

The Architecture of
RICHTER & DAHL ROCHA

with an essay by Jorge Francisco Liernur

BIRKHÄUSER

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On Tact. Some Thoughts on the Architecture of Richter & Dahl Rocha

Jorge Francisco Liernur (UTDT / CONICET)

Translated by Inés Zalduendo

*Si el fin del poema fuera el asombro, su tiempo no se mediría
por siglos, sino por días y por horas y tal vez por minutos.
Jorge Luis Borges, "Averroës's Search" (1949) ¹*

Premises

The dominant referents in contemporary architectural culture seem to be transforming the discipline into just another instrument of complicity in a world devoted to the accelerated consumption of images. This is a world in which value seems to reside only in perpetual novelty and difference, where a sound system might take the shape of a ball, or a chair the form of a crab: The only constant is the demand that such objects seduce consumers from the stylish windows of retail shops. Likewise, insofar as it ignores the legacy of historical modernisms, contemporary architectural practice contributes to a frivolous form of play involving nonstandard signifiers, like a skyscraper that resembles a gigantic pinecone or part of the crust of a distant planet, a soccer stadium that looks like an enormous shoe or a piece of exotic fruit, a school that recalls the site of an earthquake, or a museum resembling a ship stranded at sea, glowing in the sunset.

Antonio Gramsci rightly asserted that "critical activity must be based on the ability to make distinctions, to discover the difference underlying every superficial and apparent uniformity and likeness, and on the ability to discover the essential unity underlying every apparent contrast and superficial differentiation."² It is true that along with the most vocal figures in contemporary architecture, Richter & Dahl Rocha comprehend the "essential unity" of architecture's nearly complete structural integration with market forces. This is a pervasive condition, one not unrelated to the belief (at least in the West) that "*la guerre est finie*," and that 9/11 was just a horrific accident, even if a pivotal one. In this sense, the architecture of Richter & Dahl Rocha is complicit with the contemporary architectural culture to which it belongs, largely characterized by a non-ideological attitude quite far removed from the milieu of a century ago when one had to choose between Architecture and Revolution. But, beyond that "essential unity" with the

¹ "Averroës's Search," trans. Andrew Hurley, *Jorge Luis Borges Collected Fictions* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1998), p. 240: "if the purpose of the poem were to astound, its life would not be measured in centuries but in days, or hours, or perhaps even minutes"; "La busca de Averroës," was originally published in Jorge Luis Borges, *Obras completas* (Buenos Aires: Emecé Editores, 1949), p. 586.

² Antonio Gramsci, "Some Criteria of 'Literary' Judgment," *Selections from Cultural Writings: Problems of Criticism*, ed. David Forgacs and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, trans. William Boelhower (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1985), p. 232; originally published in *Letteratura e vita nazionale* (Turin: Einaudi, 1975), p. 37.

architects of their time, it soon becomes apparent that the work of Jacques Richter and Ignacio Dahl Rocha shares almost no common ground with the great infrastructural gestures of architects who celebrate globalization in a transparent (and even banal) manner; nor do they share the current passion for an architecture based on the equivocal forms emerging from computer screens to ignite the imagination of young students (as well as not-so-young architects), or the already rather outmoded taste for seismic disasters.

The singularity of the architecture of Richter & Dahl Rocha resides precisely in the fact that it does not call attention to its “originality.” However, before it can be dismissed as just another *déjà vu*, it reveals a subtle resonance that may not be perceived at first glance. In contrast to the potent images proffered in mainstream architecture magazines, which capture the reader’s interest in an aggressive way, the resonance that we perceive in the work of Richter & Dahl Rocha demands from the beholder a sustained effort to comprehend it. And what is interesting about the work is that it achieves this subtle resonance by situating itself in a liminal space determined by the architects’ refusal to abandon the archaic realm of Architecture itself, and their resistance to the exaggerated rhetoric and histrionics of the mass media. They achieve this without losing sight of the field of practice defined by programs, modes of production, and public as well as private patronage. It is in the work’s ability to maintain this tenuous balance, almost to the point of its own disappearance, that we discover its appeal.

It has been suggested that, in its rejection of garishness, the architecture of Richter & Dahl Rocha identifies with what has come to be called the “new simplicity” in Swiss architecture.³ But it seems to me more fruitful to pursue Gramsci’s other injunction, “to discover the difference underlying every superficial and apparent uniformity and likeness,” precisely because the architecture of Richter & Dahl Rocha is far from “simple.” This is not a function of rhetoric or intentionality, the aesthetic or typological character of the work, or its constructional qualities. If it were not for their commitment to the specificity of the discipline of architecture, the “silence” of Richter & Dahl Rocha’s work could perhaps be construed as an absence of meaning – a gesture that is typically the purview of artists who operate in fields where their work is evaluated in purely formal terms, where it is a matter, as Frank Stella famously commented, of “what you see” and only “what you see.” The overwhelming majority of architects are never called upon to propose “unique” buildings to ornament global capital cities, to put unknown towns “on the map,” or to promote the aesthetic avant-gardism of progressive business moguls. Like Richter & Dahl Rocha, most architects manage to operate within a certain range of opportunities and challenges, but few manage to capitalize on the resources at hand in order to channel them into works of Architecture.

But, how does one reveal a delicate nuance without canceling it? How does one arrest for a moment the fleeting sensation that has been calculated precisely to elude overt attention? In his essay on “Goethe’s Elective Affinities,” Walter Benjamin offered an appealing suggestion, which, taking a cue from Carlo Ginzburg, we could call a “knight’s move”: “Let us suppose that one makes the acquaintance

³ See Stanislaus von Moos, *Minimal Tradition: Max Bill und die “einfache” Architektur, 1942–1996 / Max Bill et l’architecture “simple,” 1942–1996* (Baden: Bundesamt für Kultur im Verlag Lars Müller, 1996).

of a person who is handsome and attractive but impenetrable, because he carries a secret with him. It would be reprehensible to want to pry. Still, it would surely be permissible to inquire whether he has any siblings and whether their nature could not perhaps explain somewhat the enigmatic character of the stranger. In just this way the critique seeks to discover siblings of the work of art.”⁴ To put this suggestion into practice entails approaching the work at several of its constituent levels, and to do so knowing that even if we are not able to disclose the heart of the secret (because of course it is in its absolute inviolability that the fascination resides), we will at least be able to establish some points of reference capable of sparking the reader’s own intuitions. In this sense, it should be made clear that my essay does not belong to the architectural work being presented in this monographic volume.

As an autonomous act, critical writing constitutes an attempt to cast creative work in its cultural context, where it crosses paths with other institutions and agents including the reader, who brings to it his or her own experiences and opinions. For our purposes, criticism thus constitutes another episode in the process of generating the layers of meaning that accrue to a work of architecture. As Michael Speaks has framed the point: “If we understand writing as production and not as an essence at the center of which is the word, then writing becomes architectural not according to what it is but to what it does: writing becomes architectural by producing architecture... In a real sense, then, institution architecture is a production cycle, an invisible architectural built form that grows with each sentence, review, criticism, and book.”⁵

With this reference I merely want to imply the existence of a semantic gap that has come to exert the power of a “force field” between the realm of building and that of the written word. It is in this charged field that the body of work represented here plays its role.

*

Switzerland / Argentina

One of the distinguishing aspects of Richter & Dahl Rocha’s work is the nature of the programs to which it responds. Generally speaking, it does not aspire to the rhetorical expression of public or private entities. Instead, it focuses on residential complexes and commercial, industrial, and educational facilities. Of nearly 40 projects developed by Richter & Dahl Rocha since its foundation in the early 1990s, 10 have been the result of competitions, while the rest were commissioned by corporations, real estate developers, government entities, banking institutions, insurance companies, schools, and a few private individuals. In a number of cases, works were commissioned by the same client at different moments in time. From this summary description and a cursory glance at the work, it is safe to make three initial observations. First, private commissions represent the majority of Richter & Dahl Rocha’s projects, which, if

⁴ Walter Benjamin, “Goethe’s Elective Affinities” (1919–1922), trans. Stanley Corngold, *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 1, 1913–1926*, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, Mass. & London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 333; originally published as “Goethes Wahlverwandtschaften,” *Neue Deutsche Beiträge* 2/1 (1925): 38, and 2/2 (1925): 134.

⁵ Michael Speaks, “Writing in Architecture,” *ANYO* (May–June 1993): 6.

we apply the standard cliché of criticism, do not seem compatible with Architecture.⁶ Second, although at first sight most of the work falls into the general category of “commercial” production, the sheer number of their projects generated by architectural competitions defies this label. And third, with the exception of a few projects, Richter & Dahl Rocha’s commissions have not been driven by the client’s explicit demand for architectural “discourse” or quality. This is to say that the quality which I feel is intrinsic to their built work was produced mostly *in spite of* market forces, which in many instances respond to a quite another logic.

Let us briefly examine the context into which the work inserts itself, and on which it depends, and the ways in which Richter and Dahl Rocha’s own histories are entwined with it. The firm’s growth coincided with the slow cycle of recovery from Switzerland’s “identity crisis,” which reached its height during Expo 1992 in Seville, when the Swiss identified with the slogan “*La Suisse n’existe pas.*” Internationally, this crisis reached a crescendo in the mid-1990s, with Switzerland rejecting the bid to join the European Union and simultaneously being censured for its hitherto unrecognized role in the Holocaust.⁷ On the occasion of the opening of Expo 2002, President Kaspar Villiger acknowledged as much: “The 1990s were in fact difficult: economic stagnation, unemployment at record levels, criticism of Switzerland for its conduct during the Second World War, and difficult negotiations with the European Union... One is moved to speak of nothing if not a crisis of identity.”⁸ The publication of this book, which presents a sophisticated, coherent, and mature body of work attesting to an uncompromising project spanning this very same period, comes at a moment when the trends Villiger described seem to have been reversed – despite the fact that for some, the Swiss identity crisis has not yet been resolved, especially with respect to the notion of a common social project.⁹

Such matters are consequential for our purposes, inasmuch as Switzerland’s recovery has occurred in parallel with changes affecting the construction industry, and thus the character and number of programs and requirements that determine architectural production. Globalization and the advance of a market economy into spheres that were formerly the province of the government have also had an impact which is to some extent reflected in bilateral agreements between Switzerland and the European Union. To begin with, this has spurred private commissions. Between 1975 and 2001, when public spending for new construction declined slightly, privately commissioned construction increased by more than 10,000 million

6 There is some truth to this cliché. It is not by chance that in the United States, the term is generally reserved for describing the architecture of university campuses or highly profitable cultural enterprises, while in Spain during recent years, extremely high-quality production generated under the auspices of government commissions (national, regional, and local) has become the norm.

