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what is formalism?

j.rowen

Over the past three decades, experiments in architectural form have been as varied as they have been unrestrained. But judgment of these forms has presented a recurrent problem: without an agreed upon set of conventions, the only universally applicable way of evaluating the success or failure of these experiments is to examine the immanent rules and presuppositions of those forms. The notion of bracketing several facets of a particular work in order to scrutinise only the internal aspects of that work can therefore be highly productive; in other words, methods of formalism have as much utility now as ever.

Formalism is not, and has never been, a way of *making* anything. Instead, in each of its various guises, formalism has always been a mode of *looking* at things. Formalism is a means of responding to works; to draw an architectural proposal based on the information gleaned from looking at a work of architecture would be to have left the realm of formalism or even of active interpretation and entered into creation, without the substrate of another work's forms (which are necessary for any formalism).

There cannot be formalist architecture, only formalist critiques of architecture.

Formalism is not, however, just a mode of looking (or explaining, or evaluating). It is a restrictive mode of looking, a code for looking, that tells one not only specifically what to look at, but also what *not* to look at. Bracketing elements of, alternatively, intention, biography, chronology, history, context (or some combination of those or other factors) undergirds any formalist method, with a view to concentrating on form alone. The restrictions and rules of formalism, therefore, are in place as a device for focusing on one aspect of a work — its form — to the exclusion of anything else.

This act of exclusion is one reason why formalism is much easier to describe negatively, in regard to what it isn't, than to define it in exact terms. One knows that formalism is not historical criticism or explicitly political criticism, or even stylistic or structural criticism (although it may utilise elements of each; any "pure," totally exclusionary formalism could only ever amount to simply pre-critical aesthetic description) — but the exact methods of formalism must be defined each time one attempts this type of criticism. Thus formalism is better understood in the plural, as formalisms.

If formalist methods are so strictly devoted to isolating the form of a work at the expense of all other properties, one has to ask: why is consideration of forms worthwhile? In order to address this question, it is important to recognise that, by eschewing some aspects of a work and not others, formalisms create boundaries within which they can operate. For example, Paul de Man argues that formalism might include indications of intentionality, but the author should be shut out. Any formalist method draws boundaries between inside and outside, creating a frame around the work, within which the formalist can do her work; breaching that frame wouldn't be allowed. Form, then, may be defined as the particular principles that a work follows, which allow a frame to be put in place that differentiates the particular work from others or from its surroundings. Forms, then, are worthwhile because they are the means by which works differentiate themselves. Consequently, as perceiving subjects, the tools for us to consider works are provided to us by a its form.

Our responsibility is not just to look, but to attentively seek out the rules of a work, and formalisms are the means for identifying those rules. In order to focus on a work's form, one needs to commit oneself to showing "*how it is what it is*, even *that it is what it is*," a surprisingly difficult task requiring immense concentration. In today's world of links and connections, attention to a particular work for some period of time represents a political position that consciously assumes that we, as perceivers, are responsible for making sense of, and ultimately formulating, the world around us. For those of us who spend our time looking and thinking on architecture, these methods ensure that we continually ask what what we mean when we call something architecture.

Jonah Rowen lives and works in Los Angeles. He is an instructor at the Southern California Institute of Architecture and an editor of *Project*.

on reflections.

w.hampel

"When I use a word," Humpty Dumpty said, in rather a scornful tone, "it means just what I choose it to mean — neither more nor less."

Through the Looking-Glass

In principle, the function of architecture lies in the establishment of a boundary between an inside and an outside; it manifests both a form and a content, and thus a most emblematic unity of opposites.

Obviously, this duality is not a trait specific to architecture — in literature, for example, form is usually associated with the appearance or style of a piece of writing, while the content relates to its meaning, message or even to mere information. But evidently these antipodes are unconditionally interwoven, as Hegel notes: "content is nothing but the revulsion of form into content, and form nothing but the revulsion of content into form."

Who would declare that a poem, a novel, an essay is defined exclusively by *what* it says and not by *how* it says it? However, when a text is translated from one language to another, the content is cast into another form — which must consequently affect the content itself. What then is the relation between mould and cast? What mode of signification does the linguistic offspring have, if, as Derrida described, the quest for a relevant "translation is as necessary, as it is impossible?"

A strong stance on this question was proposed by Walter Benjamin, who must have been well aware of this inherent contradiction, calling his 1923 essay on the topic "*The Aufgabe* (which, as de Man has pointed out, denotes both the 'task' and the act of 'giving up') of the Translator."

In this text Benjamin vehemently argues (particularly with regard to poetry) that "the translation's language can, indeed must, free itself from bondage to meaning," whereby the translation constitutes an extension to the original text, and is not simply a reproduction of it (which in any case it cannot become).

This is to be achieved by utmost fidelity towards the word — and not towards the sentence, and hence the original's meaning. He concludes the corresponding paragraph with an elucidating architectural allegory: "For the sentence is the wall in front of the language, and word-for-word rendering is the arcade."

