"*Robert Morris enjoys putting sham 'mistakes' into his language systems. At times, the artist admits it is difficult to tell a real mistake from a false one.*"

"*He works from memory, which is strange when you consider he has nothing to remember.*"

Robert Smithson, "A Museum of Language in the Vicinity of Art". Art International, March 1968

During the nineties we came to believe that we were witnessing a qualitative transformation of our society that affected the way of thinking as well as of production.

We were facing *one of those mutations that suddenly led things to be perceived, described, enunciated, characterized, classified and fatigued in a different way*, in Foucault's words. A transformation in which multiple factors entwine: the lack of confidence in history and progress, the effect of mass media on our habits, the irresistible pluralizing of codes and messages, the importance gained by the systems of images distributed in real time or the revaluation of spatial variables like contiguity and proximity.

A bitter-sweet panorama opened up, characterized by a drift towards just one way of thinking that ran parallel with the technological revolution of communication networks. The gradual reduction of social, political and economic systems of organization towards a variety of capitalism, designated as 'global', was guaranteed by the force of facts –the fall of the Berlin Wall, the collapse of the USSR, the shift of the economic hegemony towards Asia or the resurgence of religions-, forecasting the systematic loss of the value of ideologies.

The pragmatic vocation that impregnated the new times, contextualized not by chance in a period of economic expansion in the majority of the countries of the G8 –and, of course, in China- consolidated again the confidence of our societies in development through technology. However, this was not the material and productive technology characteristic of industrial society, but the virtual technology of communication and its interactive networks.

If the former had favoured the definite subordination of character to function and content to production, the latter was going to subordinate the ends to the Media and the meaning to communication. Along with it, a polemic characteristic of contemporary thinking was reinforced –its liking for paradoxes and perplexity-, expressed by Vattimo as binary simplification:

> "*If the proliferation of images of the world entails that we lose our 'sense of reality', as the saying goes, perhaps isn't such a great loss after all. By a perverse kind of internal logic, the world of objects measured and manipulated by techno-science (the world of the* real, *according to metaphysics) has became the world of merchandise and images, the phantasmagoria of the mass media. Should we counter pose to this world the nostalgia for a solid, unitary stable and 'authoritative' reality?*"

> *Gianni Vattimo,* La Societá Transparente. Garzanti Editore 1989.

Nevertheless, the grandiloquent and revolutionary messages of the gurus of the information society, built with the help of commercial communication techniques, were extinguished as suddenly as instantaneously, unravelled by successive and unexpected events. The 11-S dissolved, in the short margin of a few hours, the optimism connected with new technologies reminding us of our physical fragility; the fiasco of the technological global stock market (NASDAQ), started in the year 2000, made clear the fragility of the virtual economic framework.

As if it was a change of scene at the theatre –although perhaps it is only an advertisement break of a live television program-, the new proposed scene took as a fact the existence of a rupture, of a full stop. The economy returned to the productive and material orthodoxy (economic security), and the technology of the future lost prestige, reduced to military precision and destruction via satellite (psychological security).

But, is it true that the effects of the new technologies and their discourse have become volatile just like that? Perhaps its capacity to transform systems of organization and production was not real? The object of this article is to reflect about this double mirage, and to remind us that the 'return to reality' is necessarily dependent on virtual simulation and its production techniques in the world we inhabit. In short, to reflect about the mutual relation of dependency between virtuality and reality and its consequences for architecture.

In relation to architecture, the transformation has been real and deep, affecting numerous aspects of its philosophy. In particular, it has radically altered two basic concepts in this discipline: first, the correlation between 'real' and 'material', now conditioned by the interference of virtual; second, the concept of nature and our relationship with it, inevitably absorbed by the mechanisms of simulation.

These alterations in the ways of thinking and their parameters are strategic in the organization of the information society, but their origins are previous and are placed in the crisis of modernity. The devaluation of the concept of identity in favour of simulation was and is one of the characteristic facts of our contemporary society and culture, as well as one of the signs of identity of post-modern thinking.