7 Among other sources, see Jean Ziegler, *La Suisse lave plus blanc* (Paris: Éditions Du Seuil, 1990); Jürg Altwegg, *Une Suisse en crise* (Lausanne: Presses Polytechniques et Universitaires Romandes, 2004); and Claude Mossé, *La Suisse, c’est foutu. Une espèce à part* (Monaco: Éditions du Rocher, 2003). It is also important to remember that several pivotal events effectively disrupted the long-standing image of Switzerland as an impartial and infallible “world apart.” I refer of course to the Zug massacre, the bankruptcy of Swissair, and the almost simultaneous accident and fire in the Gotthard tunnel.

8 Founded in 1883, the Swiss Expo was held at intervals of 13, 24, 25, and 25 years until 2002, when it had been 38 years since the previous one was celebrated.

9 According to advertising executive Dominique von Matt, Switzerland is appreciated anew after the depression phase of the 1990s. It is perceived more positively from a foreign point of view than from within. In September 2001 – shortly before the attacks – a study conducted by the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology (ETH) in Zurich revealed that the Swiss population felt better, and safer, than ever.

Swiss Francs.¹⁰ According to some analysts, transformations wrought by globalization have affected the entire country, tending to organize it not as an urban, but rather a metropolitan network around the five big agglomerations of Zurich, Basel, the Ticino, Berne, and Geneva, which are of course closely related to Milan, Lyon, Munich, and Stuttgart.¹¹ These agglomerations seem to be transforming the very nature of settlements in Switzerland in a process that has come to be known as “rurbanization,” whereby rural land uses are articulated with urban, industrial, and touristic uses throughout the country. Likewise, a more intensive use of existing built fabric is being expressed in the revitalization of declining urban centers, as well as an increase in renovations, additions, and adaptive re-use, albeit at the expense of new construction. In fact, throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the market for new construction of residences declined 50%. In addition, significant changes in the type of dwellings being produced during this period have resulted in two- and three-room apartments being outpaced by single-family houses and larger apartments of five to six rooms, along with a marked shift from mass-produced housing in suburban areas to smaller developments in already urbanized areas.¹²

In addition to such changes in demand, the introduction of new material and information technologies has brought about transformations in the organizational structure and profile of many architecture offices. Not least of these is the increasing number of emerging architects who leave their jobs with mid-sized to large architectural firms in order to open independent studios.¹³ The combined effect of the increase in private commissions and recent transformations in production and construction modes in many cases encourages specialization. Under such conditions, it is understandable that critics might conclude that “the relative decline of the traditional craft-based office raises questions concerning the durability of the ethical principles that have for a long time guided the practice of independent architects,” and point to “another crucial problem: doesn’t the quality of services provided by architects to their community become illusory in light of the inevitable fragmentation of responsibility that results from the disappearance of the architect as sole manager of all building operations?”¹⁴

By Swiss standards, Richter & Dahl Rocha is considered to be a “large” firm,¹⁵ but it has opted neither to specialize, nor to establish itself as a corporation. In response to the rise in private commissions, Richter & Dahl Rocha has managed to maintain a commitment to craftsmanship and centralized responsibility characteristic of traditional architectural production. The organizational structure of the office, with an executive management group overseeing various project “teams” headed by Richter & Dahl Rocha associates, has proven to be a viable formula for sustaining

10 Public spending for construction declined from 6,528 to 6,129 million Swiss Francs, while private construction increased from 18,100 to 28,414 million.

11 See Michel Bassand, *La métropolization de la Suisse* (Lausanne: Presses Polytechniques et Universitaires Romandes, 2004).

12 See André Ducret, Claude Grin, Paul Marti, Ola Söderström, *Architecte en Suisse. Enquête sur une profession en chantier* (Lausanne: Presses Polytechniques et Universitaires, 2003).

13 According to Ducret, et alia, investments in construction decreased between 1990 and 2001 from 41,183 to 34,543 million Swiss Francs, in an inverse relation to an increase in the number of architecture offices from 6,500 in 1985 to 10,000 in 2001; see *Architecte en Suisse*, p. 46.

14 Ducret, et alia, *Architecte en Suisse*, p. 60.

15 In Switzerland large practices employ between 50 and 499 full-time employees. Ducret, et alia, *Architecte en Suisse*, p. 53 (our translation).

the delicate balance between creativity and invention on the one hand, and the conscious and efficient management of time and resources on the other.

Descriptions of the firm have drawn attention to its multinational character as one of its great strengths. There are currently 50 individuals from 12 different countries, of which 15 hold diplomas in architecture. Of those, five are technical architects, eight are project managers, seven are draftspeople, and seven are administrative staff, with a varying number of assistants. The variety of backgrounds they bring to the office results in a stimulating mix of viewpoints, as the editors of *Architecture Suisse* have aptly observed: “Despite the fact that it takes root, culturally and professionally, in the local milieu, the work of Richter & Dahl Rocha makes way for the “other,” for this difference that is the result of a multicultural dialogue, to subtly show through. This condition gives their architecture a particular identity that makes it difficult to label. Although conscious, it does not appear to be voluntary or explicit. Rather, it can be seen as the inevitable consequence of genuine teamwork that is concerned with concrete local problems while involving collaborators who have very different approaches to reality.”¹⁶

However it is difficult to draw from this “cosmopolitan” condition of the office something that distinguishes the work of Richter & Dahl Rocha from other firms of its size. It is relatively common in the age of globalization for an architecture office to be composed of collaborators of many nationalities. Likewise, it is not uncommon to find the partners of prominent firms coming from different countries than those in which each shaped and developed his or her identity as an architect. Emigration is a fact of contemporary life, with people moving in all directions. What is not so common is a lasting partnership between two protagonists stemming from such fundamentally different contexts. Jacques Richter and Ignacio Dahl Rocha first crossed paths at Yale University. What could a young man who had lived through the dark turbulence that characterized Argentina during the 1970s have in common with one who was brought up in the secure and affluent environment of the Alpine Confederation of Switzerland?

Take Richter’s case. As is well known, architecture in Switzerland is strongly conditioned by stringent building codes, the democratic participation of its citizens in urban matters, and cutting-edge technology in the building industries. Within this context, and particularly with respect to work for large corporations, the margin for creativity is reduced in the extreme. In this sense, Stanislaus von Moos’ characterization of Max Bill also resonates in the work of Richter & Dahl Rocha: “In contrast to other “quality architecture” of its time, Bill was not averse to letting his buildings merge with their quotidian context: a project for a radio station or a house of his, inserted among the railway tracks, industrial complexes, and middle-class residential complexes of Switzerland – not unlike the places documented in the photos and videos of Peter Fischli and David Weiss celebrating the banality of contemporary life – might almost go unnoticed.”¹⁷

But these same conditions characterize most architecture produced in Switzerland, and therefore do not set Richter & Dahl Rocha apart. Richter’s education was grounded in the so-called Swiss “modern tradition,” which was

¹⁶ See “Un bureau face à la pluriculturalité,” *Architecture Suisse* 152 (January 2004): 1.

¹⁷ Stanislaus Von Moos, “Max Bill: A la búsqueda de la ‘cabaña primitiva,’” *2G* (2004): 29f.

formulated in the 1930s and officially advanced with the publication of Alfred Roth’s *La Nouvelle Architecture, Présenté en 20 exemples* (1946). This “tradition” constitutes a lesson in “responsible” modernism, a credible, non-confrontational response to the sustainability of new architectures within the stable social and economic background of Switzerland. With its attention to materials, quality of construction, rational and functional organization, and the elegant manipulation of form, the Swiss modern tradition has manifestly rejected the simplistic notion of regionalism. Above all, it has rejected both the revolutionary rhetoric and the excessive formalism of other European modernisms. But within the history of modern architecture in Switzerland, a number of the trajectories that cut across this tendency to formal restraint are, on the other hand, among the most extreme expressions of the avant-garde – from the work of Le Corbusier himself to the projects, works, and proposals of the ABC group. In addition, Jacques Richter’s path included, of course, the “American” experience at Yale, and looking back, one sees that certain pivotal developments in his career stem precisely from that period.

To begin with, the architectural tradition in the “Romande” or French-speaking region of Switzerland is distinct from that of the other cantons. One could say that, while the experience of German- or Italian-speaking Swiss architects is inherently tied to the most extreme, turbulent, and even “revolutionary” histories of German and Italian modernisms respectively, those of the French-speaking region belong to a different history. This is a history that resisted modern architecture’s sudden break with the Academy in France, and came to be associated not only with the architecture of Alberto Sartoris, Henri-Robert Von der Muhl, and even the Honneger brothers, Georges and Auric. In this context, Adolphe Guyonet or Le Corbusier in Geneva represented exceptions. Marc Piccard’s Bellerive-Plage beach and pool complex in Lausanne stands as evidence that it was well into the 1930s before “modern architecture” in its most committed versions began to merge with the local culture of the Romande region. Geneva architectural historian Jacques Gubler has gone so far as to assert that “the French part of Switzerland seems much less willing to accept new architecture due to the ultra-reactionary ‘poetic penchant’ of its intelligentsia – the Federation of Swiss Architects (FAS) included.”

In broad terms, the conservatism of modern Switzerland has been repeatedly explained as a result of the dominant role of banking institutions in the country’s economy. According to Jürg Altwegg, the Swiss are “always very conservative in politics, because they invest with an eye to the long term; their major business ventures can only prosper in the context of a stable social system.”¹⁸ Making reference to the manner in which that conservatism is expressed as an “aesthetic of restraint,” Altwegg quotes the Swiss banker Edouard Pictet, for whom Calvinism in Geneva “is a matter of consciousness. One is more or less comfortable financially, more or less wealthy, but this does not justify extravagant gestures. On the contrary, one remains modest. Even if it is not a matter of necessity, one remains thrifty. One does not attend a theatre play wearing diamonds because one can afford it. This would be inappropriate. We refuse the looks and everything that trivially evokes the ‘nouveau riche’.... We despise garish, superficial signs of wealth.”¹⁹

¹⁸ Altwegg, *Une Suisse en crise*, p. 12 (our translation).

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 18 (our translation).

However, by focusing on qualities such as “restraint” and “conservatism,” one risks losing sight of the fact that, on the contrary, strong currents of change have also swept across the Romande region. In fact, this was where Switzerland’s entry into the European Union was approved in a referendum, while the rest of Switzerland decided to reject the option. Oppositional positions taken by certain of the region’s intellectuals are also indicators of open-mindedness. Denis de Rougemont, founder of the European Center for Culture in Geneva, “violently criticized Switzerland,” but on the other hand noted that “the country’s history and political structure, as well as its multilingual character, represented, in many respects, a parallel to the unified Europe he envisioned.” Alfred Berchtold characterized Romande Switzerland as “a land of bridges and valleys, which, if it does not open itself to the outside, does not exist.”²⁰

The initial eclecticism or neutrality of the Romande Swiss modernists during the decades following the Second World War enabled the region to embrace other international expressions more openly than the rest of Switzerland. One example of this was of course the remarkable work of Jean Tschumi, particularly, as Isabelle Charollais and Bruno Marchand have proposed, insofar as it struck “a delicate balance between functionality and representation, between modernism and Beaux-Arts tradition.”²¹ This was also the case with the work of Max Richter and Marcel Gut, which naturally had impact on Jacques Richter’s education and development as an architect. The office of Richter & Gut, on whose foundations Richter & Dahl Rocha was initially organized, was one of the most distinguished in Romande Switzerland during the 1960s and 1970s, both in terms of its sheer volume of production and the professional quality of the work. Theirs was a consistent architecture, an architecture initially marked by a Corbusian influence (as evidenced in their boarding school at Valmont completed in 1964), which subsequently incorporated an American Brutalism inspired by Paul Rudolf and Richard Neutra, as evinced in their La Placette Commercial Center in Vevey of 1973.