It should be emphasised that this aphorism here appears itself in translation, and thus evidently transformed in respect to both its form and content: while for example the German *Arkade* refers primarily to an archway (or even a single arch), the translation into the nearly identical *arcade* inconspicuously incorporates the connotation of a shopping arcade, that of the glazed passage — whereby the English form obviously carries slightly, but distinctly different associations, which are in turn reflected back onto the perception of the content.

Even this minor (and inevitable) deflection of the initial statement exemplifies that in any translation it comes down to a choice, there can never be exact correspondence with the original, there can only be a stance towards it — as form and content are inextricably and unavoidably associated in any kind of expression.

Form follows content, content follows form; or rather they unfold like reflections of one another. This is not to say that a specific content or form is a priori tied to a singular mirror image — but rather that they are bound to each other in perpetual interplay.

In translation, however, this dualistic form/content affiliation is expanded: the content of a translated text is related to both the content — and thereby the form — of the original and to its own, newly found form. — confirming the nature of a translation as not only a reflection *of*, but also *on* the original.

Winston Hampel is currently enrolled in the History & Critical Thinking programme at the Architectural Association.

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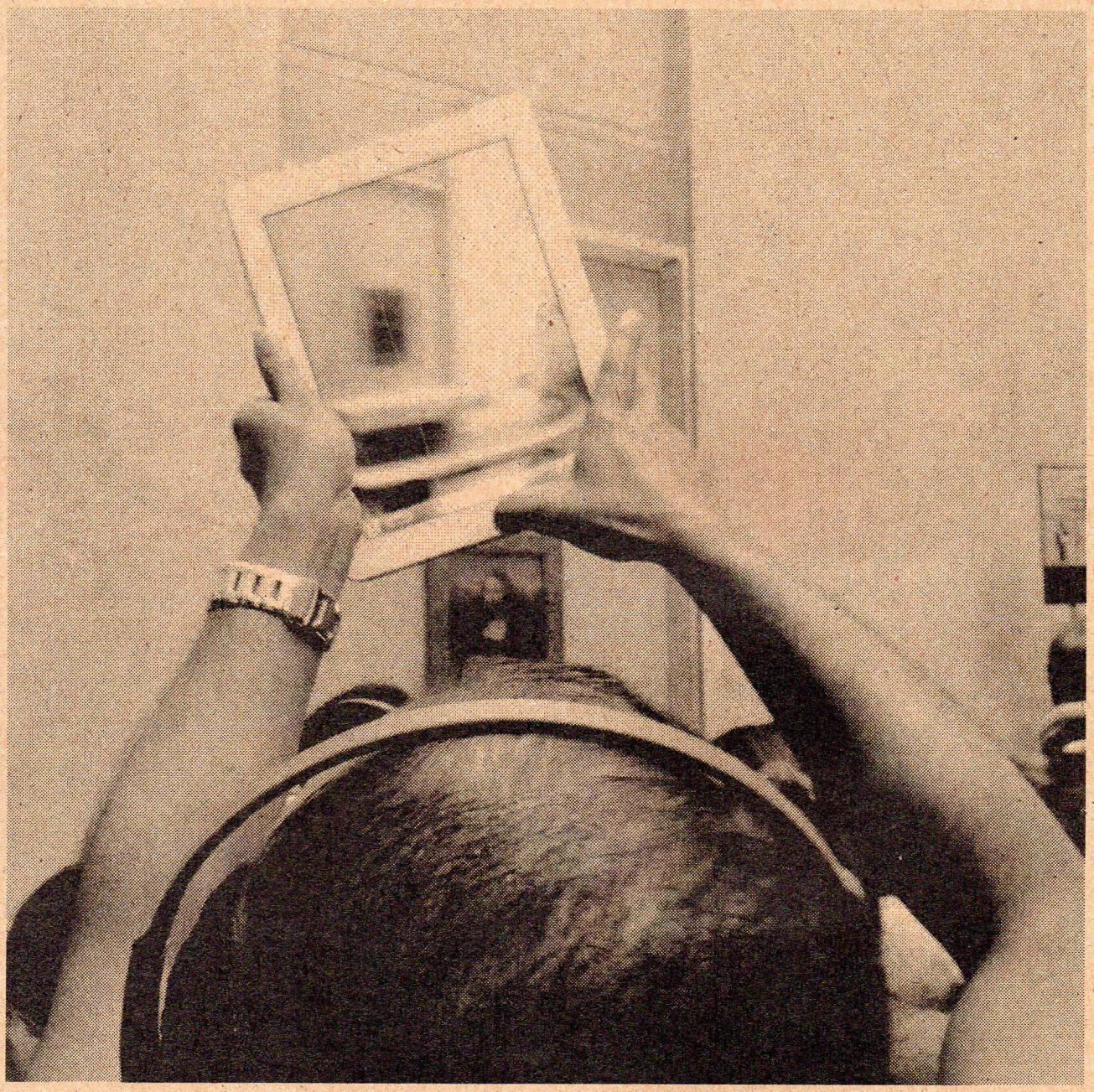

Visiting the Mona Lisa.