

Readymade objects, introduced in 1912 by Braque and Picasso and codified as new means of communication by Duchamp, sanctioned the self-sufficiency of reality and the definitive rejection, by reality itself, of any representation. The painter could only analyse this reality. His asserted dominion over form was but a cover for something he could still not accept: that is, that by now it was form which dominated the painter.

Except that now form had to be understood as the logic of subjective reactions to the objective universe of production. Cubism as a whole tended to define the laws of such reactions. It is symptomatic that Cubism began from the subjective and ended in the most absolute rejection of it (as was to be noticed by Apollinaire with uneasiness). What Cubism as a 'project' wanted to realize was a mode of behaviour. Its anti-naturalism, however, contained no persuasive element for the public. Instead, the intention of Cubism was to demonstrate the reality of the 'new nature' created by the new capitalist metropolis and its necessary and universal character, in which necessity and liberty coincide.

For this reason Braque and Picasso, and still more Gris, adopted the technique of assemblage, which gave absolute form to the universe of the *civilization machiniste*. Primitivism and anti-historicism were the consequences and not the causes of their fundamental choices.

As techniques of analysis of a totalizing universe, both Cubism and De Stijl were explicit invitations to action. For their artistic products one could well speak of *the fetishization of the artistic object and its mystery*.

The public had to be provoked. Only in this way could it be actively introduced into the universe of *precision* dominated by the laws of production. The passivity of the *flâneur* sung by Baudelaire had to be conquered. The *blasé* attitude had to be transformed into effective participation in the urban scene. The city was the object to which neither Cubist painting, nor the Futurist 'cuttings', nor Dadaist nihilism refer specifically, but which – precisely because continually presupposed – was the benchmark of the avant-garde movements. Mondrian was to have the courage to 'name' the city as the final object towards which neo-plastic composition tended. But he was to be forced to recognize that, once it had been translated into urban structures, painting – by now reduced to a pure model of behaviour – would have to die.

Baudelaire had discovered that the commercialization of the poetic product can be accentuated by the poet's very attempt to free himself from his objective

conditions. The prostitution of the artist immediately follows his moment of maximum human sincerity'. De Stijl, and still more Dada, discovered that there are two roads to the suicide of art: silent immersion in the structure of the city by the idealization of its contradictions, or violent insertion into the structures of artistic communication of the irrational – this, too, idealized – as transformed by the city.

De Stijl became a method of formal control of the technological universe. Dada wanted to enunciate apocalyptically its immanent absurdity. And yet the nihilist criticism formulated by Dada ended by becoming a means of control for planning. As we shall see, there is nothing surprising in encountering many points of tangency between the most 'constructive' and the most destructive avant-garde movements of the twentieth century.

Dada's ferocious decomposition of the linguistic material and its opposition to prefiguration: what were these, after all, if not the sublimation of automatism and commercialization of 'values' now spread through all levels of existence by the advance of capitalism? De Stijl and the Bauhaus introduced the *ideology of the plan* into a design method that was always closely related to the city as a productive structure. Dada, by means of the absurd, demonstrated – without naming it – the necessity of a plan.

Furthermore, all the avant-garde movements adopted political parties as models of action. Dada and Surrealism can surely be seen as particular expressions of the anarchic spirit. And indeed De Stijl, the Bauhaus, and the Soviet avant-garde movements did not hesitate to set themselves up explicitly as global alternatives to political practices; alternatives that assumed all the characteristics of ethical choices.

De Stijl – and for that matter Russian Futurism and the Constructivist currents – opposed Chaos, the empirical, and the commonplace, with the principle of Form. And it was a form which took account of that which concretely impoverishes reality, rendering it formless and chaotic. The panorama of industrial production, which spiritually impoverishes the world, was dismissed as a universe 'without quality', as nonvalue.

But it was taken up again after being transformed into new value through its sublimation. The De Stijl technique of the decomposition of complex into elementary forms corresponded to the discovery that the 'new richness' of spirit could not be sought outside the 'new poverty' assumed by mechanical civilization. The disarticulated recomposition of those elementary forms exalted the mechanical universe by demonstrating that no form can be given to the recovery of totality (of being as of art) except form derived from the problematic nature of form itself.

Dada instead plunged into chaos. By representing chaos, it confirmed its

reality; by treating it with irony it exposed a necessity that had been lacking. This unprovided necessity was precisely that control of formlessness and chaos that De Stijl, all the European constructivist currents, and even the formalist aesthetic of the nineteenth century – from *Sichtbarkeit* on – posed as the new frontier of visual communications. Thus it is not surprising that Dadaist anarchy and De Stijl order converged and mingled from 1922 on, from the aspect of theory as well as that of practice, in which the main concern was that of working out the means of a new synthesis.

