

T-B A21 2008 seminars
Lopud, 9th to 12th of May
let's go MENTAL

MonuMENTAL

presentations by **Mark Wigley, Francesca von Habsburg, Bjornstjerne Christiansen, Jorge Otero-Pailos, Ognjen Skunca, Helene Furján**

Continuing the discussions of 2007 (reprinted in Future Anterior), we have invited this panel to continue to think about the multiple relationships between the past(s) and future(s) of Lopud. How can we actively make use of or revive the information that is stored in the local places of memory? How can cultural heritage be made accessible without transforming a site into a big open-air museum but rather have qualitative effects? How and where do processes of preserving and remembering take place without abdicating the responsibility towards the present?

Mark Wigley: Since this is the last session each of us on the panel are going to make a series of separate statements that are completely un-choreographed. So there really is no general theme for the last panel, more like a series of six or so, seven parallel statements. And then the parallel processing will come from the audience who will then start immediately. So we actually will deliver our statements and then start talking with you for a while and then we'll eat, right? So this is just a kind of movement from words coming out of the mouth and then food going in.

I was not here on the first day so I didn't hear the toxins argument by **François Roche and Stéphanie Lavaux**. Nevertheless I want to link the question of preservation to the question of toxicity and I'll try to give you some clues as to how these two things might be linked. If you take the question of toxicity, of course it's all a question of concentration as been said before. But to take the most obvious example water is almost completely toxic if you take it in the wrong dose or you put it in the wrong place. Very small amount in your blood and you're finished. Quite a lot you have to drink.

Christian Rättsch: That's not toxicity at all. Sorry. (Laughter)

Mark Wigley: I'm going to argue this. I'm going to argue that anything in an overdose can be toxic, anything, including a panel like this one. (Laughter)

So that would be my first claim built on the question of concentration anyway – and precisely not spoken from the point of expertise, precisely not. Then of course in any situation, even why you would use the word situation is because situation is a word you use to describe the fact that there are a number of heterogeneous systems at work that makes it a situation. So in any situation there are many different systems and obviously what could be considered toxic to one system would be the opposite relative to another. So that would be point number two.

Point number three: the idea that you could always synchronize all the systems so that you could operate in a non-toxic way is impossible and anyway completely uninteresting because that would be the dream of a single system. It seems to me that the dream of a single system is responsible for almost all of the things we refer to with the word "horror." You could argue, and that would be point four, that a system is in fact defined by its toxicity relative to other systems. I'd say what makes a system, what gives character to a system is actually this relativity. And then the fifth point would be that within each system an overdose is not just positive but essential and in fact of course each overdose changes the definition of what a dose is. Within each system there is an incredibly active negotiation that goes on. So in this sense toxicity is a kind of preservation. It's all about preservation so you cannot imagine survival without toxicity. And if toxicity is a question of concentration in this definition, then actually toxicity is a kind of life preserver and so on. So of course it's all a matter of calibration.

Now you can argue the reverse very simply. Preservation is for sure a matter of concentration. It's a matter of measure and a matter of quantity. It's never itself an absolute. Indeed you can argue that what preservationists do is to adjust the concentration of images, of time, and they're really sensitive to how many buildings are being preserved in the most obvious case of a building. And they're adjusting,

they're leaving in place a sort of measure, a certain amount of images of what you think of as the past. Which immediately raises the question which is too big a question for tonight, but can the past be toxic, actually be really a threat? And the answer is for sure yes and without the thought that the past is actually toxic, more dangerous than any dream about the future, preservation would not be operational. Or to put it another way, can you overdose on the past? Again, the answer is yes.

If you believe half of what I said to you before, overdosing on the past is not necessarily a bad thing, might be even an essential thing, might be necessary. But it's seriously a question of overdose which means, there's a trauma, a necessary trauma I would say. The typical model within which we think about preservation is that we live in an age of an overdose of information. And this is the standard definition that everybody is so bombarded with information and the information seems to be ephemeral but the preservationists seem to be a corrective, even a kind of mitigation against us by providing controlled doses of the past, right? So the preservationists see themselves as sort of offering a sort of medical corrective to the overdoses of information or you could even say an overdose of the present. So the past is seen as kind of a corrective operation, and not just that, it is a regulated dose and by regulated I mean the law. Preservation always operates from within the law, so it's a kind of requirement, a required dose of the past. It's a kind of prescription in a quite literal sense. So the preservationist operates with this kind of quasi-medical sensibility that a certain dose of the past will act as a healing, corrective gesture in the face of an unhealthy overdose of information and a loss of the sense of time that comes from that.

So this is a standard scenario. That's a good word, right? Scenario. The standard scenario is the scenario in which the preservationist seems to be a virtuous figure like the good doctor and since my father is a doctor the idea of the bad doctor, the inattentive doctor is actually more interesting for me. So the question is – okay, if this was the case, if the preservationist is offering a dose of the past, carefully

controlled, regulated with the force of law, he/she always seems to be operating in an unhealthy environment, polluted environment. In fact which is why I think Jorge's (Otero Pailos) expertise in the question of cleaning is very, very interesting. It's some kind of a cleansing expertise. Dose of what? If you preserve a building let's say it's a dose of what in the end?

