Fulcrum

ISSUE 87 - MARCH 3, 2014 - CLASS REPRESENTATION

détournement and aesthetics.

m-l.raue

If détournement were extended to urbanistic realisations, not many people would remain unaffected by an exact reconstruction in one city of an entire neighborhood of another. Life can never be too disorienting: détournement on this level would really make it beautiful.

Guy Debord

Détournement implies the combination of two formerly unrelated elements. The more ideologically or morphologically distant these two elements are in the beginning, the more successful becomes the détournement. The effect of détournement is estrangement, permitting a momentary distance between perceiver and perceived object. Precisely in this moment of 'being distant' a sense of awareness is created.

In estranging perception, détournement as an architectural strategy not only bears the potential to disorientate, but also to represent a *class*. A class is therefore a construct, and in order to be recognised as such, it has to be defined — either from within or without. It is through the creation of awareness that a class is formed in the first place. The former aesthetic representation of one specific class could be détourned in order to represent another class.

A sophisticated example of representing a class using détournement is the period of Red Vienna. The social-democratic municipality of the Austrian capital, from 1919 to 1934, implemented a vast reform programme with the aim of emancipating the working class. Public housing was at the core of the scheme, re-deploying the urban courtyard block as its archetypal building form. Precisely through this process of reappropriation the Red Vienna 'Volkswohnungspalast' (translated as 'public housing palace') became the spatial representation of the proletariat.

During the Baroque period the same archetype had constituted the distinctive housing typology of Vienna's aristocracy and a symbol of its political, financial and cultural hegemony. A few centuries later, when the Ringstrasse was constructed and the middle-class became the new powerful ally of the monarchy, the bourgeoisie directly referenced the aristocratic palace — not to express their cultural values, but to maximise rent value. The urban courtyard block developed from a symbol of privilege to an expression of market forces. The distinct aesthetics of a social group were more and more reduced to a generic building mass.

In this context Red Vienna re-enacted the idea of class representation. The strategy of détournement was applied at numerous scales in a variety of ways: the strategic placement of the social housing blocks in the city, the reorganisation of the block in plan, and detailed attention to the aesthetics of the façade. In contrast to the surrounding city, Red Vienna blocks extended the public realm into the courtyard. Their central spaces provided access to the apartments, and at the same time became symbols of communality for the inhabitants. However, it was in the façade that the aesthetics of class representation found its greatest manifestation. This is also where the strategy of détournement becomes most evident. Representational elements of the aristocratic palace (like symmetry) were boldly combined with vernacular elements to form a completely estranging aesthetic. Using ideologically opposing elements the 'public housing palace' was an extreme form of détournement, producing a monster in the city.

The representation of class interests remains important today because a new, yet unrepresented, subject is emerging.

This subject is the result of a shift from labour materialised in a product to labour based on knowledge. Deterritorialised, seamless in his workflow, and producing mainly immaterial output based on communication and information, the precarious worker lacks either security or representation.

Red Vienna reappropriated the urban block in order to represent the working class, and a similar strategy could be developed today: through yet another détournement of an urban archetype, architecture should address the lack of representation faced by the precarious worker.

Marie-Louise Raue is an AA Diploma student researching new forms of public housing and the city of Vienna.
cargocollective.com/marielouiseraue

return the gift.

d.spencer

Architecture today is production without labour. Architecture as autogenesis. Projects are not so much worked upon as shepherded into self-realisation. Forms emerge spontaneously from parametric computation. The architect steps to one side of the production process and the algorithm works its magic. So it seems. The conditions of architectural labour — its extended hours, low paid internships, fixed-term contracts — disappear without trace in its discursive gloss as much as in its final products. The contortions into which its practice is forced by the contradictory and competing demands of accessibility *and* security, of adaptability *and* specificity, are nowhere apparent in architecture's formal resolutions. These speak instead of untroubled elegance, of an easy confluence with natural forces, of morphogenetic ease.

Registered everywhere in contemporary architecture, production appears to issue forth, of its own accord, from a natural order. Material organisations, self-organising systems and metabolic processes are figured, discursively and morphologically, as the manifestations of an innately efficient productivity with which the discipline now identifies itself. The laws of nature legitimate their own replication within architectural production. This proposition is further faciliated by the argument that the algorithm is as much a natural as it is a mathematical operation; that calculation, programming and processing span the worlds of nature and culture to constitute universal paradigms with which architecture must necessarily align itself.

All of this argues for a significant reformulation of Marx's account of labour and its relationship to nature. Where, in *Wage Labour and Capital*, he writes that 'human beings work not only upon nature, but also upon one another', that they produce themselves as social beings through their 'influence upon nature', it now seems that nature works on and through human beings and, in the process, that it orders their social relations on the basis of its own organisational models. The corollary of which is that we are divested of any claim to our definitive 'species being', that we relinquish our capacities for the 'fashioning of the objective' through which, as Marx wrote in his *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* of 1844, 'nature appears' as man's 'work and reality.' We are exhorted instead to resign ourselves to the 'life activity' of the animal. In effect the subject is divested of the property of labour and becomes the object of production.

