Architectural Anti-Mimesis

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“Le concept de mimesis n’est pas seulement insuffisant, mais radicalement faux.”

Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari: „Capitalisme et schizophrénie - Mille plateaux”, p. 374

Does the east façade of Herzog and de Meuron’s Schaulager in Basel (fig. 1) resemble the east façade of Le Corbusier’s Chapel of Notre Dame du Haut in Ronchamp (fig. 2)? Did mimesis or imitation occur between these two works of architecture? In this essay, I argue that imitation did not occur here or indeed between any two works of architecture. I make this claim by situating and considering architecture within a relational ontology informed by the philosophy of Gilles Deleuze. Imitation does not feature as a concept within this ontology; instead, I will show that the concept of haecceity – a term coined by the scholastic philosopher Johannes Duns Scotus denoting “thisness” – and the Deleuzian concept of “becoming” are more appropriate to a realistic analysis of architecture.

Ferdinand de Saussure’s “Course in General Linguistics”, published in 1916, but based on earlier lectures, states: “In the language itself, there are only differences. Even more important than that is the fact that, although in general a difference presupposes positive terms between which the difference holds, in a


language there are only differences, and no positive terms.” These words propose a kind of general theory of relativity, and they imply a profound shift in the ontology of the world. As Gilles Deleuze, the most effective promulgator (to date) of this shift, states in his earliest published work, what this means is that “relations are external to their terms.” At bottom, the terms of any relation are not of primary interest. It is the relations between terms which are philosophically and ontologically primary. One way of saying this is to use the word “fold”, as Deleuze does in his book on Leibniz. The significance of the fold is not that it comes to topologically transform a sheet or a plane, but rather that the fold comes first. There is nothing other than folds within folds to infinity, and the sheet or the plane is an after-effect of those folds. The fold comes first and makes the sheet. Things, objects, subjects are “merely” the after-effect of the fold, or the event. To put it in Derridean terms, they are the after-effect of “différance”. Or, to put it in Nietzschean terms following Deleuze’s early book on Nietzsche, meaning and sense are the after-effect of a “differential element from which its significance is derived (...)”.