> *"For Jean-Francois Lyotard postmodernism marked an end to master narratives that made modernity appear synonymous with progress (the march of reason, the accumulation of wealth, the advance of technology, the emancipation of workers and so on), while for Frederic Jameson postmodernism prompted a renewed Marxist narrative of different stages of modern culture related to different modes of capitalist production. Meanwhile, for critics committed to advanced art, it signals a move to break with an exhausted model of modernist art that focused on formal refinements to the neglect of historical determinations and social transformations alike."*
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> *Hal Foster. "The Return of the Real", MIT 1996, pag 205*

Architects tend to confuse postmodernism with post-modern architecture, which is a mistake. The 'post' in architecture was transient, more characteristic of a fashion than a movement. What started as a reflection with a marked intellectual and critical character, soon divided into two. And, although in both cases the eclecticism and simulation were fundamental ingredients, its qualitative use presented huge differences (those that, in fact, exist between commercial architecture and that which is not).

On one side it was the commercial, cynical and kitsch version which claimed to be offering to the great public the recuperation of recognition and identity guidelines through coarse and superficial simulations of historicist or

vernacular *clichés*. On the other, a current of thought that, by opposition to the operative techniques of the vanguards (abstraction, rationalism, objectivity and uniformity), wanted to substitute the principles of coherence, reason and articulation for ambiguity, plurality, heterogeneity and coexistence.

Following this line, Robert Venturi proposed substituting the aesthetic system as mental and abstract construction, characteristic of modernity, for a procedure capable of recognizing the singularities of each case. And as a consequence, the contamination, displacements and 'mistakes' which affect the discourse of architecture to radically transform it not only in appearances but also in its fundamentals.

> *"I prefer hybrid elements to pure ones"*, he said in 1962, *"awkward to clean ones, ambiguous to articulated ones… redundant to simple ones, irregular and equivocal to direct and clear. I defend the wealth of meanings instead of the clarity of meanings… I prefer 'this and that' to 'that or the other'"*.

> *Robert Venturi,* Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture(1966)MOMA, NY.

In Venturi's opinion, the architect must abstain from projecting on reality a closed and abstract model of order and structure –call it geometry, perspective, Classicism o Modernity. Its active role in the social and symbolic framework is weak and instrumental, closer to a 'philosopher of mistake' than to a surveyor or a geometer.

Although his intentions and ideology are not the same, some fundamentals of the work of Rem Koolhaas share the same origin. In the manifest made in favour of the '*culture of congestion*' in 'Delirious New York' he identified the three axioms on which the contemporary city is based: the net, the lobotomy and the schizophrenia, all of them mechanisms of disconnection that facilitate proliferation.

Mechanisms that allow him to describe the city as a '*metropolitan archipelago*' in which, lacking a real history, in each case –each skyscraper, each city- an '*instantaneous folklore*' is reproduced. And, through the double connection of lobotomy and schizophrenia, autonomy between interior and exterior is favoured, afterwards the interior is developed in autonomous portions and the exterior is dedicated to manipulation of ornament. The way to resolve the relation between form and function is as paradoxical and surrealist as effective: not by balance, but with/by total independency; not as a result of analysis, but for negating the problem.

Venturi and Koolhaas share not only the aversion for the articulation of form, they also coincide in their refusal to submit to a superstructure that assigns everything a stable meaning, associated to localization –physical or conceptual- within the system. Both of them work by putting the system into crisis, as their objective is not to distort the objects, but the laws that control their production.

It seems difficult to obviate the importance of this drift of thinking towards models whose complexity and plurality bring us closer to reality, with its weight of complexities and imperfection.

But it is a reality whose qualities make us think: firstly, because it has unfolded into physical reality and virtual reality; secondly, because the liberation of the differences; opposed to the integrating rationality of the abstract systems; disseminated through global mass media, has created a multiplicity of 'local reasons' –ethnical, sexual, religious, cultural or aesthetic- to form a paradoxical global mosaic. Paradoxical because the image of the totality is the result of a sum of fragments that aspire to be independent.