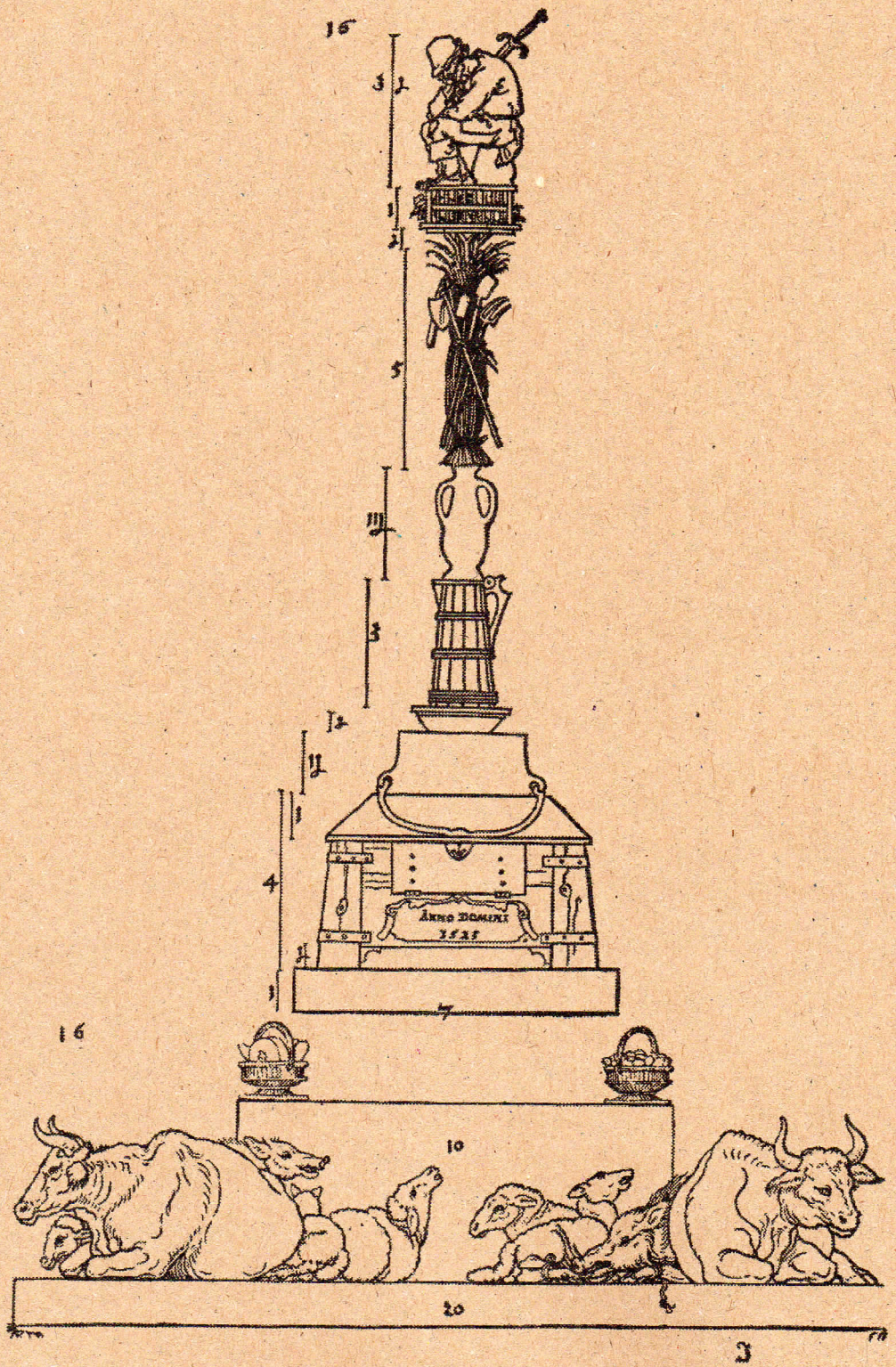
Baudrillard already said something like this in *Symbolic Exchange and Death*: 'Contrary to all appearances and experience … capital gives labour to the worker … it is the capitalist who gives, who has the initiative of the gift.' Now, however, this gift, as it finds its expression in architecture, appears as a fact of nature. The donor's identity is protected and the economic and governmental imperatives served, alongside the very idea of labour, rendered obscure. Production is presented now as a gift of nature, an obligation requiring in return that the subject become, in expiation, its naturally acquiescent medium of exchange.

The class of precarious workers lacks representation in architecture, then, not least because so much of contemporary architectural discourse and practice has lent itself to the occultation of labour; to producing, within itself and in its output, the disappearance of the very activity on which this class's identity and critical self-consciousness might be based.

We can at least, though, recognise the crisis of labour in architecture precisely in its efforts to assume forms that appear shaped by natural forces and processes.

In its inevitably stiff approximations of organic malleability it realises, after all, only the reification of nature. In its over-insitence upon morphopogical elegance it lets slip the work of artifice at the heart of architectural production.

Douglas Spencer is an architectural theorist. His forthcoming book *The Architecture of Neoliberalism* is from Bloomsbury.
spatialregister.wordpress.com



Albrecht Dürer's aesthetically problematic Monument to the Peasant's Revolt, 1525.