Jacques Richter pursued his architectural degree at the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology (ETH), Zurich, in the 1970s, at a moment when Aldo Rossi was a strong presence and the “Ticino school” was in the ascendant in Switzerland. Richter identified with the Tendenza movement, and eventually headed to the United States in search of the Kahnian roots of “rationalism” at Yale. There, as we know, he met his future partner. Dahl Rocha’s decision in favor of equilibrium and restraint had a very different pitch.

Modern architecture in Argentina is less well understood internationally than its Swiss incarnations, but as the product of a country and culture that flourished during the early decades of the 20th century, it attained an unusual degree of richness. It was the force of modernization in Argentina that attracted Le Corbusier when he made his first trip to the Americas in 1929.²² The cosmopolitan character of the great urban centers of the Río de la Plata region bear witness to a sophisticated

20 Altwegg, *Une Suisse en crise*, p. 43; and Alfred Berchtold, *La Suisse romande au cap du XXe siècle. Portrait littéraire et moral* (Lausanne: Payot, 1980).

21 Isabelle Charollais and Bruno Marchand, “Entre représentativité et fonctionnalité,” *Faces* 39 (Fall 1996): 50.

22 Le Corbusier visited Buenos Aires in 1929, when he was invited by a group of institutions at the instigation of

interweaving of disparate cultures, whose heterogeneity cannot be explained within simplistic Euro-North-American schemas that use to find in Latin America an “other” clearly differentiated by “magic realism.” The urban culture of the Río de la Plata region established itself as an outcome of immigration, modernization, and literacy. A society composed of multiple nationalities grew up, educated under the direction of a local elite who developed a neutral modernism as a means of homogenizing the country’s plurality, and was preoccupied with establishing “one” identity, and with it, “one” nation.

The modernist architectural ethos inherited by Dahl Rocha above all derives from a system of quality and representation comprising the landscape of Argentine cities. It is important to stress that it indeed comprised a *system*, and not a group of exceptions like those occurring at other latitudes on the continent.²³ Alberto Prebisch, Vladimiro Acosta, Sánchez, Lagos y De la Torre, but above all Antonio Vilar best expressed the modern tradition in Argentina, which reached its height in the 1940s with the work of the Spanish exile Antonio Bonet, Juan Kurchan, and Jorge Ferrari Hardoy – whose so-called “butterfly” chair (named BKF after the three of them) epitomized modernist furniture. From the rigorous creative path of Amancio Williams to the contemporary work of Mario Roberto Alvarez, this tradition of innovation flourished alongside the pursuit of an architecture of quality matched by extreme restraint and accompanied by resistance to the label of “regional modernism.” And it has continued to evolve within the context of a contemporary Argentine culture dominated by a minimalist paradigm that sublimates practical and metaphysical realities imposed by the enormous plain of the Pampa and the infinite horizon of the mythical *rio-mar*, the great river-sea that flows downstream across the plain where it becomes so shallow that one can walk across it for kilometers.

Dahl Rocha absorbed this tradition while working with Ernesto Katzenstein, a disciple of Bonet and nephew of Vilar. A magnificent figure within Argentine architecture circles at the end of the 20th century, Katzenstein was steeped in an almost mystical (but decidedly secular) belief in the need for restraint. For him, it was no longer as a means of homogenizing diversity, but rather as a critique of the noisy and banal rhetoric typical of his own society and time.²⁴ To this search for aesthetic restraint during those dark years, in what can only be described as a “gagged” society, was added an acute awareness of the inevitable distortion of any voice that dared to speak out. Under the military dictatorship of General Videla,

Victoria Ocampo, a member of the Argentine social and cultural elite. During that trip, he also visited Uruguay and Brazil. The most significant consequences were his proposals for Buenos Aires, Montevideo, São Paulo, and Rio de Janeiro. In 1938, Le Corbusier hosted two young Argentine architects who were visiting Paris, Jorge Ferrari Hardoy and Juan Kurchan. With his collaboration, the proposals for Buenos Aires were transformed into a Plan, and as a result a CIAM group called “Austral” was founded in Buenos Aires with the participation of former disciple of Le Corbusier and Joseph Lluís Sert, Antonio Bonet. In 1948, the municipality of Buenos Aires created a special office to develop the Plan, and in the same year, Le Corbusier began the project for Dr. Curutchet’s house in La Plata, 70 kilometers from the city. This and the Carpenter Center in Boston are Le Corbusier’s only two buildings in the Americas.

23 I am referring to familiar examples such as the so-called “Brazilian miracle” of the 1940s and 1950s, embodied in the figures of Oscar Niemeyer and Lúcio Costa, or the more individualistic example of Carlos Raúl Villanueva in Venezuela; cfr. Jorge F. Liernur, “The South American Way: El ‘milagro’ brasileño, los Estados Unidos y la Segunda Guerra Mundial (1939-1943),” *Block 4* (1999): 23–41.

24 See Jorge F. Liernur, “La importancia de ser Ernesto,” *Ernesto Katzenstein Arquitecto* (Buenos Aires: Fondo Nacional de las Artes, 1998).

Dahl Rocha was a student of the unofficial school where Katzenstein and his colleagues were trying to construct space of architectural culture and thought.²⁵

It was in this context that I met him. He had not yet finished his formal studies, but his exceptional creative talent and the openness of his theoretical curiosity were already evident. The leap to Kahn's Yale was a necessary step in his search for a tolerant cultural environment where that curiosity could be nourished by exposure to contemporary developments and tested in a stable economic context. Here, as we know, began the "Swiss" stage of Ignacio Dahl Rocha's career.

This intellectual pilgrimage from the Pampa to the Alps may seem anomalous, but it is not so unusual. Crossing the ocean in the opposite direction during the summer of 1914, the family of Jorge Luis Borges arrived in Geneva, where they lived for five years at the Rue Ferdinand Hödler while Borges and his siblings attended high school at the Collège Calvin. Borges felt so deeply connected to the city that he returned to it, almost *incognito*, at the end of 1985, died there, and was buried there in the Pleinpalais Cemetery on June 14 of the following year. Needless to say, before Borges' time, many Swiss Romande *émigrés* had already discovered a quality of life in Argentina that their own country could not offer. And it should not be forgotten that Richter and Dahl Rocha's story was itself prefigured during the 1940s, when Max Bill and the Argentinean Tomás Maldonado engaged in a productive exchange of ideas. However, in contrast to the case of Richter and Dahl Rocha, Bill and Maldonado committed themselves to the quest for one "good" solution for the totality of visual culture.

What characterizes Richter & Dahl Rocha is thus not only the multinational composition of the office, but also the permanent state of tension in which their partnership exists, cultivated by Richter's commitment to open-mindedness, and inspired by the "otherness" that Dahl Rocha brought to Switzerland from a land rife with contradiction, from the banks of that vast and remote river in which one could see snakes floating downstream from the jungle, crossing icebergs that the wind carries from the frozen southern seas.

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"Architectum ego hunc fore constituam, qui certa admirabilique ratione et via tum mente animoque diffinire tum et opera absolvere didicerit, quaecunq[ue] ex ponderum motu corporumque compactione et coagmentatione dignissimis hominum usibus bellissime commodentur."
Leon Battista Alberti, *On the Art of Building in Ten Books* (c. 1452)²⁶

Spectacle versus Architecture

Death is the inevitable destiny of all that is human, and Architecture is no exception. It may seem to be a banal statement, but philosophers from Hegel onward have offered ever more sophisticated arguments to confirm its truth. More cogently than any other critic of the last half of the 20th century, Manfredo Tafuri expressed this tragic destiny, bringing to it his acute intelligence and sophisticated theoretical

²⁵ Justo Solsona, Antonio Diaz, and Rafael Viñoly.

²⁶ *On the Art of Building in Ten Books* (1450), trans. Joseph Rykwert, Neil Leach, and Robert Tavernor (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1988), prologue, in which Alberti describes the architect as he "who by sure and wonderful reason and method, knows both how to devise through his own mind and energy, and to realize by construction,

tools. One of the most recent incarnations of his funerary prediction relates to the shapeless digital products known as "blobs," a cultural phenomenon which, as Kazys Varnelis has suggested, may indeed be advancing with great speed toward its own exhaustion: "When the blob becomes banal, the last formal monument will come to an end, and architecture itself will be able to disappear. In exploring the remaining geometries that architecture previously could not conceive or build, the blob marks the end of formal movements in architecture. With these having exhausted themselves, we reach the end of architectural form."²⁷

That the product of these articulations between new digital media, architects, and the marketplace would lead toward a cataclysmic end (or at least profound consequences for architecture) has been predicted by critics from the traditional sector. Under the direction of Kurt Forster, the 9th Architecture Biennale in Venice was driven by the quest to understand the new state of things presented under the title *Metamorphosis*: "We have developed a line of arguments about the recent transformations in the nature of architecture itself. Our hypothesis is based on the special nature of those transformations. In the last quarter-century or so, architecture has not only changed, as it always does, in diverse and often unpredictable ways, it also begun to transform itself. These changes are so profound as to suggest a transformation of the very species of architecture whose different properties can only be discovered in retrospect. One might say that when some fish began to emerge from the sea and develop limbs, or when reptiles grew skin and feathers on their legs, they turned into birds."²⁸ Forster's observation could be correct, that is, it may be true that ours is an era in which the reptile is starting to grow feathers. There is some consensus that a cluster of new activities and modes of organization involving architects is emerging. Validating Robert Venturi's motto, it has even been asserted that "the architect is going to be the fashion designer of the future. Learning from Calvin Klein, the architect will be concerned with dressing the future, speculating, anticipating coming events, and holding up a mirror to the world."²⁹ In the context of this transformation, Architecture/the reptile would be metamorphosing into a spectacle/the bird. Stronger in each instance, whether in the form of "fashion design" or under the pressure of image consumption on the part of architecture schools or advertising at a global scale, the task of architects is rapidly evolving in the direction of branding.

However, even if Forster's observation seems accurate, we may not agree with his conclusions. Darwin simply held that species tend toward self-transformation. It was not Darwin, but some of his followers who concluded that this transformation necessarily carried along with it a sense of *progress*. Furthermore, even if we accept the metamorphosis of reptile into bird, this does not necessarily mean that reptiles will *disappear*, nor, for our purposes, does the fact that other activities emerge from the practice we know as Architecture and organize themselves as new disciplines

whatever can be most beautifully fitted out for the noble needs of man, by the movement of weights and the joining and massing of bodies," p. 3; Leon Battista Alberti, *L'architettura [De re aedificatoria]*, critical ed. Giovanni Orlandi, with intro and notes by Paolo Portoghesi, 2 vols. (Milan: Edizioni Il Polifilo, 1966), vol. 1, prologue, p. 2.