"The inclusion of most of the cultural expressions within the integrated system of communication, based on the digitalized electronic production and distribution and interchange of signals, has important consequences for social forms and processes. On one hand, it debilitates considerably the symbolic power of traditional transmitters external to the system, which transmits through codified social customs –religion, morality, authority, traditional values, political ideology. On the other, the new system of communication radically transforms space and time, the fundamental dimensions of human life".

Manuel Castell. "La Era de la Información, Vol. I. La Sociedad Red". Page 452. Alianza Editorial 1997.

This affinity towards plurality –towards the heterogeneous-, is linked to the concepts of *entropy* and of *heterotopy*.
The traditional objective of architecture has been to escape to entropy, operating through the imposition of an order, the structured organization of solids and emptiness and the implantation of a hierarchy. The ways of filling spaces and moving through them are indicated through the plan.

In the plan, therefore, the experience is controlled. In this orthodoxy the plan is the generator of architecture.

"*Without plan there only will be disorder and arbitrariness.*"

Le Corbusier, Towards a New Architecture. Paris 1923

Understood in these terms, architecture can be assimilated to an ideal concept of order and structure, built around a transcendent subject that visually dominates it. It is connected to the definition of borders and limits, that is, to the mechanisms of identity and difference. Its translation into the visual, in its most operative expression, is the distinction between background and figure; and its translation to the abstract sphere leads us to the analogy of architecture as language.

Entropy, on the contrary, functions in architecture as a camouflage in nature: heightening the uniformity of a continuous texture, collapsing the limits of individual objects, introducing continuity through duality or ambiguity. In short, boycotting the laws of the *gestalt* vision and putting into crisis the concepts of forms.

"The strata of the Earth is a jumbled museum. Embedded in the sediment is a text that contains limits and boundaries that evade the rational order, and social structures that confine art. In order to read the rocks we have to become conscious of geologic time, and of the layers of prehistoric material that is entombed in the Earth's crust. When one scans the ruined sites of prehistory, one sees a heap of wrecked maps that upsets our present art historical limits. A rubble of logic confronts the viewer as he looks into the levels of sedimentations. The abstract grids containing the raw matter are observed as something incomplete, broken and shattered."

Robert Smithson, "A Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects". Artforum, September 1968

The natural and geological order is the model of entropy. It emerges from a view towards the past, now appearing not as History (imposition) but as Nature (liberation) or, in other words, what is out of our reach already and does not belong to us anymore. Whenever we have approached the natural it has been to

transform it, substitute it, and destroy it. Now, when it has disappeared, it is to simulate it.

Sigfried Gideon –official reporter of modernity-, proposed considering time as the 'fourth dimension': the parameter called to transform the concept of space, heighten it to a concatenated, and in movement, visual experience. What time meant for Gideon –the 'fourth dimension'-, today is entropy: the access door to a more complex description of the world, in which physical conditions are ruled by the random guidelines of events, of the consummated facts alien to pre-programmed systems. Real facts, like the city, oblivious to a unique or integrating order, formless, full of fissures, incomplete, dependent on multiple reasons foreign to each other, which can only be described with the open techniques of maps and statistics. Real facts that are not susceptible to fitting into the uniform and hierarchical geometries of logical reason or ideology.

> "*As an organism, the city always tries, of course, to combat entropic proliferation at the same time that it generates it; as a capitalist enterprise, the city always invents new means of recycling waste.*"
>
> *Yve-Alain Bois y Rosalind E. Krauss*, Formless, A User's Guide. MIT Press, NY. 1977

This liking for entropy, as we have said, propitiates a space in which visibility and identity lose their dominant value in favour of analogy and organization. It is what Manuel Castells has denominated the '*space of flows*', a characteristic of the information/global economy organized in a system of nodes connected through electronics. (Actually, Castells reduces this sophisticated problem into a binary simplification, opposing the *space of flows* to the "already surpassed" *space of places*, characteristic of industrial society).

This entropic and formless spatial organization, built around the concept of flow (flows of capital, of information, of technology, of organizing interaction, of images or of symbols), is necessarily characterized by going beyond the concept of localization, as well as by the heightening of 'virtual reality' to the condition of real support.