And I want to make the very strong claim that architecture is a rearguard art, that it's actually always the last of the arts to think about a particular question, the very last. So it's not just a rearguard art, it's actually precisely the rearguard art. And precisely because it's a rearguard art, architecture's the single lowest technological field on the planet. You cannot name a discipline that's lower, lower and slower. We are low and slow and philosophical, and we come at the end, right? But just because we're the rearguard, I mean we can be 80, 100, 200 years late and we're still high tech. For example high tech in architecture means large pieces of metal that look like they're put together like a children's set. And the word high tech is used in architecture and nobody laughs. So you see this big building with nuts and bolts and we say "high tech." So you have to understand that we operate on a completely different time zone than humans do. (Laughter) So because architecture is a rearguard art, you could say architecture is always a preservation act because we always come late and we always preserve an image of something. We talk about the future and the present and all of that. But we actually operate very much with the past.

So in a way this kind of preservation involves constructing an image of a kind of unchanging past so we actually constructed a late site. This image can be a few years later; it can be decades late or centuries late, or even a millennia late. A very typical timeframe for architects is between 50 to 80 years. Modern architecture was construed by its promoters as finally, in the 1920s, coming to terms with the consequences in the middle of the 19th century of steel and glass construction that were themselves the consequences of industrialization 100 years before. So

actually the promoters of the radicality of modern architecture insisted that it was 160 years out of date.

So if you think of that, so if you think of the end of architecture as preservation, as the holding of an image, not being at the beginning of a technological shift but actually at the end, at the very end. Basically steel and glass gets monumentalized by architects exactly in the moment in which other technologies become available. So if architecture is a form of preservation then preservation becomes interesting, right? Because preservation of architecture is the preservation of a preservation act. So it's a double act preservation. It's a really tricky thing. So what becomes possible is the kind of avant-garde use of the rearguard role ... And so just a few last words, and I'll try to bring this back to the monastery.

The rearguard, what's the rearguard? Well the rearguard is in the rear. But what they do is they guard the rear also and it's crucial in the military. There's always this – you know, you're the rearguard and actually with the generals, and then there's the main guard and then there's actually another one, there's another guard that's ahead, the scouts. And there's a communication system that links all of them. And for us, 160 years in front of us is the avant-garde and you go back 160 years and we have good communication with the frontlines. What we do is we preserve the rear which means actually what's really threatening is not what lies in front of the avant-garde but what's dying just immediately behind you. And this is where preservation comes in.

The primary purpose of preservation is not to hold the past in front of your eyes but is actually to disguise the loss. So we're exactly the symmetrical opposite of avant-garde which is why for example in the 1920s the words to describe the avant-garde in the arts like alienation and de-familiarization, were opposite words to the words being used by the architects of the same moment. So basically coming from this point of view architecture itself operates by constructing a kind of stable image of

something that's actually just gone. So it's always a kind of monument, always a kind of memorial act. And the fact that it's a memorial act is disguised by this language of modernity and new technology, new ages, new considerations, new ethical concerns and so on.

So ignore the fact that actually what we're doing is just trying to put up a kind of block, a kind of mask of what is actually dying and has gone. So this would lead us then in kind of a full circle to the fact that we normally think of the avant-garde as associated with life, right? And preservation with death. So the preservationist has become sort of mortician who doesn't let a building die, just freezes it in time and takes it out of time and actually stops the building from living in order to dis-avow death, or to say death didn't happen. So if you have this discourse in the avant-garde which is all about life and energy and new sources of inspiration and new sources of energy and so on, the kind of steroid philosophy, then you have steroids at one end and you have embalming fluid at the other end. That's the normal understanding.

But actually what's more radical is the rearguard action and the rearguard of the rearguard, the preserving of architecture. So when you hold a monastery like this one in view, when you as it were allow it to linger there are many, many radical potentials opened up by that. And I think this is what's so interesting about preservation. So the reason I'm saying this of course is because I think the discussion of toxins is so important and I think that the panel discussion this morning was so amazing. It would important to understand the toxicity of preservation itself and in fact it is traditionally giving you a very controlled dose of what you believe to be your past and constructs a nostalgia for a life you never had - which is really the way nostalgia operates.

And it is the controlling of the dose what makes preservation flip from being a kind of anesthetic which is a classical role of preservation. But a slight adjustment of the

dose and it can immediately flip to the most radical accelerant. And I think this would then be the way one could judge all the various decisions about preserving a building like this one. To consider which gestures are more in the anesthetic line and which gestures are more hard core, giving a shock to the system, even risking the health of the system? And I think as I said earlier, these things are never entirely separate. In fact any one preservation project, no matter how radically conservative it is also despite all of that has this absolutely surreal capacity as well.

