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ENUNCIABILITY OF THE WORK OF ARCHITECTURE AFTER ALBERTI

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In 1967, Sol LeWitt proposed a new framework for artistic practice, which he calls “conceptual”:

In conceptual art, the idea of concept is the most important aspect of the work. When an artist uses a conceptual form of art, it means that all of the planning and decisions are made beforehand and the execution is a perfunctory affair. (...) the fewer decisions made in the course of completing the work, the better. This eliminates the arbitrary, the capricious and the subjective as much as possible.

(LeWitt, 1967, p. 79)

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LeWitt advocates the total separation between the stage of idealization of the work and the stage of its realization. Execution can only begin after the idealization has been concluded. According to this operative model, (1) the artist performs his role of authorship only during the idealization stage; (2) the work resides in the enunciation that defines it; and (3) the execution of the work can be freely assigned to any other agents provided they are capable of carrying it out.

When promoting this separation between the idealization and the execution of the work, an operative model is applied that is not traditionally used in the visual arts. According to the classification proposed by the philosopher Nelson Goodman, one can say that visual arts thus change from “autographic” (the author himself executes the work) to “allographic” (the work is executed by other agents). (ver: Goodman, 1968)

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Apparently, LeWitt seems to do nothing more than to claim an operative framework for visual arts that is similar to what was inaugurated by Alberti within the scope of architecture. The entity instituted as the “project” is based on that separation between conception and execution. The project is a mediator between the conception work carried out by the architect (the “work” in the authorial sense) and the construction (the “work” in the material sense). It is possible to see how Alberti’s work model – as described by Mario Carpo – is identical to the model proposed by LeWitt for how conceptual artists should relate to the execution of their own works:

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At various times and in different contexts Alberti insists on this ideal point of no return, where all design revisions should stop, and construction begin speedily and without hesitation (and, he adds, without any variation or change during the course of the works, regardless of who is in charge of the site). Alberti famously advised architects against directing the actual construction: in his view, building should be left to the workers and to their supervisors.

(Carpo, 2011, p. 21)

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However, I argue that the operative model proposed by LeWitt (which actually had a lesser expression in his own proto-conceptual work than in that of fully conceptual artists) transcends the mere existence of a definition of “what the work is”, prior to its execution. In order to understand this operative model, it is necessary to consider the specificity of the definitions employed by these artists.

In fact, the use of an enunciation that defines “what the work is” is not in itself an attribute of conceptual art. Many minimalist works are produced industrially using drawings made by their authors, similarly to what Alberti advocates. Conceptual works of art are enunciable in a different manner: *while the “project”, as defined by Alberti, corresponds to a formal enunciation (the project consists mainly of drawings), the enunciations of works of conceptual art are of a discursive nature (in other words, they are verbal or can be verbalized).*

In the context of conceptual art, the enunciation corresponds to a set of verbal data that can *succinctly* define what the work is and, for its turn, the work is *literal* in relation to that enunciation.

There is no such thing as an absolutely exhaustive enunciation. The realization of a work inevitably involves making decisions on aspects that are not addressed in the enunciation. There are always indefinite factors which, albeit without compromising the coherence and the meaning of the idea, allow for slightly different versions of the same work to be produced. Other than this, one can state that the process of realization of the work tends not to add data to the enunciation. The transition of the enunciation — an abstract entity — to the work — a concrete entity — is direct. It is a transition centered on the rigour observed when complying with that data. There is no room in the work for any formal or material features that do not strictly comply with the enunciation. Decisions about form (about the *disegno*, if applicable), the materials or the execution do not seek any such mannerism that “artistically enriches” the work. When, in some works, questions of compositional nature are raised, subjectivity is avoided through a neutral use of modular grids or elementary forms such as squares and cubes. The introduction of any factors of formal sophistication would merely produce “morphological noise”.

There is a vast array of works which could be used to illustrate this enunciability (every conceptual work, for instance), but I’ll rather point out a single — seminal and iconic — work: the readymade *Fountain* which Marcel Duchamp tried to exhibit in 1917. This work could be enunciated as “a common urinal signed by the artist and presented in an exhibition context”. Duchamp does not write this in order to propose his works to the public. But *Fountain* is nonetheless an enunciable work: it is comprehended by its own definition. Its meaning resides in its discursive definition.

Finally, *Fountain* could also serve to help understand the function performed by form in the enunciable work. A variation in the form of the urinal model, as long as it continued to be a common urinal, would

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not affect its sense or its implications. However, if the same enunciation were realized with a urinal in the form of a shell, for example, that form would lead to other meanings. Problems would start to arise deriving from the “design”. The more anodyne the urinal, the further the focus for interpretation of the work is shifted from form to enunciation: the “presentation of the urinal as a work of art” in itself (even though this is not the focus of this text, one could add that it is through this emptying that the work becomes *self-reflexive*).

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After outlining this model of *discursive enunciability*, which I defined based on conceptual art, the question I would like to raise now regards the possible relationship with architecture and, more specifically, with project design practices. I will summarily discuss the possibility of a work of architecture being enunciable.