> "*The space of flows is the material organization of social practices in shared time that work through the flows. By flow I understand the sequences of interchange and interaction determined, repetitive and programmable between the physically unconnected positions kept by the social actors in the economic, political or symbolic structures of society.*"
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> *Manuel Castells*. "La Era de la Información, Vol. I. La Sociedad Red". Page 452. Alianza Editorial 1997.

That is to say, the social practices and their articulation through symbolic or representation systems now expand through the 'space of flows', disconnecting the basic concept of material support in simultaneous social practices –those that are produced through the net- of the notion of contiguity. We would have before us be facing a 'real virtual' support as alternative to a 'real physical' support, as the net is no less real for being virtual.

The local and everyday things see their qualities eroded –specificity and location-, reconfiguring its profile through simulation. For the same reasons, the values of authenticity, originality and singularity become practically inaccessible. How can we explain, otherwise, the continuous infiltration of ethnography and its descriptive and cartographic techniques, at the service of fiction and construction of identities?

It is not surprising, therefore, that architecture, as social practice connected to symbolic and representation systems, has been really affected by the new parameters akin to technology of information. And the ephemeral associated with consumption, ornamentation associated to image and de-contextualization characteristic of organization in net, are three symptoms or manifestation of such transformation.

How can we handle, in this intellectual environment, a concept that has been central in the discourse of architecture as is the 'context'?

The context is a physical and intellectual tool. It, supposedly, allows the fixing of the parameters of actuation under the principle of continuity and location. When one operates in these terms, things belong to the places in which they are situated, and derive their logic, their reason for being from them. Continuity assures coherence (aesthetic, environmental and physical). And location and continuity assure identity, its *almost*-natural integration in social and symbolic codes.

However, in a culture of simulation, in a space alien to the concept of physical location and with a formal model fascinated by the lack of hierarchy and randomness, the concept of 'context' is a useless or inapplicable tool. Except if we accept that the first step in simulation is the construction of a context. And, even if we assert that this concept of context can only be produced in a culture of simulation.

The Market in Santa Caterina, designed by Miralles/Tagliabue, in Barcelona, and the Municipal Stadium in Braga, by Eduardo Souto de Moura, will help us to identify the extent of this reflection.

The Stadium, built against the quarry stone wall in Monte Castro, accumulates in its architecture a sequence of decisions whose logic is complex, alien to the lineal coherence of the relation cause/effect or to the transparency of a unique and explicit technique. As a consequence and as a symptom, the conflict between the geometric and formal rotundity of the stadium and the natural and shapeless walls that surround it follow us wherever we go.

Encrusted on the rock, intentionally inaccessible from the sides, the public that come in through the main entrance must *"by-pass"* the football pitch underground to reach the southern stand. A route that takes us, by surprise, to the wall of excavated rock, and which as a labyrinthine cavern, goes up crossed by pillars, stairs, lifts and independent toilet units. A cavern indiscriminately limited by the rock wall and by the concrete slab of the southern stand, now behind us. We thought we had come in, but we are out again or perhaps underneath.

The Stadium operates as a concave/convex recipient, an enveloping shell that we surround and trespass in successive occasions, giving value to an ambiguous relation with the terrain, as the Stadium is surrounded by emptiness –at the front, underneath, behind, on the sides. Built/excavated emptiness, compressed between the concave surface of the stand and the convex surface of the rock that never touches it.

Naturalizing architecture and making the surroundings artificial are, in this architecture, the same thing; two operations of simulation to build reality, showing a strategy whose coherence is not explicit, whose naturalness is built, and whose identity is simulated. But, could it be otherwise?

Naturalizing, like authenticity, cannot be the result of a search. Nonetheless, its strategic simulation allows the equilibration of the disciplinary techniques of connection and fragmentation, or continuity and difference. It makes one appreciate that architecture and its environment are approached as the same

thing, at least from a disciplinary point of view. Both, architecture and its surroundings, are built with the same techniques, to reach the same purpose, constructing a unique balance. They only differ in their grade of visibility, in their desire to become present or imperceptible, formal or environmental.

