

Architecture, more than any other human gesture frozen in material, (i. e. more than any other type of "plastic art"), is in doubt at present. The reason for this is a paradox: architecture is more obviously "useful" than say painting or sculpture. Since he is doing something obviously useful, the architect is not really an artist at all, (an artist being a person whose usefulness is in doubt), but more of an engineer, (an engineer being a person who serves a purpose). On the other hand there is a point in saying that the architect stands in the way of the construction engineer, (the one who really builds the useful things), and that therefore he is more than useless, he is harmful. Of course: arguments like these are ridiculous, if read by critics of art, and other elegant people, (for instance by rich people who ask architects to design their villas). But if read by for instance a worker in São Paulo, they make very good sense: he wants his little house built, and no architectural nonsense.

Yes, but is the worker in São Paulo right if he thinks that architecture is nonsense? (As much nonsense, or more so, than painting and sculpture?) I mean: does a house built by a construction engineer in the cheapest, quickest and most functional way really serve the worker's purpose? Does it not, in reality, impose itself on the worker, his wife and children, so that the family serves the purpose of the house, (meaning the purpose of those who made the construction engineer build this type of houses)? Has not the construction engineer inverted the terms "worker - house" in a way that transforms the worker into a part of the house, and didn't he do so because he himself is a tool in the hands of an impersonal establishment which manipulates everything, including people, for its own purpose? I think this question might make the worker wonder. He may reconsider his attitude toward architecture. (And, by inference, toward art "tout court".)

But if he looks around, he might stick to his first opinion. What is architecture actually doing? Obviously two things: For those who are in power it is supplying symbols of their social standing. For the rest it is supplying symbols of a way of life suitable to those in power. (The same may be said, in a way, of art "tout court"). Therefore: the quicker one gets rid of architecture the better.

The point to be kept in mind is this: architecture supplies symbols. Which is a way of saying that it means something. Construction engineers do not supply symbols but houses. Which is a way of saying that such houses mean nothing. It is they which are, strictly speaking, nonsense. (Exactly the same nonsense like all other products of the industrial civilisation.) Architecture, like all art, is that dimension which gives sense to what, without it, is nonsense. But of course, the sense which architecture, (and all art), gives may be demagogical, or in any other way untrue. And this is in fact what the worker sees when he looks about him: architecture is at present untrue.

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This was not always the case, and, in fact, is a rather new historical event. As a rule, architecture does give a true meaning to buildings, in the sense of supplying symbols for what, at its time and place, is considered real. Igloos symbolize the snow divinity, Aegyptian pyramids rigid immortality, African huts the life-giving phallus, a Swiss cottage the dangerous and protecting mountain, and a Romanesque monastery the transcendental God and a way to reach Him. Therefore to live in these buildings is to lead a meaningful life, because it means to be in constant touch with the real. Today the situation is different. One either lives in meaningless houses, therefore a meaningless life, or one lives among symbols which cover up reality instead of revealing it, therefore a life of alienation.

This happened because art, (including architecture), has become divorced from science and technology on the one hand, and from daily life on the other. It has become either a "specialisation" for some members of the ruling classes or a way to manipulate the masses. It is no longer part of life, but something added. Architecture is added to construction engineering, it is meant to give a deliberate sense to something which is felt to be senseless. (Like industrial design is added to mass production.) One cannot imagine an Eskimo or Romanesque "architect" in the sense in which we now use the term. This is why the Eskimos build always beautifully and well, and why the same cannot be said about our towns and cities.

Our fathers, bathed in ugliness as they were, merely suspected this, but we know it. Take Brasilia as a gigantic example. A town was to be built in the middle of nothing, in order to provide an enormous country with a population center. One knew that it would not suffice just to build roads and houses. The enterprise was to have meaning. Architects were called in to supply the necessary symbols. The town was planned like an airplane to symbolize "take-off", the central plaza was designed to symbolize the "Three Powers of the State", the presidential palace to symbolize the sunrise, and possibly the living quarters to symbolize the ideal fonctionnaire of the future. And the result of this gigantic endeavor is a town in which psychoanalysts strive, because it is a place of gigantic alienation.

