

Architects Should Be Idiots

This opening, an intentionally provocative title, is designed to focus on two important aspects of contemporary critical thinking. The first is that the "positive-optimistic" rhetoric that pervades contemporary discourse — where hopefulness is the tenor given to the most dire situations, such as global warming and economic melt-down, and the architect is described as a witty problem-solver — is destructive and misguided. The evidence suggests that intelligence, when forced to come up with a solution to impossible problems, will convert the tragic view to the comic in order to produce a solution that, however unlikely, wins temporary approval thanks to a shared fantasy promising democratic survival. The second is that the term "idiot" has been given a bad connotation by just such optimistic problem-solvers, in order to contrast with their own "happy-meal" offerings. The etymology of the word, idiot, shows that there is nothing more in it than the idea of privacy; and although private thoughts are in danger of being weak because they are not exposed to public review, the opposite benefit is that private thoughts do not owe anyone in advance, and may develop eccentric qualities when not pressured by social expectations for a happy outcome.

Schools have become machines optimized to deliver happy outcomes, in the form of confidence promised but never truly enjoyed by paying customers, based on false expectations and the illusion of knowledge that is not knowledge but, rather, information accumulated and ordered in superficial but popular ways. The idea of mastery has been given symbolic form, so that passing a course is seen to be equivalent to knowing what the course was about; and that having an academic degree is a *carte blanche* for professional success. None of this has ever been true, but in the past skepticism kept most thoughtful graduates from believing in the illusions embodied by their degrees. Now, almost all players are complicit in the bestowal of the imaginary but ungrounded sense of mastery.

The dummy is another kind of idiot with an undeservedly bad reputation. Though the term has been commonly applied to any thoughtless knucklehead, the dummy is, more accurately, the machine component of the ventriloquist's performance, the apparent source of the voice that is transported, with comic effect, to automated mouth, eyes, lips, head, torso, and sometimes arms. Naturally the dummy does not speak; but this prop is essential for the *audience to believe in the reality of the voice*, so in effect the dummy exists more than the ventriloquist. In French, the word for dummy is *le mort*, the dead man, and this is even more informative. We have no knowledge of the impossible condition designated, oxymoronically, as "being dead," but from childhood play experiences we know all about playing dead. Being invisible or blind are affects of this play, and the voluntary inability to see or interact with things that are technically present and actionable speaks to an inner human ability to divide space in an irrational way. So, it turns out that the dummy, like the idiot, knows a thing or two. The dummy and the idiot can tell us all we would like to know about a central feature of all human life, mental and social, that is, *the uncanny*. For architects, the uncanny is especially important, as the German word for it, *Unheimlich*, the un-homey, suggests. The uncanny pairs two opposite effects related to home. Away from home, we often enjoy the uncanny experience of feeling at home. Conversely, when we are comfortable in our familiar home, we often feel undermined by a sense of estrangement. It's the crisscross of effects, more than their particular embodiment, that is important, particularly in the case of life and death.

The destructiveness of the optimistic "can-do" language of architectural education is not only false because it makes false claims and promises false mastery, it is not about learning at all but about re-packaging. Learning requires risk, loss, and despair; but in the "acquisitive" mode of later capitalism, wealth is abstracted at all levels into commodity that must be possessed, enlarged, and defended. The concepts of loss produce a "foreclosure" of the capitalist mentality, which must be nourished constantly through a rhetoric of acquisition that continues in the face of evidence of satisfaction. Acquisition logic proves the point of Lacan, that desire requires the permanent absence of some object, and is self-sustaining and self-increasing. The optimism of education aims to build the confidence of those who have no actual basis for confidence, by perpetuating a model of potentiality: "You can be or do anything you want to be or do" is the motto. This mental climate, once initiated, cannot be reversed. The learner becomes weaker and more dependent on the model of progress to the extent that s/he cannot break the cycle of dependence. Without autonomy the learner cannot learn.

The idiot is not stupid. The idiot has in fact managed to break free of the ideology of substitution and dependency that promises mastery; the idiot has decided take on the interests of the dummy. The idiot has decided "to die," to become private, in order to live, given that the promised life of mastery is profoundly fake and immediately enslaving. The choice of the idiot clearly faces the prospect of what Hegel called "tarrying with the negative," but the idiot is compensated by seeing how, as mastery is untangled in the process of being dismantled, it was put together in the first place. Fantasy, the basis of the illusion of mastery, is itself a means by which subjects relate to the Real, in the face of the Real's traumatic impossibility, its resistance to symbolism of any kind. Fantasy is "fantastic," but in order to be

effective, it must have an effective structure. Effective cause is, literally, an "effect" that works like a cause. This turns the "effects" of fantasy, even when they fail, into clues about how fantasy operates, which in turn are clues about how subjects operate. We cannot have anything like an "objective knowledge of the object," but we can have an objective knowledge of the subject ("OKS": cf. Vico's saying, *verum ipsum factum*). And, although knowledge of nature is limited and always contingent on theoretical frameworks, we can have a corresponding "subjective knowledge of the object" ("SKO"), which is based on our experience as subjects of the failures of addressing objects objectively.