²⁷ Kazys Varnelis, "One Thing After Another," *Log: Observations on Architecture and the Contemporary City* 3 (Fall 2004): 115; see also Iain Borden, "Death of Architecture," in *Hunch* 6/7 (Summer 2003): 105–110.

²⁸ Kurt W. Forster, "Thoughts on the Metamorphoses of Architecture," *Log* 3 (Fall 2004): 19.

²⁹ Ben van Berkel and Caroline Bos, "Weather, Wine, and Toenails," in *Hunch* 6/7 (Summer 2003): 90.

necessarily mean that Architecture as such will *disappear*. Witness the rise of fields like urbanism, industrial design, and countless other practices that at some point were included in the definition of Architecture. It is worth recalling that Alberti attributed the making of clocks to architects.

Furthermore, although Forster, Tafuri, and Hegel may not have been mistaken in their predictions of the disappearance of architecture *as we know it*, no one can assure us that we are on the eve of such a disappearance. For his part, Kenneth Frampton has proposed that “architecture can only survive as a form of critical culture, as a resistant ‘otherness,’”³⁰ but this demand for “resistance” is based on a somewhat nostalgic compulsion to extend the existence of a discipline that otherwise seems destined to disappear. It is appropriate, on the other hand, to ask what is the relationship of Architecture to that world which was so powerfully evoked by Marx, in which “*all that is solid melts into air*”? Guy Debord lucidly observed that: “Here we have the principle of commodity fetishism, the domination of society by things whose qualities are ‘at the same time perceptible and imperceptible’ by the senses. This principle is absolutely fulfilled in the spectacle, where the perceptible world is replaced by a set of images that are superior to that world yet at the same time impose themselves as *eminently* perceptible... Since the spectacle’s job is to cause a world that is no longer directly perceptible to be *seen* via different specialized mediations, it is inevitable that it should elevate the human sense of sight to the special place once occupied by touch; the most abstract of the senses, and the most easily deceived, sight is naturally the most readily adaptable to present-day society’s generalized abstraction.”³¹

In this sense, Architecture, understood in absolutely traditional terms, seems still to be able to have the capacity to actively refute that “melting into air,” which, among many other things, carries along with it solidarity and empathy among human beings. And it does so with more efficacy than the presumed rebellion against, as Iain Borden asserts, “all institutional forms” which call for a “complete and permanent revolution, involving new forms of education, production, creativity, desires, self-management, territory.”³² Only a superficial approach to the practice of Richter & Dahl Rocha would identify its studied and profound archaism with a conservative attitude or an indifference to the world that surrounds it. Taking distance from currents and fashion, they obstinately pursue the work within Architecture as institution, in harmony with Adorno’s idea of the role of the “sister” institution of Art. “For the disenchanting world, – stated Adorno – the fact of art is an outrage, an afterimage of enchantment, which it does not tolerate.”³³

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30 Kenneth Frampton, “On the predicament of architecture at the end of the century,” *Hunch* 6/7 (Summer 2003): 176.

31 Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone Books, 1994), 26 and 17; originally published as *La Société du spectacle* (Paris: Editions Buchet-Chastel, 1967).

32 Iain Borden, “Death of architecture,” p. 108.

33 Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, ed. Greta Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann, trans. and ed. with trans. intro. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), p. 58; originally published as *Aesthetische Theorie* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 1970).

Archaism I: Character

The signature trait of Richter & Dahl Rocha’s work is the legibility with which each project expresses the program for which it was conceived. Their building shapes do not belong to the universe of industrial, cybernetic, or biological form, nor are they purely geometric figures. There is no doubt about the function of the Route de Berne 46 office building, nor does the apartment building in Prilly-Lausanne reference anything but dwelling, while for the La Prairie Clinic at Montreux, the extension of its profile into the landscape, its terraces, and the asymmetry of its apertures work together to express with great lucidity a program that is about comfort and delight, not to mention efficiency. It is not difficult to recognize an educational purpose in the dimensions, siting, and materials selected for the Valmont Boarding School, nor is there anything obscure about the amenities offered by New Meeting Place on the campus of the Institute for Management Development (IMD) in Lausanne. In all of these cases, what is quietly revealed is the “character” of the architectural task, an ancient and specifically architectural way of affirming Aristotle’s dictum that things (like the characters in his *Rhetoric*) are manifestly what they say they are.

Archaism II: Construction

Likewise, the works of Richter & Dahl Rocha are conceived with respect for their material condition. They are not mere “images,” but tangible things. As such, they respond to the traditional function of architecture, that is, sheltering human activities. In order for this to happen, diverse elements that have weight, texture, gloss, color, and qualities such as waterproofing, heat resistance, and longevity must be assembled into a whole. The various tectonic, tactile, and visual properties of these elements are manipulated to produce sensations that amplify the specifically architectural discourse within which they interpret and respond to a given program. The red brick used in the residential development “Les Uttins” in Rolle highlights the ex-urban domestic condition of the project, while the black brick used for the rear facade of the residential complex “La Verrière” in Montreux resonates with the “hard” environment of the railroad tracks that abut the site. In all instances, these works exude the architects’ pleasure, not so much in their material condition as the materiality of Architecture itself. In the same way, the wood of which the Forest Refuge is constructed palpably refers to the trees that surround it. Where there is a convergence between the density of craftsmanship, the consistency and precision of industrial materials, and the potential for invention, the *moderation* of Richter & Dahl Rocha’s approach often produces a celebratory combination – for example, where glass is used in the form of bricks for the walls of the interior courtyard of “La Verrière” (either to cover or reveal in those suggestive “boxes” of light), as *brise-soleils* for UEFA’s renovated Villa La Falaise, or as innovative signage for Nestlé. Given their avid engagement with the creative potential of the material world of building, it is not surprising that in a number of cases, Richter & Dahl Rocha’s research into constructive solutions for a particular project has taken on a life of its own, resulting in reproducible products or systems. From a prototype for a Forest Refuge that can be constructed by rangers as needed, one at a time, to furniture developed for Nestlé Headquarters and later produced as a commercial line, a patented office partition system, and corporate signage that began as a unique

solution and was later replicated, the firm's commitment to open-ended research and development ultimately inspired the founding of the affiliate firm, RDR Design.

Archaism III: Human Scale

When buildings are conceived as "spectacular" productions, remarkable artifice and ingenious invention occasionally conspire to elicit sensations that would be very much at home in an amusement park. This is not Richter & Dahl Rocha's goal. Instead, they closely attend to the richness of everyday life experiences. In striving to maintain dimensional relationships that refer to human scale, that of the user in whose service their projects are conceived and built, and with an eye to the "character" of the project, the architects pursue an approach that consists in searching for the most appropriate articulation of site and program. In their renovation of Nestlé Headquarters, the stately character of the glazed ground floor reception area is not a function of rigid composition or eye-catching materials, but rather the careful calibration of spatial relations in order to establish equilibrium between the interior space and the surrounding landscape. Richter & Dahl Rocha introduced a vertical plane of etched glass that acts as a screen behind the massive reception desk, proportioned in dynamic rapport with the dimensions of the gigantic hall. Against this freestanding translucent plane, the diminutive figure of a receptionist is gracefully framed by the immensity of the lakeside landscape. Attention to the issue of human scale is also evident in a very different case like the residential development Im Forster in Zurich, particularly in the solution proposed for the so-called *Mittelberg*. Here, the design consists of a small housing complex that presents itself not as a series but rather an ensemble of structures echoing the form of a single "grand mansion." Thus it manages to harmonize new and preexisting buildings. Richter & Dahl Rocha's project for Im Forster also effects a skillful articulation of level changes in the terrain, in which structures only partially emerge from the earth in order not to dominate the magnificent park which belongs to the patrimony of that part of the city. A third and quite diverse example is the New Learning Center for IMD. Here again, the design is about inserting the work into a park setting, and in the context of a diverse group of buildings. The relationship between context and program required a differentiated morphology that would not overwhelm the natural setting. The appearance of the structure was reduced to an elevated volume supported by a powerful pair of arcades recalling Tschumi's approach. More than half of the functions are concealed below ground level. And, in this case, the curved skin of the emerging building is divided into semi-transparent panels the width of a forearm, which not only mediate the double-height of the building, but simultaneously reflect the surrounding trees.

Archaism IV: The Elements

Again and again, works of architecture must make use of the very elements of which they are composed. To provide shelter from sun and weather, builders developed inclined planes which came to be called roofs. To divide spaces, vertical elements called walls were introduced. To let air into enclosed spaces, builders invented the ingenious device of the window, and to change level, ramps, stairs, and mechanical devices. These were followed by sills, dormers, thresholds, parapets, ceilings, podiums, cornices, columns, and many other elements. While some architects have

tried to evade them, it is also possible to embrace the conventional elements of architecture as the continuously fascinating raw material of this ancient discipline. Richter & Dahl Rocha have taken a special interest in the transformative potential of such elements, which in their projects do not always function in expected ways. This is witnessed by the delicate stairs for their twin SWHome® villas at Chailly and the sculptural articulation of a stair linking two pre-existing structures that Richter & Dahl Rocha joined together for their Lausanne office. And in homage to Jean Tschumi's double-spiral Chambord stairway rising up through six floors of the original buildings, their own *pièce de résistance*, the Liaison Space, connects each floor of Tschumi's curvaceous structure with those of the simple bar building added in the 1970s. Given the unequal ceiling heights of the two buildings, ramps cutting through the atrium space fan out, floor to floor, to mediate the slight gaps. In a similar way, Richter & Dahl Rocha's projects explore a range of variations on the theme of the support, mediating the transition between the building and the ground. This has resulted in solutions as diverse as the series of concrete pilotis at street level supporting the residential complex "La Verrière," whose site rises up sharply behind it to carry the railroad tracks, and those of the office building at Route de Berne 46, essentially square or rectangular pilotis, or abstract prisms, supports that reflect their material aspect, such as the Richter & Dahl Rocha Office, or cylindrical pilotis, like those used in the La Prairie Clinic. In other instances, the architects have arrived at more sophisticated solutions, such as the sculptural arcades of the New Learning Center for IMD, the complex system of supports for the Nestlé restaurant, the slender, decorated columns for the New Meeting Place on the IMD campus, and even, in a totally opposite extreme, the gigantic blocks that support the New Museum of Fine Arts in Lausanne. The works of Richter & Dahl Rocha do not emerge from the ground, nor do they try to float above it: As is natural in Architecture, they simply rest on it. And often, in order to do this, they employ that element of transition between building and ground called the podium. Sometimes it is the plane that supports a group of buildings, as in the residential development "La Verrière." On other occasions, it is the building itself that unfolds into the surrounding terrain, as with the supporting walls of the La Prairie Clinic extension, or defines a terrace, like the New Meeting Place for IMD, or contains part of the building – as also happens with the project for Route de Berne 46. Even an edge beam can become a podium, as evidenced in the Swiss National Train Maintenance Center in Geneva, and likewise, the concrete cylinders that articulate such a transition in the modest Forest Refuge.