Because of its disciplinary character and its tortuous precision –"I think, with a dose of masochism, that the projects in which I encounter difficulties come out better"- the architecture of Eduardo Souto de Moura is trapped between the opposing concepts of authenticity and simulation. And under the apparent naturalness of the continuities, the architect, restricted by his own will to the instruments that architecture provides –his sole, obsessive field of reflection-, builds a complex system of ambiguities and appearances.

Architecture, despite the search for a phenomenological synthesis or the severe self-limitation of the elements that come into play in each game, cannot hide the unequivocal signs of the tensions that underlay the appearance of things. Transformed into an entropic organism, architecture solves problems in the same measure it creates them.

The Market in Santa Caterina, opting for a different strategy in its appearance, unfolds the formal, structural, figurative and aesthetic complexity with visible naturalness in the strict sense of expression. More over, one comes to believe that the mechanisms of proliferation and superposition are applied with true freedom to produce an environmental experience that calls with great effectiveness to the sensations, not the concepts, of randomness and casual.

As is habitual in the architecture of Miralles/Tagliabue, the exuberant structure loses the rigidity of the support and avoids repetition in a permanent aspiration to lightness. And the structure's casual appearing and its intentioned disappearing helps us to identify the true protagonist: an undulated and Gaudí-like 'blanket' that levitates, like a magic carpet, over our heads.

But, as if the problem was not sufficiently complex already, there is more: a solid and vertical block of social housing is embedded with violence behind the Market. It is evident that multiple reasons of a pragmatic kind will back up this presence: the skillful hiding of the loading-unloading access to the Market, the situation of its warehouses, the funding of the investment or the location of the Social Services in municipal sites to reduce the cost.

Whatever the real causes are, its formalization gives us the first clue to proposing a second reading: if in the architecture of Souto de Moura the complexity is hidden behind the precision and the continuity of images without fissures, in the architecture of Miralles/Tagliabue an apparent naturalness of gestures is notable.

The intentional substitution of the order given by eventuality, increasing the absence of hierarchy, the open and free recuperation of ornament as superimposed value, the use of camouflage techniques as a system of control of the experience and giving up the concept of space as object –destroying any reference to closed limits- to propitiate continuity, allow us momentarily to believe that it is true: architecture can be produced with freedom. However, freedom is also simulated, and it could not be otherwise.

Architecture, as active practice in the social order, moves in the symbolic order of the meaning or, if you prefer it, of the codified messages. How can we explain, then, the simulated order of urban fragmentation implicit in the technique of incrustation of the social housing block? Or the reproduction of the 'natural floor' of the city on the roof as garden represented through the pictorial technique of pointillism (or pixilation, which is the same) and the texture of the tapestry?

The Market in Santa Caterina opts for an attacking strategy. Instead of hiding the conflicts, it exhibits them; instead of eliminating problems, it reproduces them; instead of summarizing the images, it ornaments them; instead of marking the limits, it dissolves them. Are we not, perhaps, in front of a 'geometric machine working the other way round'?

The complexity of architectonic problems is faced by multiplying the variables and controlling the techniques of ornamentation to simulate, beyond the real, the complexity and ambiguity of the programs and the environments. As in the Municipal Stadium in Braga, although with different techniques, architecture resolves problems at the same time that it creates them.

We go back, therefore, to the beginning –to the words of Robert Smithson-, which put special emphasis, not by chance, on the operative techniques characteristic of our time. On one hand, the construction of images without fissures that hide its difficulty and contradictions –"*He works from memory*"-, with which Souto de Moura exorcises the present. On the other, the difficulty to distinguish between the fortuitous and the intentional –"*At times, the artist admits it is difficult to tell a real mistake from a false one*"- with which Miralles/Tagliabue desire to take architecture closer to life.

But, the Municipal Stadium in Braga as well as the Market in Santa Caterina, even putting to work different or opposing strategies, build through architecture the guidelines and parameters of the problems in which they are inscribed, that is, build the context in which they can and must be understood. Or, if you prefer, they simulate it.

Luis Rojo de Castro, July 2005