In short, there is a positive, consistent, and historically recognized program of humanistic knowledge that is not, like Phenomenology, an attempt at subjective knowledge of the subject; or, like Positivism, a project of objective knowledge of the object. The alternative is simultaneously SKO and OKS, which is why Slavoj Žižek has emphasized the "clinic" as the middle option between the "blue pill" of subjective delusions and "red pill" of (false and ineffective) traumatic scientism. To the left, we swerve in order to identify, often compassionately, with human desire and abjection, but we miss the point that in order to do this we have objectified/institutionalized the subject. To the right, we attempt to ground the subject in nature, in objectivity, which misses the point in an opposite, Neo-conservative, way. Both swerves are compelling in that they seem to offer world-views, but these are in reality ideologies, not grounds of knowledge. The SKO/OKS approach, in addition to having testable protocols, has been used by artists, scientists, and philosophers in the past — knowers who, knowing the limits of knowledge, practiced self-restraint in the form of artificial silence: a renunciation of the possibility of saying everything. Where Lacan formalized this in terms of *mi-dire*, "speaking by halves," Vico did the same thing through the rhetorical device of *aposiopesis*, the premature ending. The method of artificial silence is not an arbitrary or ideological trick: it has an ancient pedigree, reaching back as far as shamanistic magic and homeopathic medicine, appearing in "enigmatic" works such as Giulio Camillo's theater of universal memory. The modern forms of these silence projects are the basis of the entertainment industry and the effectiveness of the placebo in medicine. This is a "method" whose success is grounded in the effectiveness of past results. It is not illusory. The mastery is to be experienced, individually, "idiotically," not advertised as an ideological position or promised in exchange for tuition payments. Architects especially should be idiots.

The idiotic method I propose "regresses" through the three (progressive) forms of Hegelian negation, denial, renunciation, and foreclosure. We start with the last negation first: the **foreclosure** of the modern optimism, which makes the other forms of negation invisible or neutralizes them within a "happy meals" diet of neologisms such as "sustainability." My idiotic method addresses the deepest and most difficult aspect of human subjectivity, sexualization. Inside the logic of sexualization is the revelation that not just our notions of gender but of space in general come out of rules for using boundaries. Undoing foreclosure is by no means a reversal of its negative but just the reverse, a restoration of the negativity of foreclosure in its poetic sense as an apocalyptic-poetic geography of the end-game, such as found in James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* or Norman O. Brown's *Closing Time*. The inherent psychosis of foreclosure calls into question all forms of symbolic order, but in so doing, it looks at the phenomenon of resistance *per se*, which constitutes the Real, trauma, and fantasmatic responses to the Real.

Renunciation is about the voluntary limits of order, efficacy, and mastery; and hence we enter into the withdrawal from experience that finds a way to admit defeat in any language and culture. This is not New Age Buddhism but asceticism. For Vico and Lacan, as master-renunciators, we see how method can formalize restraint into a discovery device that works in all situations, for all users/participants. The resilience of Vico's study methods and Lacan's *mi-dire* are akin to the close-up magician's use of repetitive motion to create pockets of invisibility inside ordinary space. These are so-called "sites of exception," what Don Quixote sought to rescue from the evil enchanters (e.g. Positivists and Phenomenologists) who attempted to see the interior of experience "as if" from the outside. Eric Santner's concept of psychotheology (including the space of miracles), fusing Freud and Franz Rosenzweig, is informative to this project; just so the fictional-documentary narratives of W. F. Sebald (*Rings of Saturn*, *Vertigo*, etc.) show how sites of exception work in practice. The final stage, the undoing of the premature "resolution," a **negation of denial** focuses on spatial and temporal reversals, inversions, obversions, and topological paradoxes, which are typically compared to the "Möbius band" structure. Here, diagrams are elevated into an art whose chief danger is that things may be prematurely clarified.

This three-step detoxification program aims to turn architects into idiots.

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February 14, 2012