Chaos and order were thus sanctioned by the historical avant-garde movements as the 'values' – in the proper sense of the term – of the new capitalist city.

Of course, chaos is a datum and order an objective. But from now on form is not sought outside of chaos; it is sought within it. It is order that confers significance upon chaos and transforms it into value, into 'liberty'. Even Dadaist destructiveness has a 'positive' aim – particularly in America and Berlin. Indeed, historically speaking, Dadaist nihilism, in the hands of a Hausmann or a Heartfield, became the expression of a new technique of communication. The systematic use of the unexpected and the technique of assemblage were brought together to form the premises of a new nonverbal language, based on improbability and what Russian formalism called 'semantic distortion'. It was therefore precisely with Dadaism that the theory of information became an instrument of visual communications.

But the real place of the improbable is the city. The formlessness and chaos of the city is therefore to be redeemed by extracting from within it all its progressive virtues. The necessity of a programmed control of the new forces released by technology was very clearly pointed out by the avant-garde movements, who immediately after discovered they were not capable of giving concrete form to this entreaty of Reason.

It was at this point that architecture could enter the scene, absorbing and going beyond all the entreaties of the avant-garde movements. And architecture alone being in a position to respond to the needs indicated by Cubism, Futurism, Dada, De Stijl and international Constructivism, these movements were thrown into crisis.

The Bauhaus, as the decantation chamber of the avant-garde, fulfilled the historic task of selecting from all the contributions of the avant-garde by testing them in terms of the needs of productive reality. Industrial design, a method of organizing production even before it is a method of configuring objects, did away with the residue of utopia inherent in the artistic expression of the avant-garde. Ideology now was not superimposed on artistic operations – the latter were now concrete because they were connected to the real production cycle –

but had become an internal part of the operations themselves.

Despite its realism, however, even industrial design left certain needs unsatisfied; and in the impetus it gave to the organization of individual enterprises and the organization of production it contained a margin of utopia. But this was now a utopia serving the objectives of the reorganization of production. The plan common to the spearhead architectural movements – the term avant-garde is here no longer adequate – from the formation of Le Corbusier's *Plan Voisin* (1925) and the transformation of the Bauhaus (1923), contained this contradiction: starting from the particular sector of building production, architecture discovered that the pre-established objectives could be reached only by relating that sector to the reorganization of the city. Thus, just as the necessities singled out by the avant-garde had referred to the sectors of visual communication most directly related to the economic process – architecture and industrial design – so the planning enunciated by architectural and urban theories referred to something other than itself. In this case the something other was a restructuring of production and consumption in general; in other words, the planned coordination of production. In this sense architecture – beginning with itself – mediated realism and utopia. The utopia consisted in obstinately hiding the fact that the ideology of planning could be realized in building production only by indicating that it is beyond it that the true plan can take form; rather, that once come within the sphere of the reorganization of production in general, architecture and urbanism would have to be the objects and not the subjects of the Plan.

Architecture between 1920 and 1930 was not ready to accept such consequences. What was clear was its 'political' role. Architecture (read: programming and planned reorganization of building production and of the city as a productive organism) rather than revolution. Le Corbusier clearly enunciated this alternative.

In the meantime, and beginning with just the most politically committed circles – from the *November-gruppe* to the magazines *MA* and *Vesc* and the Berlin *Ring* – architectural ideology was defined technically. Accepting with lucid objectivity all the conclusions on the 'death of the aura' and on the purely 'technical' function of the intellectual apocalyptically announced by the avant-garde movements, the central European *Neue Sachlichkeit* adapted the method of designing to the idealized structure of the assembly line. The forms and methods of industrial work became part of the organization of the design and were reflected even in the ways proposed for the consumption of the object.

From the standardized element to the cell, the single block, the housing project and finally the city: architecture between the two wars imposed this assembly line with an exceptional clarity and coherence. Each 'piece' on the line,

being completely resolved in itself, tended to disappear or, better, to dissolve formally in the assemblage.

The result of all this was that the aesthetic experience itself was revolutionized. Now it was no longer objects that were offered to judgment, but a process to be lived and used as such. The user, summoned to complete Mies van der Rohe's or Gropius' 'open' spaces, was the central element of this process. Since the new forms were no longer meant to be absolute values but instead proposals for the organization of collective life – the integrated architecture of Gropius – architecture summoned the public to participate in its work of design. Thus through architecture the ideology of the public took a great step forward. Morris' romantic socialist dream of an art of all for all took ideological form within the iron-clad laws of profit. Even in this, the ultimate test of the theoretical hypotheses was the confrontation with the city.

Manfredo Tafuri, 'The Dialectic of the Avant-Garde', *Architecture and Utopia*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1974) 89–103.