Architecture cannot be something that has been added. If it is to give true meaning to buildings and towns, therefore to human surroundings and human life, it must spring from the mind, the heart and the bowels of those very few among us who are still in close touch with what is real. And these very few cannot be called in as specialists to assist town planners, sociologists, economists and politicians. But, on the contrary, it is these very few who should be assisted by specialists in order to help and transform their symbols into things within which and among which we may lead again a life full of meaning. This must happen, or we shall suffocate in functional or Brasilia-type surroundings,

Horia Damian is one of the very few, and there can be no doubt about

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this once we have seen what he is doing. Radu Varia says his things seem to be coming from another world. Yes, if that other world is understood as that reality which we have lost, but without which we cannot go on living. His things, (all of them, and some more obviously than others, are proposals to start dwelling again, and working again, and praying again, and having fun again, and stop to be refugees from reality within a senseless apparatus that pretends to have meaning. Of course: his things are "only" proposals. They stand about in his work-shop or in exhibitions, waiting for us to do something about them. Taken at face value, they are nothing but pathetically beautiful objects. But if we imagine them translated into what they want to be, they become a vision of a possible future. Their monumentality is the articulation of a humanity that has finally conquered nature. Their color is the expression of human will to impose himself upon the world. Their structure is the victory of human reason over the accidents of chance. Their texture is palpable proof of man having forced a great number of materials to submit to his wishes. Seen thus, Damian's things stand, as proposals, for the culture and civilisation of a future that is the exact contrary of many present apocalyptic visions.

But this is not what really matters with these proposals. It is true they are symbols, and they mean a possible future. But they are symbols of a kind that defies definition. Namely of the kind that is sometimes called "open". In theory of communication this type of symbol is known as "connotation". A symbol "connotes", if it suggests a wide scale of meanings. It "denotes", if it imposes its meaning. All present architecture is denoting. We cannot escape its meaning, we can either accept it, or, (which is difficult), refuse it. Which means to say that all present architecture is a deliberate imposition of meaning. But Damian's things propose a wide range of possibly conflicting interpretations. It depends to a very considerable degree on us, on each one of us, what his things will come to mean, once we decide to try and use them. His a proposals for a dialogical, not a discursive, architecture. Which means to say that his architecture is not an imposition, but a suggestion.

Now this again means that there are "hidden" meanings behind the things which he dares propose us. They are mysterious in this sense, and they evoke, (sometimes invoke), the sacred. (The sacred being the hidden meaning.) In fact: there can be no true meaning without this mysterious dimension. Present architecture is false, because it lacks that dimension. Its presence in Damian is existential proof of his truth, of the fact that what he proposes to say has a true meaning. Life among and within his things would again be life within the space of transhuman experience, therefore real.

There is an apparent contradiction in what has been said: namely that Damian's things mean human victory, and the submission to what is transhuman. The contradiction is merely apparent: human victory is only possible

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where man is aware of his limitations. Maybe this is the sin of Brasilia and all modern architecture: to ignore these limitations. This is fundamentally why they are untrue. Damian opens up a window to those of us who can still see: a window out of technological civilisation toward the mystery that surrounds us. Exactly because of this opening, his architecture, if made reality, would no longer be a prison.

Is Damian an architect? Of course not. He lives in a post-architectural age, in which to make categories like architecture and sculpture is silly. He is a modeller of the future. Whether he will become something of an architect in the traditional sense of the term depends on us, on our efforts. This is how we should look at his things: not asking "what is this?", but "what can I and others make of it, so that life should again be worth living?" And this is no rhetorical question. It is there, in the things themselves, and we cannot escape it.

Let me again return to my São Paulo worker. Were he to know about Damian, he would change his opinion concerning architecture, concerning art, and concerning his own life. He would have an aim beyond merely surviving in a civilisation which uses him as an instrument, and which poisons him with false symbols. Let us do something about Damian's things and about the São Paulo worker.