Archaism V: Context

In their practice, Richter & Dahl Rocha concentrate on the making of architecture, attending as precisely as possible to the requirements of their clients, whether public or private, but always taking extreme care with their handling of whatever portion of the natural or built environment their projects occupy. In this sense, context is of paramount concern. A project like their residential complex "La Verrière," for example, is as strongly determined by the structures that surround it as it is conditioned by the massive infrastructure of the railroad passing directly behind it. Facing the lake, it confronts the historic Montreux Palace Hotel, but the architects have also taken into account the character of all the lesser important

buildings along this street. On the other hand, with their extension of the La Prairie Clinic, the architects kept the structures low, with three floors semi-buried in the ground to emphasize the volume of the existing “Chateau” and the Shalom Villa at the upper end of the site. But as it unfolds into terraces, it also follows the slope of the site, making reference to the local vineyards. In the same way, the dramatic horizontality of the Nestlé Product Technology Center in Singen, Germany, heightens the presence of the building, while at the same time deftly integrating it into the nondescript industrial context with brick cladding and calibrating its height to that of the surrounding structures. The five-story Route de Berne 46 office building, located in a suburban neighborhood comprised of low buildings, could have dominated its context. To avoid this effect, the building volume was subdivided so that the ground floor and mezzanine appear to rest on a second plane, and the three upper floors were treated as a unified piece made to seem “lighter” by the movement of louver-like *brise-soleil* elements, reducing its overall impact. In the same regard, it seems appropriate to consider how Richter & Dahl Rocha’s buildings for IMD and the residential development for Im Forster are articulated in their park-like settings, and also how the Valmont Boarding School in a quiet residential neighborhood achieves harmony with its context by reducing the large volume of the gymnasium to a minimal height which gently communicates with the houses that surround it.

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The Role of Technique

The only possible legitimacy for the modern work of art comes from within, from its potential to be “autonomous.” This necessity for autonomy is absolute, that is, the totality of the work’s component parts must be subsumed to it. However, the work of architecture presents problems of a greater complexity than other artistic endeavors, given that its autonomy must mediate incalculable factors such as the use of a building or the strength of materials used to build it. For Adorno, within the modern work of art there is a struggle between nature, to whose own determinations the structure of materials that comprise the work must be assimilated, and the modernist mandate for the autonomy of form. Adorno rightly maintains that it is inevitable that, “in the impulse of every particular element of art works toward integration, the disintegrative impulse of nature secretly manifests itself. The more integrated artworks are, the more what constitutes them disintegrates in them. To this extent their success is their decomposition and that lends them their fathomlessness.”³⁴

But this written-in-stone law about the necessity for form to triumph over materials in the condition of modernity produces a profound disorientation, to the extent that modernity does not provide any basis for or indication about the organization of form. Therefore, and in the particular case of architecture, it is customary to make use of consoling alternatives such as the supposed “objectivity” of functionalism, postmodernist irresponsibility, atemporal typological categories, and geometrization. However, the most lasting consolation is that of *technique*.

³⁴ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 52.

The organization of form based on the logic of technology – whether with respect to process, mimesis of the formal-mechanical universe, or materials – carries two additional reassurances: alignment with the course of progress, and the supposed approximation of truth. Adorno observed that “the technologization of art is no less provoked by the subject – by the disillusioned consciousness and the mistrust of magic as a veil – than by the object: by the problem of how artworks may be bindingly organized. The possibility of the latter became problematic with the collapse of traditional procedures, however much of their influence has extended into the current epoch. Only technology provided a solution; it promised to organize art completely in terms of that means-end relation that Kant had in general equated with the aesthetic.”³⁵

The link between technical “progress” and the human condition has been amply explored (not to mention cast into question) by philosophy itself, and this is not the place to pursue the issue. However, with respect to the work of Richter & Dahl Rocha, it may be productive to consider the relationship between technique and “truth.” This relationship was at the center of architectural debates during the 1950s and 1960s, when “Brutalism” was fiercely articulated in connection with the existentialist demand for “authenticity.” Behind these positions, the phantom of Ruskin and 19th-century organicism lurked, along with a latent devotion to the notion of a mimetic relationship between architecture and nature. Beyond the artifices (academic in the 19th century and “aesthetic” or ideological in the early 20th century) architects would make it their mission to reveal the (natural) truth through the materiality of architecture. The modernist destruction of the moorings of “truth” beyond the scope of representation was countered with the belief in its unmediated presence in the transparent articulation of materials, in response to a logic of technique presumed to be “pure.” Architecture, understood as institution, entails, on the contrary, a clear consciousness of the conventional basis for “truth.” And the modern condition with its demand for the subordination of material/nature to the autonomy of form only reinforces that artificial condition as superfluous, as valid only in the domain of the representation of “truth.”

In one of his most convincing works,³⁶ Gianni Vattimo has developed this idea of constructed truth within the context of a certain order of representations in Nietzsche’s work on the “mask.” Vattimo demonstrates that for Nietzsche, “in the second Untimely Meditation, beyond the disguise of the decadent man that cannot take the initiative and dons a mask of stereotypical roles, ‘masks with only one expression’, we encounter a masking that is not only not connected with decadence, but on the contrary seems to be the only means of avoiding it: the definition and delimiting of the boundaries of a horizon of historical action which demands assuming some element of the historical being as ‘value’.”³⁷ Following Nietzsche’s lucid vision, the masking is not disguise or mediation (as in representations), but presents itself as the inevitable mode of human construction of the world. Precisely for that reason, Vattimo reminds us that “in the second Untimely Meditation, the overcoming of the decline of historicist civilization should come about by virtue of

³⁵ Ibid., p. 59.

³⁶ Gianni Vattimo, *Il soggetto e la maschera: Nietzsche e il problema della liberazione* (Milan: Bompiano, 1974).

³⁷ Vattimo, *Il soggetto e la maschera*, p. 23 (our translation).

'everlasting forces' such as art and religion, which are not at all ways of disguising true reality, but 'masks' in themselves, illusions, fictions. Civilization taken to be the model, the 'classic', is not contrary to decline as the world of the true, but rather eminently the world of fiction and mask. In spite of the fact that all of this raises some difficulties, it does not allow Nietzsche's discourse to be reduced simply to the distinction between a civilization of becoming, and therefore no fiction, and another where – because of the lack of creative forces – man disguises himself. Also, the first of these civilizations is a creation of masks, illusions and fictions. They are so in spite of confronting disguise, precisely because – in opposition to disguise – they do not want to be confused with reality; and they even disclose 'reality' itself in its guise of appearance, of a mask that does not want to be seen as such."³⁸ At this point, any intent to "disclose" the supposed truth through the Brutalist demonstration of the technical roots of building not only results in a futile demonstration, but almost a century and a half after the Nietzschean enlightenment, also seems pathetic. In the practice of Richter & Dahl Rocha, technique occupies, on the other hand, the same subordinate space that it occupied in the traditional practice of architecture, even setting aside the illusion of tectonics. Marco De Michelis reminds us that "the term *tectonic* was coined at the beginning of the 19th century as an instrument for reconstituting the lost unity of the architectonic organism by the combination and juxtaposition of building elements."³⁹ In the architecture of Richter & Dahl Rocha, on the other hand, the unity does not respond to the logic of such juxtapositions, and very often negates it.

In their residential project "Les Uttins," for example, the slabs of one of the main facades of the building seem to be suspended without any support, while on the rear facade, the brick wall (which seems at first sight to be a supporting wall) is fenestrated irregularly, making it difficult to understand its structural logic. With the La Prairie Clinic, the podium of the building is comprised of stonework like that used to retain the terraced vineyard slopes characteristic of the region around Montreux. However, instead of reinforcing its condition of weight (represented by the small windows), at the lower level, the building opens up in its full extension with the glass facade of a restaurant that belongs to a last band of material – clear and abstract – presenting the tectonic artifice of the bands of "stone." Furthermore, the presumably "rustic" condition of that same "stone" presents itself as a "mask" by showing the polished sides made visible as doorjambes. In the same way, in the center of the Nestlé Product Technology Centre at Singen, the facades of the building not only enunciate the condition of "extension" inherent in the building's structure, but also present themselves as two distinctly different "faces." The brick used on one of the facades is suspended over the continuous windows, and clearly "applied," as is revealed by the metal frames that support it. The lateral ends, on the other hand, are signs that literally indicate the function of the building. The roof of the New Meeting Place on the IMD campus in Lausanne is supported by off-center columns of the interior, while on the exterior, this tectonic logic is neither revealed nor is it completely disguised. It "tells" us that the

³⁸ Ibid., p. 40 (our translation).

³⁹ Marco De Michelis, "Morphing Metamorph," *Log: Observations on Architecture and the Contemporary City* 4 (Winter 2005): 10.

horizontal plane which encloses it is supported by the robust wooden vertical elements that act as *brise-soleils*.

The Swiss National Train Maintenance Center in Geneva is another telling example of the "double play" in which Richter & Dahl Rocha are engaged in relation to technical issues. On the one hand such issues are not denied, as with contemporary practice in thrall to a dominant geometrization, the "white cubes" of the first modernists, or architecture subordinated to formalist decisions, but neither do Richter & Dahl Rocha pretend that technique is the dominant parameter. It is quite evident that the distribution of "loads" in this industrial project does not follow the logic of its supports. On the contrary, the aluminum facing appears to hover lightly above, while the dark wood panel seems to be unsupported weight. This is because, in its full extension, the continuous window offers open vistas to the exterior for the workers inside. Nothing of the engineered structure of the building is expressed in its architecture. The elements that comprise this enclosure mask the interior space without pretending that it expresses its unity on the exterior. On the contrary, on the exterior there is a three-fold partition that does not exist in the interior. The materials work in opposition to one another, in such a way that the polished, clear, and reflective metallic surface of the roof is opposed to the rough, dark, and opaque surface of the wood. The latter is obviously the predominant element for the image of the building. It does not declare its materiality directly, but rather through a metaphoric process. Like the tragic or comic gestures on the masks worn by characters in the classical theatre, the rustic quality of the wooden blocks speak to us as they refer to, or "represent" the arduous, mechanical, and to a certain extent, primary condition of the manual labor going on inside.

