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The Critic As Producer: An Essay on Essays On Architecture

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THE EFFORT OF THE ESSAY REFLECTS A CHILDLIKE FREEDOM THAT CATCHES FIRE, WITHOUT SCRUPLE, ON WHAT OTHERS HAVE ALREADY DONE.
—T.W. ADORNO, "THE ESSAY AS FORM"

This is an essay. But what makes it one?

I could start by calling it a kind of stocktaking, an attempt at thinking about the state of critical discourse within the many forms of architectural media. In this sentence, the word *attempt* wouldn't signal self-deprecation so much as the etymological underpinnings of the word itself, the Old French *essayer,* "to try your hand at something." This root gives us the wonderful if mildly archaic verb form of *essay*—the more engagingly lithe sibling of *assay*, which sounds Shakespearean but which picked up a metallurgical connotation along the way. Play it further back and you find the Latin *exigere* and *exagium*, "to ascertain the weight of something." Perhaps then an essay on architecture asks not how much your building weighs, as Buckminster Fuller famously put it, but how much its ideas do.

I could also start historically. The genre of the essay (or at least its name) was given to us late in the sixteenth century by Michel de Montaigne, an avuncular gift from an elder statesman "for the pleasure of my relatives and friends so that, when they have lost me, which soon they must, they may recover some features of my character and disposition." [1] Montaigne saw the unique double personality of his texts—scholarly but subjective, rigorous but incomplete, exercising judgment without being judgmental—and knew just the right word to group them under, *essais*, because they were "attempts," nothing more and nothing less. Centuries later, Georg Lukács would tease "the great Sieur de Montaigne" by claiming that "the simple modesty of this word is an arrogant courtesy" by which "the essayist dismisses his own proud hopes which sometimes lead him to believe that he has come close to the ultimate." The notion of the essay as attempt, for Lukács, was both an aggrandizement of the individual idea and a demure admission of "the eternal smallness of the most profound work of the intellect in the face of life." [2] This tension remains integral to the form.

Each of Montaigne's 107 chapters in *Les Essais* follows this simultaneously declamatory and deferential model. They are all statements of

[1] Michel de Montaigne, "To the Reader" (1580), *Essays*, trans. J.M. Cohen (New York: Penguin Books, 1958), 23. Cohen's introduction to this volume also offers a good primer on the essay form.

[2] Georg Lukács, "On the Nature and Form of the Essay," trans. Anna Bostok, *Soul and Form* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1974).

tentative belief, leavened with a welcome frankness about Montaigne's own particularities, his distinct existence within those beliefs, and an inquisitive sensibility. He experiments, he tests himself (on the strictly unsystematic subjects of education, relationships, smells, idleness, cannibalism, clothes, etc.), and his project of finding himself through the examination of ideas gave rise to a fertile form of writing. His note to the reader, signed March 1, 1580, ends with a characteristic equivocation: "I am myself the substance of my book, and there is no reason why you should waste your leisure on so frivolous and unrewarding a subject." [3] We have been reading him ever since.

[3] Montaigne, *Essays,* 23.

While nobody quite duplicated Montaigne's idiosyncratic marriage of philosophy and autobiography, his legacy runs broadly through the literature of the Enlightenment—Descartes, Voltaire, Rousseau, Emerson. Alexander Pope's "An Essay on Criticism" of 1711, written in heroic couplets, contains a number of his most famous *bon mots* but also an acknowledgment and embrace of the Montaignean critical–individualist ethos: "'Tis with our judgments as our watches, none / Go just alike, yet each believes his own." [4] In comparison, John Richardson's connoisseurial, report-card-giving *Essay on the Whole Art of Criticism as It Relates to Painting* of 1719—a foundational text for English art theory as we know it—comes across as schematic, scientistic, and authoritative, more treatise than essay. And yet, Richardson's use of the essay form helped lay the groundwork for texts like Hogarth's *Analysis of Beauty* (1753) and a general flourishing of the essay form in the arts in the second half of the eighteenth century, in England and France especially (a turn, not incidentally, that relates to the simultaneous flourishing of major art exhibitions—making today's comparative lack of good criticism around a proliferating industry of architectural exhibitions all the more ironic). Essays have a way of sparking critical disciplines around themselves. They explore a ground that is to some extent unmapped, and in so doing, they sometimes imply new fields of thought.

[4] Alexander Pope, "An Essay on Criticism" (1711).

Or perhaps it's best to start architecturally, with the first slide of the first lecture of the "1750–Present" survey course known to many architecture students:

Engraving by Charles Eisen of a primitive hut, used as the frontispiece to the second edition of Marc-Antoine Laugier's *Essai sur l'architecture* of 1755.