In a short essay in Eduardo Cadava’s book “Who Comes After the Subject?” Deleuze makes the following point about how concepts (such as that of resemblance and mimesis) relate to their field of effectiveness: “A philosophical concept fulfils several functions in fields of thought that are themselves defined by internal variables. There are also external variables (states of things, moments in history), in a complex relation with the internal variables and the functions. This means that a concept does not die simply when one wants it to, but only when new functions in a new field discharge it. This is also why it is never very interesting to criticize a concept: it is better to build the new functions and discover the new fields that make it useless or inadequate.” Deleuze’s answer to “who comes after the subject?” is that the concept of the subject does not die, but rather becomes useless or inadequate because of the creation of new fields of concepts which interrelate with each other in a different way. It is the task of the philosopher to create these new concepts and fields, and he speaks here of a “transcendental field without subject” within which the subject – and with it the object and representation – does not appear, and therefore becomes useless. This transcendental field without subject, object or representation gets laid out most thoroughly in the “mechanosphere” of Deleuze’s and Félix Guattari’s “A Thousand Plateaus”. The mechanosphere is the name given by them to an entire ontology and epistemology of new concepts which are set out in this book. Following Foucault, ontology and epistemology – the question of being and the question of knowledge – are the same thing, since all being is always already related to knowledge. There is no primitive access to being prior to knowledge, this being one of Deleuze’s criticisms of phenomenology. This is symptomatic of Deleuze’s avowed “constructivism” or, as Quentin Meillassoux would say – being critical – his “correlationism”: things, including knowledge, always happen for Deleuze as a correlation between what an old ontology would call subject and object, which in this new ontology get evaporated or treated as an after-effect of something more primary. This mechanosphere is resolutely anti-mimetic, anti-representational and opposed to the notion of resemblance. As Deleuze and Guattari state in Plateau 10 entitled “Becoming Intense”, “no art is imitative, no art can be imitative or figurative”. This is because art (and everything) is concerned with “becomings”, or events – what they term “haecceities”. What may be “interpreted” and “given meaning” as imitation or resemblance is, in the reality of the mechanosphere, an assemblage or conjunction of two multiplicities whereby the one sets itself in relation with the other – and “vice versa”. This means that the question of the original and resemblance becomes unimportant or uninteresting. Deleuze and Guattari are here close to Blanchot’s “Two Versions of the Imaginary”, where the image, that which supposedly
comes after that which it represents, in fact is shown to be that which grants the very possibility of what we would like to be sure is the original. The “becomings” of which Deleuze and Guattari write are “machines” or assemblages (“dispositives” in the French) which occur as events. Architecturally, we can say that architecture occurs as the event or assemblage of the interplay of us and the environment in which we live. This idea needs to be understood in its full implications. There is no pre-existing “subject” which comes to inhabit an “object” (i.e. a building or an environment). What comes first is the symbiosis of the two, what Deleuze and Guattari call a “block of co-existing”, which means that in this ontology (or epistemology) the subject and the object do not exist prior to what we could call the particular “individuality” of architecture. What is prior is the interplay (i.e. architecture), the relations between the terms, not the terms themselves (subject/object, or inhabitant/building). Assemblages – and this is something which gets ignored by interpretations of Deleuze still in hock to an outmoded objectivist ontology – are always “social”. This is something Deleuze emphasises in his “Foucault” book, and which he gets directly from Foucault. “A Thousand Plateaus” is so resolutely concerned with the interplays between the social and the material that we could call it an entire anthropology, were it not for the fact that it is precisely the topic of man or human (“anthropos”) which is called into question here, as we will see below. Architecture is like the interplay of the wasp and the orchid. Deleuze and Guattari give this example of a “becoming” several times in “A Thousand Plateaus”. This interplay is a participation between two entirely different things, which makes these different things possible. The interplay gives the wasp and the orchid their very possibility of existence, since they cannot exist without each other. Again, it is the relation between the two of them, this interplay, which is primary. The terms of the relation – the wasp itself, the orchid itself – are secondary to the event which occurs between them. This raises the question of resemblance: after all, is it not the case that the orchid “resembles” the wasp in order to attract it? The answer given is that resemblance has nothing to do with it, except within a conventional mode of looking (a conventional ontology) that assumes the pre-existence of either the wasp to the orchid or vice versa. Rather, their interplay is some sort of co-evolution, a “block of becoming” or a haecceity. Architecture, in turn, is such an “haecceity”. Deleuze and Guattari give other examples – a horse falling in the street, or a dog running in the road, or a cat hunting at five o’clock. These things have to be understood as a single individuality, all at once: “horse-cart-cobble stones-street” or “dog-running-in-the-road” or “cat-at-five-o’clock”. And architecture therefore has to be understood as us-and-environment in an intimate and pre-existing real correlation: we are always already within it, within the relation as terms of a relation that do not pre-exist that interplay. As Deleuze and Guattari say: “(...) you will yield nothing to haecceities unless you realise that that is what you are, and that you are nothing but that.”

The work of Herzog & de Meuron constitutes – often – just such a haecceity. Their architecture is an assemblage (“dispositive”), a machine made up of many particles of different types – memory, space, materiality, the visitor or inhabitant themselves, literary allusions – a machine with which it would not so much be said that we are engaged, but rather a machine that we are (Deleuze and Guattari quote Virginia Wolf: “The thin dog is running in the road, this dog is the road.”). If we take an obvious example such as the façade of the Schaulager, this should therefore not be seen as imitative of the east side of Ronchamp, as Stanislaus von Moos has argued. What the architects are doing is not repeating the “form” of the earlier building; nor are they recapitulating a process of design; rather, they are establishing the possibility of the event of architecture – a haecceity – which occurs at Schaulager and within which there is a Ronchamp-becoming. How does this non-resemblance work at Schaulager (fig. 1) and Ronchamp (fig. 2)? The scale and disposition of the east-facing
entrance façade of Schaulager, when occurring as “event”, resonates with the east façade of Ronchamp, initially in respect of the overhang and the encircling wings. As elsewhere in Herzog & de Meuron’s work, once caught in the grip of Schaulager, one has a very odd sense of “déjà-vu”, just as Proust, at certain points, manages to evoke in us that same “unheimlich” feeling of déjà-vu by means of a resonance back to a previous point in his novel. Herzog & de Meuron do this, for instance, at the Tate Modern by means of the Turbine Hall’s resonance with other similarly scaled and disposed semi-internal spaces in London, such as Westminster Hall. At Schaulager it is the heard “sound” of the building that allows the drama of the event to occur most clearly. The upper part of the east façade of Schaulager appears to be a solid sheet of white-painted steel welded together on site, and this acts as a massive resonator, causing the whole of the space to hum in a most disconcerting way. I do not know where the hum at Schaulager comes from; I think that the steel sheet is possibly echoing and acting as a sounding board for the electrical cables of the tramlines immediately adjacent on the street (a technical issue the architects would be familiar with from their Basel signal box projects). Whatever the mysterious source, this hum is like the hum one will have experienced elsewhere; it relates to a previous art gallery project by the same architects – Tate Modern Turbine Hall, where, for a long time, the adjacent electricity substation caused a noticeable hum. But as strongly, it relates to the other events which Schaulager engages, namely that of standing-sheltered-by-Ronchamp.