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Past, Present, Future

Hannah Arendt has proposed the need to distinguish between the human "condition" and "nature," and insists that "human nature" entails the search for an essence, for the being of humans, and thus inevitably leads toward metaphysics, and ultimately, divinity. To avoid this path without necessarily attempting to deny it, the disciple of Heidegger and Husserl prefers to speak of specific conditions of the human. Following a Marxist tradition, albeit in a critical mode, Arendt recognizes among the most important of these conditions the capacity to work, to produce world, as distinct from labor which is the activity destined to reproduce the natural condition of life. To produce world is to produce objects that are not condemned to pass fleetingly through human existence only to return immediately to nature, such as with food, for example. To produce world is, according to Arendt, to produce objects that resist immediate consumption, and thus to resist time, to produce objects whose value resides precisely in the fact that they last even beyond the lifetime of the individuals who generated them. "It is indeed the mark of all laboring," she wrote, "that it leaves nothing behind, that the result of its effort is almost as quickly consumed as the effort is spent.... Insofar as the intellectual is indeed not a 'worker' – who like all other workers, from the humblest craftsman to the greatest artist, is engaged in adding one more, if possible durable, thing to the

human artifice – he resembles perhaps nobody so much as Adam Smith’s ‘menial servant’, although his function is less to keep the life process intact and provide for its regeneration than to care for the upkeep of the various gigantic bureaucratic machines whose processes consume their services and devour their products as quickly and mercilessly as the biological life process itself.... The products of work – and not the products of labor – guarantee the permanence and durability without which a world would not be possible at all.”⁴⁰ This distinction with respect to the role of work as a mode of constructing world in time and throughout time, is reinforced in an observation by Walter Benjamin in the same vein. In his *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, Benjamin wrote that “our image of happiness is indissolubly bound up with the image of redemption.... There is a secret agreement between past generations and the present one. Our coming was expected on earth. Like every generation that preceded us, we have been endowed with a weak Messianic power, a power to which the past has a claim....”⁴¹ The class struggle... is a fight for the crude and material things without which no refined and spiritual things could exist.... They manifest themselves in this struggle as courage, humor, cunning, and fortitude. They have retroactive force and will constantly call in question every victory, past and present.... As the flowers turn toward the sun, by dint of a secret heliotropism the past strives to turn toward the sun which is rising in the sky of history.”⁴²

Therefore, without work there can be neither duration nor time, because the instant consumption of the products of labor implies that human life remains trapped in the timeless cyclical flux of the voracious movement of nature towards its final stasis. Works of architecture are for society like the table or family vase, like the beloved pencil or the old sweater, like all the things and beings that accompany us and help us understand our own unity as individuals in spite of our perpetual transformation. Without those fixed points, without those imprints of human work, society is adrift in the timeless eternity of nature. Without those common possessions that we receive and leave behind as our heritage, the individuals that make up a generation lose the threads that unite them and by the force of entropy tend to be transformed into autonomous particles who even lose sight of their own human condition.

I believe that the work of Richter & Dahl Rocha belongs to those architectures understood to be foundational for the constitution of our world, as a privileged medium for the preservation of human sociability and historicity. Given the demand for immediate consumption and the general instability of the modern metropolitan condition, in addition to the acceleration of the process of dispersal of all values as a result of the unstoppable force of globalization, the capacity for resistance is under

40 Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993; 1st edition, 1958). “The reality and reliability of the human world rest primarily on the fact that we are surrounded by things more permanent than the activity by which they were produced, and potentially even more permanent than the lives of their authors. Human life, in so far as it is world-building, is engaged in a constant process of reification, and the degree of worldliness of produced things, which all together form the human artifice, depends upon their greater or lesser permanence in the world itself.”

41 Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), Thesis II, p. 253; “Über den Begriff der Geschichte,” completed in spring 1940, was first published in *Die neue Rundschau* 61/3 (1950).

42 pp. 254f.

siege, and, I would venture to say, along with it, the essence of the discipline of architecture. The vindication for architecture in the traditional institutional sense comes about because of the need to introduce within our conception of this activity the temporal role – what Mishima calls the vessel of time – which the discipline must assume. The institution of architecture entails, among other things, the possibility of receiving that “endowment” mentioned by Benjamin, introducing to it the traces of our own existence and bequeathing it once again to future generations. This transmission is impossible without common codes, although – like language – these can (and should) always be modified.

Adolf Loos pointed to the crux of this problem in his essay “Ornament and Crime.”⁴³ For Loos, because of the terms of its production, architecture could not easily assimilate itself to the processes of other commodities of more transitory utility. Following Boullé, the architect of the Michaelerplatz house believed that, to ensure that the exterior of a luxurious coat or a work of architecture would maintain its cultural relevance for the maximum length of time (that its use value would endure), the exterior had to possess a “resistant form” with respect to the passage of time. Assuming architecture to be an example of *Formermüdung*, or “resistant form,” Loos questioned the supposed absence of limits in the universal process of homogenization ensured by the market. To enter into the problem of time, and with it the need for “resistant form,” invokes the need to work within architecture as “institution,” that is, as the space of a social contract.

This is why an “institutional” practice such as that of Richter & Dahl Rocha can neither ignore the problem of its possible permanence (“turn towards the sun”) and limit itself to a pure present nor settle its account with history. It is this situation that enables the work to establish a dialogue with the masterworks of the past. In the West at least, these comprise a particular type of solution that facilitates transgenerational dialogue. Every creator, according to the polemical literary critic Harold Bloom, struggles to reach the level of the masterworks that preceded him or her, and only in reaching them can he or she consider a new opportunity: “There can be no strong, canonical writing without the process of literary influence, a process vexing to undergo and difficult to understand.... The anxiety of influence is not an anxiety about the father, real or literary, but an anxiety achieved by and in the poem, novel or play. Any strong literary work creatively misreads and therefore misinterprets a precursor text. An authentic canonical writer may or may not internalize her or his work’s anxiety, but that scarcely matters: the strongly achieved work is the anxiety.... Tradition is not only a handing-down or process of benign transmission; it is also a conflict between past genius and present aspiration, in which the prize is literary survival or canonical inclusion.”⁴⁴

That trans-generational dialogue, as well as the impact of the relationship between past and future on contemporary creative work is manifest in Richter & Dahl Rocha’s production. That preoccupation undoubtedly made an early appearance with Jacques Richter’s interest in the Tendenza group, whereas in the case of

43 Adolf Loos, “Ornament and Crime,” published in *Ornament and Crime: Selected Essays*, intro. Adolf Opel, trans. Michael Mitchell (Riverside, Calif.: Ariadne Press, 1998); originally trans. from German and ed. Marcel Ray, *Les cahiers d’aujourd’hui* 5 (1913): 247–256.

44 Harold Bloom, *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1994), p. 8.

Dahl Rocha, it was already apparent in his house in San Isidro, with its explicit references to Loos's *Raumplan*, the Mies of the Krefeld houses, and Argentine precedents such as that of Carlos Vilar. But that same preoccupation has been maturing in the universe of Richter & Dahl Rocha's recent work. Think, for example, of their inspired handling of apparently commonplace elements such as the *brise-soleils* designed for the office building at Route de Berne 46. The vertical elements that cover main facade may seem to repeat an inherited solution, one that has been applied in countless instances since Le Corbusier, and which the Brazilian architects developed in the early modern period. But in the hands of Richter & Dahl Rocha, this inheritance is inflected with an almost imperceptible variation: a small glass louver-like element that controls and filters light entering the building. The New Meeting Place on the IMD campus stands as another example of this open dialogue with the past. The existing structures on the campus did not dictate the scheme for the underlying structure that organizes the new building, but it moves carefully within the dimensions of the courtyard, establishes a continuity with the existing cornice, and engages it in conversation through the use of brick pillars on the angle evoking those that frame the original piece. Furthermore, Richter & Dahl Rocha's building does not strive for absolute novelty. In the elegant play between slender vertical elements and overhanging planes, it invokes the American Prairie School and its Californian successors of the 1940s, while echoing Oscar Niemeyer and Lúcio Costa's Brazilian pavilion for the 1939 New York World's Fair.

Perhaps most forceful of all is the example of Richter & Dahl Rocha's transformation of Jean Tschumi's 1958 Nestlé Headquarters. Here, history, and thus time, was the central problem. Considered of the best examples of modern architecture in Switzerland, the building was in dire need of updating, considering the fact that it is, so to speak, "alive" and the "aura" of the existing structure in addition to its landmark status demanded an extremely careful approach. The result, in spite of the functional and technical transformations geared to preserving the original appearance and facilitating its ongoing function as headquarters for a multinational corporation, offers not only a completely new reading of the original project and the 1970s addition (here, the role of the new circulation plan was decisive), but also incorporates into the building's legacy entirely new dimensions and absolutely novel moments. Richter & Dahl Rocha's design for the new Museum of Fine Arts in Lausanne (2004–05), with its pure volume suspended in space by minimal supports, invokes a history that runs the gamut from the adventurous experiments of the Russian constructivists to the systematic efforts of Mies van der Rohe. However, that is not to overlook the impact of Lina Bo Bardi's Art Museum in São Paulo, itself rooted in outstanding precedents like Niemeyer's museum in Brasília, and some recent works by Paulo Mendes da Rocha, for example. Going much further back in terms of references, Richter & Dahl Rocha's modest Forest Refuge stands as a sensitive reflection of continuities and breaks with the house/home as the basic unit of shelter. From its source in the mythical-universal form of the primeval hut to an ingenious rethinking of the double-gabled roof and rotated floor plan, their prototypical dwelling unit looks as far backward as it looks forward.

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...und Aschenbach empfand wie schon oftmals mit Schmerzen, daß das Wort die sinnliche Schönheit nur zu preisen, nicht wiederzugeben vermag.
Thomas Mann, *Death in Venice* (1908)⁴⁵

Bello es una palabra revolucionaria. Tiene que ver con las emociones, con la atracción, pero también con la búsqueda y la investigación. Herbert Marcuse ha escrito sobre este aspecto revolucionario de la belleza.
Jacques Herzog⁴⁶

The Principle of Hope

For those who are able to refuse the demand for spectacularity required by immediate consumption, and who are able to give themselves the necessary time to enjoy it, Richter & Dahl Rocha's architecture thrills, in intense and unique ways. But that intensity works upon our senses in the register of *pianissimo*, an almost inaudible whisper, in stark contrast to the "shock," the provocative shriek of the metropolitan *Nervenleben*. If one contemplates the work very attentively, it is possible to perceive the subtle resonance that signals the ontological difference between architecture and construction.

