’ a yet negotiable ‘I don’t know what;’ with Rancière’s words “confronting the world with what it could be” (Rancière 2006:117). It is an aesthetics of interstice that furthermore activates the gap between what has been referred to as ‘post-criticality’ and ‘utopian realism;’¹⁴ an aesthetics that neither gives way to totalitarian nihilism nor to ethical totalitarianism. Such a spatially complex and disordered aesthetics also creates special possibilities for architecture and architects as navigators, editors, facilitators, and interceptors, continuously exploring the trans-disciplinary fields of societal investigation, from different perspectives embracing the complex realm where spatial agency, desire and power intersect.

AUTHOR



Maria Hellström,
PhD, SLU, Inst för landskapsplanering
Box 58
230 53 Alnarp
Maria.Hellstrom@ltj.slu.se

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- BAUDRILLARD, JEAN (1981), *For a critique of the political economy of the sign*, St. Louis, MO: Telos press.
- BAUDRILLARD, JEAN (1983), *Simulations*, New York: Semiotext(e)
- BAUDRILLARD, JEAN, AND JEAN NOUVEL (2002), *The Singular Object of Architecture*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- BAUMGARTEN, ALEXANDER GOTTLIEB (1750-58/1988), *Theoretische Ästhetik – Die grundlegende Abschnitten aus der “Aethetica” 1750/58*. Latin-German edition translated and reedited by Hans Rudolf Schweizer. Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag.
- De Certeau, Michel (1980), *L'invention du quotidien: 1. Arts de faire*. Paris: Gallimard.
- DUANY, ANDRES, ELIZABETH PLATER-ZYBECK AND ROBERT ALMINANA (2003), eds., *The New Civic Art: Elements of Town Planning*, New York: Rizzoli.
- FEATHERSTONE, MIKE (1991), *Consumer Culture and Post-modernism*, London: Sage.
- FOSTER, HAL (1983), *The anti-aesthetic: essays on postmodern culture*, Port Townsend: Bay Press.
- FRAMPTON, KENNETH (2005), “The Work of Architecture in the Age of Commodification,” in *Harvard Design Magazine*, no 23, Fall 2005/Winter 2006, pp. 64-69.
- GÓMEZ, LILIANA (2005), “Interview with Bernard Tschumi,” in *Puntocero Magazine* Sept.2005-Feb.2006. <http://www.puntocero.de/content/tschumi.html>. Download date 2006-04-01.
- HARVEY, DAVID (1989), *The Conditions of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change*, Oxford: Blackwell.
- HARVEY, DAVID (1996), *Justice, Nature and the Geography of Difference*, Oxford: Blackwell.
- Hayes, K. Michael (2002), “Foreword”, in Baudrillard, Jean, and Jean Nouvel (2002), *The Singular Object of Architecture*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Hellström, Maria (2005), “With a Maximum of Effort for a Minimum of Result: Situated Probing with different degrees of realization,” in Thomas Binder and Maria Hellström, eds. *Design Spaces*, Edita: IT Press.
- Hellström, Maria (2006a), *Steal This Place: The Aesthetics of Tactical Formlessness and “The Free Town of Christiania”*, doctoral dissertation, SLU, Dep of landscape planning, Alnarp.
- Hellström, Maria (2006b), “Att stjåla en plats”, in *Arkitekten* 12:2006, pp. 37-40.
- G.J. Hospers (2004), “Place marketing in Europe: the branding of the Øresund Region,” *Intereconomics: Review of European Economic Policy*, 39 (5), pp. 271-279.
- Jameson, Fredric (1984), “Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism,” in *New Left Review*, 146:52-92.
- Liotard, Jean Jacques (1984) “The sublime and the avant-garde,” first published in *Art Forum* 22, pp. 36-43; also in A. Benjamin (ed.) (1989) *The Lyotard Reader*, pp. 196-211.
- Liotard, Jean François (1988), *Peregrinations. Law, Form, Event*, New York: Columbia University Press.
- Jean-François Lyotard (1991) *Leçons sur l'analytique du sublime*, Paris: Galilée.
- Liotard, Jean-François (1986/1992), “Entusiasmen. Kants kritik av historien,” in van der Heeg and Wallenstein (1992), *Tankens arkipelag: Moderna Kantläsningar*, pp. 241-295.
- Liotard, Jean François (1994), *Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime*, Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Marcuse, Herbert (1978). *The aesthetic dimension: toward a critique of marxist aesthetics*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Nielsen, Tom (2004), “Ethics, Aesthetics, and Contemporary Urbanism,” in *Nordisk Arkitekturforskning* 2:2004, pp. 23-44.
- Patteeuw, Véronique /Urban Affairs (2002), (eds.), *City Branding*, Rotterdam: Nai Uitgevers.
- Otero Pailos, Jorge (2002) *Theorizing the Anti-Avant-Garde: Invocations of Phenomenology in Architectural Discourse*. PhD dissertation, Massachusetts Institute of Technology.
- Rancière, Jacques (2006), *Texter om politik och estetik*, Lund: Propexus/Site Editions.
- Smith, Richard G. (2002), “Baudrillard’s non-representational theory: burn the signs and travel without maps,” in *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, volume 21, 2003, pp. 67-84.
- Smith, Richard G. (2005), “Lights, Camera, Action: Baudrillard and the Performance of Representations,” in *International Journal of Baudrillard Studies*, Volume 2, number 1, Jan 2005. Available at http://www.ubishops.ca/baudrillardstudies/vol2_1/smith.htm. Download date 2006-04-02.
- Sorkin, Michael (2002), “Brand Aid, Or, The Lexus and

the Guggenheim (Further Tales of the Notorious B.I.G.ness),” in *Harvard Design Magazine*, no 17, Fall 2002/Winter 2003. Available at http://www.gsd.harvard.edu/research/publications/hdm/back/hdm_17sorkin.pdf. Download date 2006-04-01.