In what way does this event of sound function at Ronchamp? To answer this, one needs to visit it on a Sunday morning, standing within the east façade, when the bells of the other Ronchamp church in the valley are being rung after mass. Le Corbusier has arranged the east end of the chapel as a giant resonator, which gathers the sound of the bells from the valley below and re-projects them towards the visitor. This event, caused by an extremely considered state of affairs, is one where a sense of orientation and source is momentarily lost since Le Corbusier’s chapel itself appears to be ringing; as if, together with the votive statue of the Virgin hovering within the wall above you, there were a set of bells there in the east façade. But of course we know there is not.

In both these pieces of architecture – which I define here as the haecceity of the event – there is a constant building-becoming of us and a human-becoming of buildings. This to-and-fro, this “unnatural participation” or symbiosis between what we habitually call subject and object or human and building, this becoming (“devenir” in Deleuze’s and Guattari’s original French) “is” architecture. In other words, there is an entirely different ontology of architecture implied by the work of Herzog & de Meuron and Le Corbusier – an architecture of machinic interplay, of the human-becoming of buildings and the building-becoming of humans. Except that “human-becoming” is not a term Deleuze and Guattari would use. What is it that one is becoming in these circumstances? Perhaps, as they argue, it is a question of “woman-becoming”. Why woman-becoming? Because it is impossible for man to become. “Man” cannot become in this way because the concept of man – a majoritarian concept, a controlling concept – only makes sense within a now-outmoded ontology. What can become must in some way be a minority, which does not mean a numerical minority but rather that which is (traditionally) given second place. We must allow ourselves to become something other than “man” in order to participate in this ontology, in this haecceity of architecture. Two questions might be asked of this analysis. Firstly, what authorises this particular interpretation of Schaulager in respect of Ronchamp? After all, if one were to approach Schaulager from another direction, say from the car park at the rear rather than the overhanging main entrance at the front, one’s subjective impressions might well be entirely different. Rather than an interplay with the work of Le Corbusier, one might instead see the building as a huge block of soil raised up out of
the surrounding field (fig. 3). The play here is not so much with another piece of architecture, but more with the situation in which the building finds itself. I would make several points in relation to this: a) this play, again, is not related to any concept or deployment of mimesis. Rather, an interplay has been set up between the building and its immediate surroundings. b) This interplay does not begin from fixed pre-existing terms, but rather the terms (the building, and the surroundings) only occur as a result of the interplay between them. Schaulager does not respond to a pre-existing site, but rather creates its own site by setting itself off against something which it itself creates, just like the orchid and the wasp. And c), the radical differences in interpretation speak to the efficacy of this ontology of architecture. For if architecture is regarded as an haecceity which each of us participates in, then what might mark a strong piece of architecture is its ability to call forth an indefinite number of rich interpretations in those who come to inhabit or engage with it. The architectural interplay between people and place differs according to the prejudices and happenstances that people bring to it, just as it can be argued that great works of literature – one thinks of Shakespeare – are great precisely because they open an infinitely rich set of possible interpretations. How do they do this? – precisely by understanding – implicitly or explicitly – that it is not the terms of the relationships (for example, one particular interpretation) which defines the thing, but rather the setting up of relationships which can allow many different terms to flourish.
Secondly, one might ask what justification there is in linking the built work of Herzog & de Meuron with the philosophy of Deleuze and Guattari. After all, they are not on record as having themselves made a connection with French philosophy in the way that they have engaged with, say, the work of Hans-Georg Gadamer. My argument here is not, however, to draw such a direct link. Rather, I am interested in how – if architecture is considered within a differential ontology of the type which Deleuze and Guattari outline – what appears to be a resemblance drawn between two works of architecture in fact becomes something entirely different, and the question of mimesis then disappears. There is, however, a transverse linkage to be made, which runs via the topic of play and the playful character of Herzog & de Meuron’s work. When talking about their Allianz Arena (fig. 4) in Munich, Jacques Herzog has stated: “I love football (...) I also played for a long time myself, and today I am a passionate spectator in the stadium”; and “[i]nteraction, reinforcing emotions, is the most important aspect in all our projects(...)”; and “Pierre de Meuron and I played together as children(...)”. This tells us that what interests them is not the building as object, but rather the event which is architecture.