Preservation is in fact totally strange. It's totally strange. It just doesn't use the language of estrangement. So there's a kind of quiet weirdness to preservation, but there can also be this other mode. So I think the discussions which are coming out of the theorization and the design for the garden of toxins, **The Garden of Earthly Delights**, can also be understood as a more general discussion of the whole project and its potential.

So I think the idea would be now that this is a kind of speech, right? There's going to be a series of these speeches, each of which will be disconnected from each other and therefore will cancel each other out and that will therefore mean there's absolutely no affect on you. (Laughter) So you will sit. You will have the sense that nothing happened.

Bjornstjerne Christiansen: It's my first time visiting here. I would like to talk about my impressions and also what I see in terms of potential of this place. I'm kind of practical in the sense that I like to have things being done, to do stuff, to make things that can be implemented and have consequences on various levels.

I was mostly interested after hearing the project by Francois and Stephanie in what the monastery used to be. I can focus mostly on what art has to offer – in the sense that it is a conversation platform that can generate models and examples. These can

be seen as those and can also be implemented into integral structures where they can have more confronting consequences. It can be use rather directly.

So I was mostly fascinated about the fact that the monastery used to be a conversation platform. Most of all, back then maybe, it was a secret conversation platform, a kind of intellectual property platform. The monks would hide the kind of knowledge they produce. They would test a little bit on people and some on themselves. But they would mostly hide the information from other people. I would like to see this place become the opposite of that – to see it as a conversation platform that is based more on an open knowledge system where everything that would be used here would be open knowledge and open source. It would mean that you could easily research here which I think is being constructed into the conditions for research as an actual place for residencies, with the interest in giving access to artists, for research and production, with money and possibilities. But then it should be possible for artists to do something here to publicize it and I would highly recommend that everything that's made is based on open knowledge, open source. So on the contrary of hiding the information and keeping it secret, instead make it completely open. And of course I believe this is how cultural production is most valuable.

But also you can say that in this situation you have a public of local residents, not so many perhaps. They are here alone seven to eight months a year. Then you have a group of people who all of a sudden come in for three or four months which I would also experiment on. So you could look at that group of people as material. So I'd rather see myself being here, experimenting, and then being able to make models, examples that I will publicize. Sometimes even going into the culture that exists here, both the present and the tourist culture and then see what will come out of that. So this is my immediate response to how I see this place, mostly because I think that for me the most valuable thing you can get as an artist is an opportunity to research properly in a condition where you actually produce something – you could do

something. Because I believe that the most interesting process and development for an artistic work comes when there is production, when there is something to present to the public and I believe very much that you make models, examples, and you try them out. Some of them will fail which is fine. They're still models, examples that maybe can work much better for other people. Again back to not keeping your information separate from all. Bring that forward for others to use in a better way. This is my recommendation, also to the place, mostly because I personally would like to have the opportunity. And so basically I also – I think that it's quite fascinating that you have this group of people here who the population changes so much in one year. I'm also a little bit fascinated about seeing you talk about preservation that maybe originally a little bit – the public who lives here, the residents - maybe once you think about preserving those eight months that they work so hard to have which is something that we all would want to have like a leisure time, free time to do something else than work as mad horses.

Maybe that is maybe the valuable thing, those seven or eight months. I don't know how to use it but you could see as it as capital, something to work with. There are many other things I can say but I think, like I said, this is the first time I'm here but I think that conditions are really good. I have to compliment you. You seem to have an interest in all the projects and so that's good. And also that you want to participate so much. Some artist really don't like that. I really find it very challenging and beautiful but it seems that something's going on and that's why I'm also happy to be here. But make it completely open, an open knowledge system. That's my recommendation.

Biographies

Mark Wigley

Mark Wigley is a dean in the Architecture department at Columbia University. He has a B.Arch., University of Auckland (New Zealand), 1979 and completed his Ph.D. in 1987. He was a resident fellow in the Chicago Institute for Architecture and Urbanism, 1989, and won the International Committee of Architectural Critics (C.I.C.A.) Triennial Award for Architectural Criticism in 1990. He is recipient of the Graham Foundation Grant, 1997. His last book is titled *The Architecture of Deconstruction: Derrida's Haunt* (MIT Press, 2000). He teaches a class on the history of architectural theory.

Superflex - Jakob Fenger / Bjørnstjerne Christiansen

Jakob Fenger (born 1968, DK), Rasmus Nielsen (born 1969, DK), Bjørnstjerne Christiansen (born 1969, DK) all studied at the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts and always exhibit jointly under name Superflex. Their work bridges various cultural fields and they cooperate with people from many different occupational groups.

Superflex's projects often involve the audience and encourage active participation. Superflex often talk about their projects as tools, products or systems that are not the exclusive property of the artists and that only make sense when they are being used or adapted independently by others. Recently they have extended this approach through the development of ideas or strategies as conceptual tools that can be applied to a wide range of situations and the idea of the art world itself as a tool that has a value in and of itself and that can be used to serve diverse ends far beyond the traditional system of galleries, collectors, dealers and museums.