Welsch, Wolfgang (1997), *Undoing Aesthetics*, London: Sage.
Welsch, Wolfgang (1997), “Aesthetics Beyond Aesthetics,” in Martti Honkanen, ed., *Proceedings of the XIIIth International Congress of Aesthetics, Vol III: Aesthetics in Practice, Lahti*: University of Helsinki. Also available at <http://www2.uni-jena.de/welsch/Papers/beyond.html>. Download date 2006-04-01.

Woods, Lebbeus (1992), *Anarchitecture is a political act*, New York: St. Martin's Press.

NOTES

- ¹ *The Oxford Dictionary of English* (2005), 2nd revised edition, Oxford University Press.
- ² For a discussion, see Jorge Otero Pailos (2002) who in a critical historiographical study tries to follow in the steps of what he calls the “anti-avant-garde” of architecture. Apart from the anti-avant-garde, it is of course possible to discern also a neo-avant-garde of architecture, to a great extent a source of inspiration for this paper. Emanating from Nietzsche's critique of Hegelian idealist ‘architectonics,’ this ‘negative’ architectonic tradition is closely interrelated with surrealist, situationist and de-constructivist spatial practices, all in different ways interrogating representational orders. Within an architectural discourse theoretically articulated by among others Manfredo Tafuri, Massimo Cacciari, Ignasi de Sola-Morales, John Rajchman or Beatrice Colomina, this train of thought also presents what I here describe in terms of a spatial re-orientation of idealizing aesthetics. See also my discussion of this topic in Maria Hellström (2006), *Steal This Place: The Aesthetics of Tactical Formlessness and “The Free Town of Christiania”*; especially chapter IV, “The Formlessness of Space.”
- ³ For a discussion, see Otero Pailos (2002), and Welsch (1997).
- ⁴ “Aesthetica (theoría liberalium artium, gnoseologia inferior, ars pulcre cogitandi, ars analogi rationis, est scientia cognitionis sensitivae).” Baumgarten (1750-58), *Aesthetica*, §I, p.2
- ⁵ Rancière is here commenting on a discussion about a passage in Stendahl's *Vie d'Henri Brulard*, where the protagonist conjures up the very first, insignificant sounds that influenced him in his childhood: a church bell, a water pump, and a neighbor's flute; a discussion concerning romanticism's tendency to conflate everyday aesthetic pleasure with aesthetic ‘philosophizing,’ thereby (according to some critics) reducing the immediate experience.
- ⁶ For a recent example, see Helena Mattsson (2003), *Arkitektur och konsumtion: Reyner Banham och utbyttbarhetens estetik*. Stehag: Symposion.

⁷ An illustrious example of the end of verticality is the painting *Flagrant délit* by Madelon Vriesendorp on the cover of the first edition of Rem Koolhaas' *Delirious New York*, where you see two representatives of former verticality (two skyscrapers) in horizontal intercourse.

⁸ “Die Zweckmäßigkeit kann also ohne Zweck sein;” See Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, I:§ 10. Projekt Gutenberg <http://gutenberg.spiegel.de/kant/kuk/kukp101.htm>. Download date 2006-04-01.

⁹ In the third critique of Kant, *The Analytic of the Sublime* occupies a modest and ambiguous place. Van der Heeg and Wallenstein (1992), like many other Kant interpreters, point to the inherent unbalance and fragmentation of the third Critique, first and foremost as expressed in the partition of the text in an *Analytic of Beauty* and an *Analytic of the Sublime* (*Analytik des Schönen and Analytik des Erhabenen*). See van der Heeg and Wallenstein, (1992:55-56). See also the discussion in Hellström (2006a), pp. 129-139, where “The Free Town of Christiania” in Copenhagen is discussed in terms of a sublime tactics of radical difference.

¹⁰ **sublime**, from Lat., *sublimis*, lofty; from Lat. *sub-*, up to, and *limes*, lintel. *Oxford English Dictionary* (1989), 2nd edition, Oxford University Press. The notion of the sublime is ascribed the pseudonym Longinus, who in the antique manuscript *Peri Hypsous (On Height or On the Sublime)* paradoxically enough developed the concept as a means to free art from Art, or from the criteria of normative judgement. The manuscript of Longinus was translated from Greek by Nicolas Boileau-Despréaux in 1674 under the title of *Traité du Sublime, ou du Merveilleux dans le Discours*. It was this that inspired Edmund Burke to his strictly physiological explanation of beauty and the sublime in terms of pleasure and a kind of morally edifying pain. See Edmund Burke (1757/1998) *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origins of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*.

¹¹ Tom Nielsen (2004) discusses a similar approach in terms of “the Paradigm of Almost Alright.” See Nielsen (2004:30-32 and 34-35).

¹² The most well-known critique of Lyotard's envisioning of an ethical subject has been delivered by Jürgen Habermas. In his view, postmodernism is an illicit aestheticization of knowledge and public discourse as it undermines the legitimacy of the ethical/political subject. Against the postmodern disbelief of meta-narratives, Habermas “seeks to rehabilitate modern reason as a system of procedural rules for achieving consensus and agreement among communicating subjects. Insofar as postmodernism introduces aesthetic playfulness and subversion into science and politics, he resists it in the name of a modernity moving toward completion rather than self-transformation.” See Aylesworth (2005).

¹³ Some of these examples are discussed in former articles by the author of this paper. See Hellström (2005, 2006b).

¹⁴ For a discussion of these concepts, see for example Gómez, Lili-ana (2005), “Interview with Bernard Tschumi.”