We could say analogously: if our topic of investigation were football, then it would be assumed that we were not interested in the football as a round object made of leather stitched together. Of course, some people are legitimately interested in the football as such an object that fulfils certain technical and other objective requirements. It is just that this objective concern is recognised as rather remote from an interest in football per se. If we say we are interested in football, that does not generally mean we are interested in the football, but rather in football as a series of playful relationships between the players, the ball, the pitch, the spectators and of course the stadium (the Allianz Arena or any other), but also the rules, the myths, the memories, the loyalties and many other particles of varying types which go to make up football. All these named terms occur only within and are given validity only within the playful relationships which are, in this ontology, football. To conclude the analogy: no less should we regard architecture per se not as an object which resembles another building or another object (the Allianz Arena itself looks like a football!) but rather as the set of relationships of which these objects are a derived part. This transverse linkage can also be extended to the philosophy of Gadamer. He,
too, speaks of play as having the same ontology as the work of art, and in particular the same ontology as architecture. In his magnum opus “Truth and Method” he states, in the chapter entitled “Play as the clue to ontological explanation” that, in the end, “the movement of play as such has, as it were, no substrate” („Die Spielbewegung als solche ist gleichsam ohne Substrat.”). This lack of substrate of play is the moment where he acknowledges, exactly as Deleuze and Guattari do, the primacy of difference or relation over the terms of those relations. What Gadamer therefore also does – necessarily so, since it is implied in all relational ontologies – is to question mimesis; in contrast to Deleuze’s and Guattari’s more radical approach, the way he does this is to recast the notion of mimesis and unlink it, essentially, from the idea of imitation or resemblance: “The concept of mimesis (...) did not mean a copy so much as the appearance of what is presented.” („Der Begriff der Mimesis (...) meinte nicht so sehr Abbildung, als die Erscheinung des Dargestellten.”)

Within Deleuze’s and Guattari’s playful ontology, mimesis thought of as imitation is a non-question. Mimesis does not figure as significant within the operation of the field of variables and functions which make up this philosophy. There is no original thing or object which comes to be resembled by the second object which the architect is supposedly miming. Nor is there some process of nature which comes to be mimicked by the process of design. Firstly, because there is no object. Architecture is not of the status of objects, but rather is “une machine à habiter” – a machine not for living “in” (as often poorly translated into English), but rather a machine for or of living, an always-social assemblage (“dispositive”). Secondly, nor are these events of architecture mimed or copied. As Deleuze and Guattari state: “No art is imitative, no art can be imitative or figurative. Suppose a painter ‘represents’ a bird: this is in fact a becoming-bird that can occur only to the extent that the bird itself is in the process of becoming something else, a pure line and pure colour. Thus imitation self-destructs, since the imitator unknowingly enters into a becoming that conjugates with the unknowing becoming of that which he or she imitates.” What is happening with Ronchamp-Schaulager is not a formal transposition of a shape of enclosure from one place to another, but the Ronchamp-becoming of the event of Schaulager and the Schaulager-becoming of the event of Ronchamp. Within the ontology I am outlining here, these are not buildings, but the always-already occurring event of the haecceity of us. We call these types of haecceity architecture because they include buildings and environments within their activity, just as one would call music not the pure sound, but rather the interplay of the sound and the person, the sound-becoming of woman and the woman-becoming of sound; just as one would call art not the fresco on the wall but the event of one-looking-at-the-fresco. These events are already what Deleuze and Guattari call multiplicities, multiplicities which include us as well as many other particles such as memory, space, material, concepts (...) Ronchamp only occurs as us, and Schaulager only occurs as us. This means that as soon as there is some connection between the two (for instance, we visit Schaulager on Saturday and Ronchamp on Sunday) the desire of the architects for a becoming that infects each of the events is realised. There is no metaphor or abstraction posited here in the Ronchamp-becoming of the event of Schaulager and the Schaulager-becoming of the event of Ronchamp. Rather, this is what actually can happen as a real event. What is unreal, abstract and derived is the object; what is unreal, abstract and derived is the resemblance of one object to another; and what great architects like Le Corbusier and Herzog & de Meuron do is to quite deliberately work instead with the possibilities of the real: with the haecceity of architecture.
La philosophie, plus rigoureusement, est la discipline qui