In his essay on Max Bill, Von Moos declared the architecture of the Swiss master to have been "an architecture devoid of utopian sentiment."⁴⁷ If we consider that utopia can only be expressed through the direct presentation of programs and/or forms conceived exclusively within the context of a future social or cultural formation, his assertion would be sound. But if we understand utopia as a nonexistent place, where the unattainable aspirations of the present can be expressed, then it is unfair to deny this dimension of Bill's architecture. The observation may, or rather should be extended to the appreciation of Richter & Dahl Rocha's work, particularly in the terms set forth by Ernest Bloch in *The Principle of Hope*,⁴⁸ where utopia contained within the most intense works of art does not reside in its explicit discourse, in its content, but in its ability to constitute itself as a source of hope. And precisely, following Baudelaire's prescient definition of modernity, beauty is above all – as Baudelaire would take delight in paraphrasing Stendhal – the *promise of happiness*. In his review of *The Principle of Hope*, Roland Aronson framed Bloch's position in this way: "[for Bloch] to hope, most simply put, is to anticipate a better world in the future – the 'still unbecome, still unachieved homeland' – and to act to create that world, based on real tendencies in the present."⁴⁹ Aronson further asserted that Bloch's project was in a sense a reaction to the fact that "philosophy has ignored the future, and thus has lacked the tools for discerning how the utopian function operates in the 'nearest nearness'

⁴⁵ *Death in Venice*, trans. Kenneth Burke (New York: Knopf, 1965), p. 76: "...and Aschenbach was distressed, as he had often been before, by the thought that words can only exalt sensuous beauty, not give it back" (our emendation of the translation); Thomas Mann, *Der Tod in Venedig, Romane und Erzählungen* (Berlin & Weimar: Aufbau-Verlag, 1975), p. 518; first published as *Der Tod in Venedig: Novelle* (Munich: Hyperion, 1912); .

⁴⁶ "Finos arquitectos constructores," interview with Jacques Herzog by Fredy Massad and Alicia Guerrero Yeste, *Summa+* 35 (February-March 1999): 112: "Beauty is a revolutionary word. It has to do with emotions, with attraction, but also with searching and investigation. Herbert Marcuse has written about this revolutionary aspect of beauty" (our translation).

⁴⁷ Von Moos, "Max Bill. A la búsqueda de la 'cabaña primitiva,'" p. 17.

⁴⁸ Ernest Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, trans. Neville Plaice, Stephen Plaice, and Paul Knight (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1986).

⁴⁹ Ronald Aronson, "Ernest Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*" (Review Essay) *History & Theory* 30/2 (May 1991): 226 (quoting from Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, p. 9).

of the present. But artistic genius grasps, and presents, material that is beyond 'what has previously been consciously given, what has previously been explicated and finally formed the world'.⁵⁰ "Every great work of art this still remains, except for its manifest character, impelled towards the latency of the other side, i.e., towards the contents of a future which had not yet appeared in its own time'.⁵¹

The significance of Baudelaire's "In Praise of Make-up" (1863) for understanding the depth of the issue of beauty has been pointed out by Franco Rella,⁵² who identifies what he calls the *enigma* of beauty, or the search for beauty as dissatisfaction. "The beautiful is also supernatural, and ornament, *la parure*, cosmetics, demonstrate 'a disgust' for that which simply is, and they express in this way a metaphysical anguish."⁵³ And paraphrasing Baudelaire, he continues describing those ephemeral adornments as "a new effort, more or less accomplished, towards the beautiful, any approximation towards an ideal, whose desire the unsatisfied human spirit relentlessly seeks."⁵⁴

To emphasize the point: the hope Bloch talks about is not limited to a purely metaphysical dimension. "In this view hope becomes a discourse of critique and social transformation. Hope makes the leap for us between critical education, which tells us what must be changed; political agency, which gives us the means to make change; and the concrete struggles through which change happens. Hope, in short, gives substance to the recognition that every present is incomplete. For theorists such as Bloch (Lerner, West and Kelley), hope is anticipatory rather than messianic, mobilizing rather than therapeutic. Understood in this way, the longing for a more humane society does not collapse into a retreat from the world but becomes a means to engage with present behaviors, institutional formations, and everyday practice. Hope in this context does not ignore the worst dimensions of human suffering, exploitation, and social relations; on the contrary... it acknowledges the need to sustain the 'capacity to see the worst and offer more than that for our consideration'.⁵⁵ In my judgment, through its commitment to the search for beauty, Architecture responds – in its central demand – to the construction of such hope. The work of Richter & Dahl Rocha, the varied aspects that unfold within it, come together around this idea. There is no cohesive force other than the search for beauty, which articulates the complex layers of demand, aspiration, and meaning that comprise it.

In the first place, this is a response to the chaos and ugliness of the contemporary metropolitan condition. We perceive this as the absolute absence of form, or at least as the tendency toward the dissolution of boundaries and the comprehensible structure of the traditional city. If the city's reason for being consists in its capacity to

50 Ibid. (quoting from Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, p. 126).

51 Ibid. (quoting from Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, p. 127).

52 Franco Rella; "Elogio della bellezza," Franco Rella, ed., *Forme e Pensiero del Moderno* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1989), p. 84 (our translation): "Anche il bello è sovranaturale, e l'ornamento, la parure, il maquillage, dimostrano "un disgusto" per ciò che semplicemente è, ed esprimono così un'ansia metafisica; see also *Bellezza e verità*, ed. Franco Rella (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1990), and *L'enigma della bellezza* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1991).

53 Rella, "Elogio della bellezza," p. 84.

54 Ibid.: "uno sforzo nuovo, più o meno felice verso il bello, una approssimazione qualsiasi verso un ideale, il cui desiderio sollecita senza posa lo spirito umano insoddisfatto."

55 Henry Giroux, "When Hope is Subversive," *Tikkun* 19/6 (November-December 2004): 63.

engender a common social project, then the contemporary hypermetropolis, on the other hand, is the non-place where all social connections are broken. And, if to restore them the project entails the constitution of a recognizable urban unity, its absence in the hypermetropolitan condition generates in its inhabitants total freedom and at the same time, total and distressing loneliness.

However, the dissatisfaction with *beauty* is not produced by its lack as much as by what it contains that is inaccessible to us, by its over-determination. So impossible to apprehend is the beautiful that in spite of the fact that it is apparently codifiable, given that it does not reduce itself to subjective impressions, all attempts to reproduce it strictly through its codes are doomed to fail. And works produced in this manner are almost always born with the appearance of death. As I have discussed elsewhere,⁵⁶ in its completeness, *beauty* constitutes itself, in this sense, as denunciation, because by virtue of being uniquely localized and identified it illuminates its absence beyond its limits. In the context of the contemporary hypermetropolis, and particularly in the case of its most underdeveloped expressions, beauty makes ugliness even more striking and inadmissible, as Marc Cousins has formulated it.⁵⁷ It is the possibility of the beautiful, the hope for beauty that urges us to avoid the inhumanity of ugliness. Or, in Adorno's words: "Art must take up the case of what is proscribed as ugly, though no longer in order to integrate or mitigate it or to reconcile it with its own existence through humor that is more offensive than anything repulsive. Rather, in the ugly, art must denounce the world that creates and reproduces the ugly in its own image, even if in this too the possibility persists that sympathy with the degraded will reverse into concurrence with degradation."⁵⁸

Rem Koolhaas, who has launched a lucid critique of those who invoke the ancient concept of mimesis in a superficial manner, proposed the analogy: "You are in a mess, we are in a mess, you are unstructured, we are unstructured, you are vulgar, we are vulgar, you are chaotic, we are chaotic.... The only relationship that architects can have with chaos is by taking their rightful place in the army of those committed to prevent it, and fail."⁵⁹ The demand for beauty that architecture proposes to us must be read in this first sense, as a critique of the rhizomatic expansion of fragments of urbanity without scale, boundaries, or articulation. And in opposition to that expansion, not with a totalitarian gesture that pretends to the original *One*, no less fragmentary a fragmentary action, which, conscious of its own impotence, proposes those crystallizations that like all forms of life are impulses in opposition to entropy.

Following Augustine, for Simone Weil, "The first of the soul's needs, the one which touches most nearly its eternal destiny, is order, that is to say, a texture of social relationships such that no one is compelled to violate imperative obligations.... We love the beauty of the world, because we sense behind it the presence of something akin to that wisdom we should like to possess to slake our thirst for

56 Jorge F. Liernur, "Toward a Disembodied Architectural culture," *Anybody*, ed. Cynthia Davidson (New York: Any Corporation, 1997), p. 196.

57 Marc Cousins, "The Ugly," in *AA Files* 28 (1995): 3–6.

58 Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 48.

59 Rem Koolhaas, in "Finding Freedoms: Conversations with Rem Koolhaas," by Alejandro Zaera Polo, *El Croquis* 53 (1992): 16 and 27.

good. In a minor degree, really beautiful works of art are examples of 'ensembles' in which independent factors concur, in a manner impossible to understand, so as to form a unique thing of beauty."⁶⁰ At the origin of the conception of the beautiful in the West, in his *Poetics*, Aristotle conceives of it precisely in this register, confronted with the abyss of a formless and incomprehensible universe: "A beautiful object, whether it be a living organism or any whole composed of parts must not only have an orderly arrangement of parts, but must also be of a certain magnitude; for beauty depends on magnitude and order."⁶¹ Furthermore, Aristotle claims that *social beauty* depends on the correct relationship between the number of inhabitants and the size of the city.⁶² But the demand for beauty may have another reading in terms of the social. The cohesion, boundary, and order required by Aristotle had already been described by pre-Socratic philosophers such as Heraclitus and Pythagoras as *harmony*.⁶³ Harmony is, above all, *assemblage*, the condition of reunion of parts. And, underlying the appearance, what determines that assemblage of things, the totality of things, is a network of relationships that are established among all of relationships in the universe. The basis for those relationships is established by the number or amount, and because of this, the relationship between the object and the world is an inextricable aspect of the condition of the beautiful as it has been constructed historically.

Different from the perception of that which is pleasant to the senses, that which belongs to the subjective realm of the aesthetic, *beauty* only exists in the social dimension of the human condition. Hans-Georg Gadamer writes: "Despite this, the kind of truth that we encounter in the experience of the beautiful does unambiguously make a claim to more than merely subjective validity. Otherwise it would have no binding truth for us. When I find something beautiful, I do not simply mean that it pleases me in the same sense that I find a meal to my taste. When I find something beautiful, I think that it 'is' beautiful. Or, to adapt a Kantian expression, 'I demand everyone's agreement'."⁶⁴

The claim for the *beautiful* is therefore an attempt to overcome the individualistic and subjective regression, both at the merely aesthetic level, and also on the level of the not necessarily shared enlightenment of the artistic. One condition for the existence of *beauty* is, in other words, the condition of its articulation – as a category – within a global cultural construction. It is true that the work of art does not link or reduce itself to the idea of the beautiful; and, furthermore, the authoritarian temptation that underlies the concept of beauty itself cannot be ignored. But precisely for that reason, to make it productive, we must understand it as a paradox, as an open problem. In referring to the ontological characteristics of commodities, Gadamer has written that "it is fitting, therefore, that the only "things" we know are mass-produced in factories, marketed with intensive advertising, and finally thrown away when they are broken. They cannot help us

60 Simone Weil, *The Need for Roots: Prelude to a Declaration of Duties Toward Mankind*, intro. T. S. Eliot, trans. Arthur Wills (New York & London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 10f.

61 Aristotle, *Poetics*, quoted in Ernesto Grassi, *Die Theorie des Schönen in der Antike* (Cologne: Dumont, 1980), p. 183.