As I said, the fact that works of architecture are executed by agents whose function is distinct from that of the architect does not render the works enunciable — not in the sense given to enunciability in the context of conceptual art. Whether the operativity characteristic to the “architecture project” approaches the operativity of conceptual art depends on the nature of the data that defines what the constructed work may become.

The project as an autonomous entity, in the manner devised by Alberti, does not have a discursive nature. The operative tradition inaugurated in the Renaissance is based on the possibility of defining “what the construction will supposedly become” through data of a *formal* nature. What is actually defined is “the form the project has” and not “what the project is”. This is what justifies the privileged use of the drawing. And this is also the reason why verbal or numerical elements that often integrate the project are themselves of use in describing the form.

Considering the possibility of an enunciable architectural project implies admitting, first and foremost, that the architect’s activity may be developed in a discursive and not (at least directly) visual field. It, therefore, implies the departure from the tradition of the *disegno* in its two acceptations:

- As a criterion for the artistic valuation of the project
The *form* — as a thing in itself, sculptural, and also as a space-defining element — is viewed as the *locus* of the project’s artistic quality.
- As a way of operating
The drawing — as a practice of figurative approximation to form — is the means used to generate that quality.

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In short, this would translate into:

- (1) a project definable by means of an enunciation (and not by a drawing, even if that enunciation leads to a drawing);
- (2) a project design practice focused on the definition of “what the project is” (and not in finding a form – which may only result from the realization of the enunciation);
- (3) a type of architectural quality that is contained in the enunciation (and not in the quality of the form in itself).

In theory, it is possible to define an enunciative project this way, similarly to the enunciability that is typical of conceptual art. However, in view of the specificity of architectural artifacts – their requirements and their usual formal and material complexity – one may ask: can an enunciation completely define an architecture project?

Creating an architecture project is a complex task. The landscape, the morphology of the site, the program, the construction system, infrastructure networks, regulations, cost, the client’s wishes – all of these are examples of matters that architects should take into account when they design projects. And, more than simply taking them into account, they must interrelate them in order to obtain an articulate and coherent “whole”. More than the isolated factors, it is their interrelation that limits the methodological and formal possibilities of an architecture project. A work of art, as an artifact, can correspond to an entity as simple as a urinal. A work of architecture almost always corresponds to a puzzle of constructive elements that should be meticulously organized in order to satisfy requirements of a material and an immaterial order. A project involves that effort – that *technical chore* – and only within the scope of that effort can it be subject to *relatively limited* variations that endow it with an artistic value. In view of that complexity, it becomes clear that it is not easy for an idea to successfully determine “what the project is” in an exhaustive manner. A discrepancy easily arises between the (potentially low) number of factors that the enunciation can define and the (potentially high) number of factors to be decided.

Encompassing the complexity of a project in a simple enunciation involves contemplating simultaneously the configurative aspects and the material/constructive aspects of the architectural artifact. Due to its technical specificity, the project inevitably implies these two aspects: the organization of space and the organization of matter. In order to illustrate what an enunciative project could be – or to demonstrate the enunciability of architecture projects – I will mention two examples that reconcile both these aspects.

The first is *The Environment–Bubble* – the project defined by Banham in the text “A Home Is Not a House” and which François Dallegret executes under the form of an illustration (Banham, 1981, pp. 56-60). This famous residential unit is summarily defined in the illustration as “Transparent plastic bubble dome inflated

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by air-conditioning output”. It is comprised of a single space enveloped by a membrane with a portable set of infrastructures at its centre. The Banham bubble is similar to a machine or device. Its constitution is very succinct. Despite the fact that it never reached the level of detail that its execution might require, it is a fairly complete enunciation where a configurative or spatial idea and a constructive or material idea coincide.

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The second example is the *House in Coutras* which Lacaton & Vassal conceive in 2000. This house is basically made up of two greenhouses that the architects picked from a catalogue in order to be installed together on a land parcel provided by the clients. One of the greenhouses acts as an outer casing for an inner volume that contains a room with a kitchenette, three bedrooms and a number of facilities with a bathroom. The other is left empty, like an indoor garden or the greenhouses used for leisure in the 19th Century. As can be seen in many of their projects, Lacaton & Vassal propose to build at low cost, without exceeding the estimated construction cost, in order to offer those inhabiting the spaces an additional area which would not only provide for different needs over time but – above all – encourage the invention of new uses. The enunciation of this project is close to that of a readymade: it is based on an appropriation. The climactic definition of the artifact patent in *The Environment–Bubble* and the constructive pragmatism of the most banal prefabrication are conciliated therein.

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In both these works, the project is already defined as an enunciation before the exact design becomes an issue, and the design is nothing but literal with regard to that enunciation. They are both enunciative, and such enunciability is what makes them suitable to a re-examination, not just of form in architecture, but of the very concept of “architecture” – namely as *disegno*.

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