Deleuze, 1983, p. 31; "un sens renvoie à l’élément différentiel d’où

circle, Blanchot’s outside, and Foucault’s “pouvoir”, look


desire to continue to invoke an experience lived as raw

defined by the combinations of visible and articulable

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Meillassoux, Quentin : After Finitude, London 2008,
p. 5: “By ‘correlation’ we mean the idea according
to which we only ever have access to the correlation
between thinking and being, and never to either term

considered apart from the other.” My view is that Meillas-
soux (together with Alan Badiou and the speculative materi-
alists such as Graham Harman) is mistaken in believing that
this correlationism can be avoided: as Meillassoux himself
states, correlationism can only be overcome by going via
correlationism – which surely simply returns us to the tran-
scendental strategies of that arch-correlationist Kant.

11 “A Thousand Plateaus” is made up of a series of what
they call – using a term from Gregory Bateson – “plateaus”
or chapters. Bateson’s reference is a sexual one: he points
to the habits of Balinese mothers who masturbate their sons
but avoid them coming to a climax: rather they maintain a
certain “plateau” of pleasure which Bateson sees as symp-
tomatic of wider cultural habits. Deleuze and Guattari’s
plateaus intend to avoid a climax; they remain, as they say,
always “in the middle” (this is also related to the old notion
def of climactic climaxes, like wise to be avoided). Their
ontology is essentially pan-sexual ontology – that is, to do
with interplay. See Bateson, Gregory: Steps to an Ecology of Mind,

12 Deleuze, Gilles and Guattari, Félix: A Thousand
Plateaus – Capitalism and Schizophrenia, London 2004,
p. 336. Deleuze, Gilles et Guattari, Félix: Capitalisme et
art n’est imitatif, ne peut être imitatif ou figurative”.

13 Blanchot, Maurice: Two Versions of the Imaginary, in:

idem. (ed.): The Space of Literature, Lincoln/New England
1989, pp. 253–263. Blanchot, Maurice: L’Espace littéraire,
Paris 1955. There is not time to go into the implications of
this reversal in relation to the concept of time, suffice it to
to say that it comes in turn to question what Heidegger calls
the “vulgären Zeitbegriff”, although precisely not in the
name of an “ursprüngliche Zeit” (which again would be too
phenomenologically reliant on the notion of a primitordial
experience).

14 Deleuze / Guattari 2004 (as footnote 12), p. 322.

15 On this see Gough, Tim: Diagrammatic Architecture, in:


16 Deleuze / Guattari 2004 (as footnote 12), pp. 11–13,
27, 263, 292, 324, 346.

17 Ibid., pp. 11–13.

18 Ibid., p. 263.

19 Ibid., p. 292.

20 Ibid., p. 289.

21 Ibid., p. 290.

22 Moos, Stanislaus von: Nr. 250. Überlegungen zum
Schaulager der Emanuel Hoffmann-Stiftung in Basel von
Herzog & de Meuron, in: Architektur weiterdenken: Werner

23 I have written further on the link between Proust’s
déjà-vu and Herzog & de Meuron’s architecture in “A
memory of the Serpentine Pavilion 2012”, in: Bozzetto 3:
Zweimal, September 2012, pp. 4–5.

24 Deleuze and Guattari 2004 (as footnote 12), p. 274.

25 I am indebted to Dr. Ole Fischer for this interpretation
of Schaulager.

26 I am grateful to Professor Ines Weizman for raising this
question.


30 Ibid., p. 138, 142.