62 Aristotle, *Politics*; quoted in Grassi, *Die Theorie des Schönen in der Antike*, p. 184.

63 See Jan Patothcka, *L'Art et le Temps* (Vienna: Presses Pocket/P.O.L., 1992).

64 Hans-Georg Gadamer, "Art and Imitation," *The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays*, trans. Nicholas Walker (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), pp. 102f.

to experience what things are. Through them we are unable to experience the presence of what is essentially irreplaceable, there is nothing historical about them and they have no life."⁶⁵

For this reason, in the current condition of one-dimensional homogenization and of reproducibility, the *beautiful* constitutes itself as an impregnable core. Everything can be consumed, and particularly prone to that risk are the artistic expressions that present themselves as virulent and contingent negations of the existing. Because as such, they feed the series of infinite replacements required by the machinery of capitalist production. In that machinery, the abominable but inevitable destiny of the avant-garde is publicity. *Beauty* confronts that consumability because the agreement, the human reunion it is based on, beyond subjective sensations, does not have the limit of the present moment, nor even those of its own time. We would not ask ourselves about beauty if we did not receive perplexing traces of its experience in other generations, and even other geographies. If the work of Richter & Dahl Rocha can be faulted, it would be on account of its beauty. In it we perceive the powerful will of "reunion," of "order," of "harmony," of "balance," of "proportion," of "stability," of "atemporality," of "restraint," of "gracefulness," of "elegance," of "certainty," and of "consistency," that characterize works we call beautiful. Of course these are insignificant attributes for an important part of contemporary critique, but what for some constitutes a demerit, becomes for the rest of us a rare and necessary virtue.

All of the work done for the renovation of Nestlé Headquarters, one of the best examples of this virtue, attests to Richter & Dahl Rocha's powerful commitment to the orchestration of the parts of a whole whose unity has been challenged by previous interventions – even their interventions in the typical floor plan, which were directed to the subtle highlighting of an intent not fully realized in Tschumi's original building. Echoing the grand Chambord staircase and the entrance canopy, referencing the formal allusions of the floor plan, reinterpreting with new materials and diverse morphologies the magnificent columns of the arcade of the Tschumi building, the new Nestlé restaurant constitutes a moment of great intensity. Probably inherited from this strong referent, the curves of ample radius were rehearsed for the first time in the Prilly-Lausanne building complex, becoming dominant in the La Prairie Clinic extension. Here they act as a device to connect an extremely complex and diverse group of pre-existing buildings. La Prairie also accounts for the attention given to light as a modeling and organizing matter of the work. The main function of the clinic, the care of the body, calls for light that has a soft presence appearing from unexpected sources or filtered through control systems.

The synecdoche, or the careful relationship of the parts to the whole, is another of the conditions for achieving beauty. The way this materializes in Richter & Dahl Rocha's "Les Uttins" development reminds us of the fantastic work by Bruno Taut in Britz. The building group is defined by a series of variations on a typology which all refer to one another. When the building is facing the landscape as the main determining event, the pieces are capable of disappearing as autonomous

65 *Ibid.*

elements, and giving way to the totality, to their presentation as a whole, through the flow from one end to the other of the mezzanine floors. But to this unified reading, others are added. To begin with, the several blocks comprising the site. From this position it is possible to read the double-front terraces as bridges between the units, which are identified as independent brick volumes. Finally, it is also clear that those blocks allow units that are independent of one another to form a unit, with unique characteristics as is clearly expressed by the irregular rhythm of the apertures.

There is no beauty without a clear determination of the boundaries of the work. These may be established by a formal structure with an interior centrality, that is to say organized as an identifiable figure (the cone of a mountain), or by definite signs (the fingers of the hand, classical cornices). The two alternatives are illustrated in the work of Richter & Dahl Rocha: on the one hand, buildings such as the New Learning Center on the IMD campus, the New Museum of Contemporary Art in Lausanne, and the Restaurant for Nestlé; on the other hand, apertures that signal the end of the bands or stripes used for the La Prairie Clinic extension, the frames surrounding the housing at “Les Uttins,” and the stone walls on both ends of the glazed facades of the Nestlé Headquarters building.

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Tact

I would like to pursue one final aspect of the work of Richter & Dahl Rocha, given that it involves a nuance which imbues their architecture with a highly unusual quality. The order, harmony, definition of boundaries, relative timelessness, and willful consistency of form – which together constitute the “signs” of modern beauty – are not enough to distinguish this work from that of other architects who also seek and attain these objectives. We could turn again to Gramsci for a provocative reflection that sheds light on this problem: “It is too easy to be original by doing the opposite of what everyone else is doing; this is just mechanical. It is too easy to speak differently from others, to play with neologisms, whereas it is difficult to distinguish oneself from others without doing acrobatics.”⁶⁶ Indeed, the work of Richter & Dahl Rocha carefully avoids any type of acrobatics, to the point that it demands considerable attentiveness to be appreciated by the observer. Their buildings actually seem to reject grandiloquence, to defy blunt definitions, to avoid the domain of the “manifesto” occupied by their contemporaries whose works are consumed as “advanced” or (trans)avant-garde products. The technological feat, the formal surprise, the absolute denial, the novel structure: these phenomena are absolutely foreign to Richter & Dahl Rocha’s work. They inhabit, we would say, the space of *neutral* production. But we would be mistaken in assuming that there are negative connotations for the attribute of neutrality. Roland Barthes dedicated one of his last lecture courses at the Collège de France (1977–78) to the subject,

⁶⁶ Gramsci, “Sincerity (or Spontaneity) and Discipline,” *Selections from Cultural Writings: Problems of Criticism*, ed. David Forgacs and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, trans. William Boelhower (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1985), p. 214.

and from his in-depth analysis emerged an illuminating definition: “I call Neutral everything that baffles the paradigm.”⁶⁷ The “paradigm,” for Barthes, is the “motor of meaning,” a certain, specific meaning. The paradigm operates within the opposition of clear extremes, among which a conflict is established: it requires the maximum profundity and attainable aspirations. In one or the other direction, the clear meaning upon which the categorical affirmation or negation is founded is thus established. The avant-garde and the moral act upon the paradigm. The Neutral is a state of provoked dysfunction of the paradigm, and therefore leaves us uncertain. Barthes concludes that “the Neutral doesn’t refer to ‘impressions’ of grayness, of ‘neutrality’, of indifference. The Neutral – my Neutral – can refer to intense, strong, unprecedented states. ‘To outplay the paradigm’ is an ardent, burning activity.... [The Neutral is] suspended in front of the hardenings of both faith and certitude.... [The subject] finds himself confronted with an aporia: wishing for a logical ‘monster’, the right mix of emotion and distance.... In short, a well-behaved Eros, ‘restrained’, ‘reserved’.”⁶⁸

I have already noted that the work of Richter & Dahl Rocha does not present itself aggressively, but neither is it absolutely silent, in the sense of a total absence of the intent to communicate. Barthes’ distinction between the Latin verbs denoting silence is meaningful here. Barthes points to an “interesting nuance” in the difference between the Latin verbs *tacere* (verbal silence) and *silere* (“stillness, absence of movement and of noise”).⁶⁹ *Tacere* deals with the human domain of the word, verbal expression about the human condition, whereas *silere* connotes the mute serenity typical of objects and natural phenomena (“the night, the sea, the winds”). It would be valid, in that sense, to say that the silence in Richter & Dahl Rocha’s work is that of *silere*. But, how do you reconcile *silere* – in the end an extreme, affirmative situation – with that “baffling of the paradigm” that would consist in the option for neutrality, which in my view characterizes their architecture. To describe the state of equilibrium that is opposed to unstable representation, and to avoid transforming silence into a stable element of the paradigm, “the Neutral would be defined not by permanent silence, which, being systematic, dogmatic, would become the signifier of an affirmation (‘I am systematically taciturn’), but by the minimal expenditure of a speech act meant to neutralize silence as a sign.”⁷⁰ I maintain that Richter & Dahl Rocha imbue the work with *silere* in such a manner that it is presented to us in the “state of equilibrium” characteristic of beauty itself, but adjusting or reducing the operation to the maximum possible to the point where silence is neutralized as sign.

Among the many manifestations of the neutral that Barthes explored in his lecture course, I would like to draw particular attention to what he refers to as “the principle of tact.”⁷¹ In a universe mandated by the paradigm, the tactful is

⁶⁷ Roland Barthes, *The Neutral: Lecture Course at the College de France (1977-1978)*, trans. Rosalind E. Krauss and Denis Hollier (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), p. 6; originally published as *Le Neutre, de Roland Barthes, Notes de cours au Collège de France, 1977-1978, texte établi, annoté et présenté par Thomas Clerc* (Paris: Éditions Du Seuil, 2002).

⁶⁸ Barthes, *The Neutral*, pp. 7 and 14–16.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 23f.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 29ff.

unimaginable: the culture we construct is expected to be categorical, affirmative, virile. Tactfulness is a feminine principle, therefore weak, secondary, irrelevant. A tactful man is the object of censure, as he occupies a dubious state between man and woman. As Barthes explains it, “the principle of tact is: a pleasure [*jouissance*] in analysis, a verbal operation that frustrates expectation,... a perversion that plays with the useless (nonfunctional) detail.”⁷² The principle of tact is therefore a kind of politeness, to the extent that it is based in the idea of a pleasurable and voluntary concession to the other. As in the gesture of politeness, the tactful treatment of a work consists in its ability to comprise a certain stroke of need: on the contrary, the paradigmatic manifestation of the discourse beyond the requirements of life that provide meaning to the works tries to capture the attention of the other. Furthermore, Barthes proposes: “I would suggest calling the nonviolent refusal of reduction, the parrying of generality by inventive, unexpected, nonparadigmatizable behavior, the elegant and discreet flight in the face of dogmatism, in short, the principle of tact, I would call it, all being said: sweetness.”⁷³ In light of Barthes’ observations, many courteous gestures in the work of Richter & Dahl Rocha have been revealed in my foregoing remarks, but it is worth calling attention to two other particularly notable cases. One is the way in which in the New Meeting Place on the IMD campus emerges from within the preexisting construction, occupying the exterior space by means of a gentle widening of the floor plan that surrounds – like a protective embrace – the grove of Centennial trees in the park. The other, perhaps more moving example, is the resurrection of the unbuilt cupola Jean Tschumi designed to surmount his double-spiral stairway in the Nestlé Headquarters building. The intent was to illuminate and complete that magnificent example from the history of modern architecture. Given the diameter of the opening over the stairwell, a glazed opening at that scale would have necessitated a cumbersome structure contradicting the architects’ intent, in the sense that Barthes construed as the minimal expenditure of a speech act meant to neutralize silence as a sign. Therefore, Richter & Dahl Rocha sought to calibrate their intervention by determining the maximum dimensions of commercial glass available to them, and fabricating a funnel-shaped Fiberglas skylight to mediate the difference between the aperture itself and the glazed oculus, to achieve a presence whose maximum intensity is reached precisely where it is reduced to almost total absence: “to baffle the paradigm” by mediating the hardness of steel to achieve the softest of light.

⁷² Ibid., p. 29.

⁷³ Ibid., p. 36.