Likelier than not, the architectural canon bracketed by these commonplace dates begins not with a building but with an essay. In 1753, Marc-Antoine Laugier wrote what is surely the most famous essay on architecture—partially for having claimed the title *Essai sur l'architecture* early on, partially for the famously allegorical frontispiece of its second edition, which describes the tectonic origins of the primitive hut, but largely for the strength of its commitments, the vivid rhetoric of its arguments, and an emphasis on shaping popular opinion rather than conferring legitimacy through received wisdom. As with Hogarth's essay of the same year, it can be read as an attempt to replace connoisseurship in architecture with a new rubric of making judgments—principles, yes, but derived argumentatively and not through established tradition.

Laugier's first sentence: "There are several treatises on architecture which explain measures and proportions with reasonable accuracy, enter into the details of the different Orders and furnish models for all manner of buildings." Thus he dispenses with Vitruvius, Alberti, Serlio, Perrault, and the wealth of architectural writing that came before him—these are useful texts, vital even, and full of potentially productive information, but they aren't a point of urgency for what Laugier has to say. His second sentence: "There is no work as yet that firmly establishes the principles of architecture, explains its true spirit and proposes rules for guiding talent and defining taste." [5] The essay form enters into architecture at this moment, as Laugier attempts to outline why the rustic hut and the Maison Carrée excite in him such delight, and to communicate that delight to an audience that was explicitly not limited to architects. Such a piece had to be written not from a position of experience and authority, exactly—and these were two things this Jesuit priest had little of where buildings were concerned—but rather as a heartfelt missive from an author who wanted to expand the question of architectural opinion beyond the confines of what was generally agreed to be the knowledge of the preceding centuries.

[5] Marc-Antoine Laugier, *An Essay on Architecture* (1753), trans. Wolfgang and Anni Herrmann (Los Angeles: Hennessey and Ingalls, 1977), 1.

Historical surveys begin with Laugier's *Essai sur l'architecture* because we love origin myths, and Laugier tells a fine one, couched in the language of rationality and natural law. But his replacement of the treatise with the argumentative essay also marks an important turn in the discursive construction of the field that we call architecture. [6] The essay has since become one of the central means of discussing the stakes of books and buildings—appealing to personal judgment with a dose of expertise, framing the act of design within a cultural and political milieu while holding firm to particular articles of unmoving faith (whether universal or particular). If buildings are indeed the stuff of architectural history, essays illuminate our changing understanding of those buildings. The history of architectural ideas is a history of essays as much as a history of artifacts.

[6] Wolfgang and Anni Herrmann have noted that in 1759, Laugier went as far as working out "a detailed scheme for a journal devoted exclusively to the discussion of every aspect of the arts, of architecture, painting, and sculpture as well as the applied arts, giving information on artists and reviewing books dealing with the arts…what would have become the first art periodical in history." It met with considerable resistance from artists, who still resisted the idea that critical voices could exist independently of the artistic establishment. See Laugier, *An Essay on Architecture*, xv-xvi.

Indeed, compiling a genealogy of essays on architecture could continue almost endlessly, stopping in at William Gilpin's essays on the picturesque, or the essayistic responses of Semper and Ruskin to the Crystal Palace of 1851, or early textual touchstones of modernism like "The Tall Office Building Artistically Considered," "City Planning According to Artistic Principles," and "Ornament and Crime." These are not manifestos, nor are they histories, nor are they descriptions of projects—in each case we

find a polemical thinking-in-public that shapes the architectural discipline and also the popular response to it. But all essays are necessarily partial, and this one will turn instead to a moment when the political potential of the essay form gained a newfound importance, as industrialization and social change were effecting radical transformations on the modern metropolis.

It's no coincidence that the major proponents of critical theory in the twentieth century, and the Frankfurt School in particular, adopted the essay as a potentially transformative literary form. One might even argue the inverse, that the genre of the essay—in its structural aspects and its intellectual lineage—in some sense demanded the rise of critical theory, being a form of thought uniquely suited to a certain form of writing. Looking back on the Frankfurt School heyday from the vantage point of the 1950s in "The Essay as Form," Theodor Adorno points to the "anachronistic relevance" of the essay genre, untimely but still potent in its ability "to polarize the opaque, to unbind the powers latent in it." (This "anachronistic relevance" is indirectly taken up by Terry Eagleton's *The Function of Criticism*, which argues that "the role of the contemporary critic, then, is a *traditional* one…not to invent some fashionable new function for it.") [7] The political charge of the essay is exercised against the rigidity of thought itself, under the premise that changing reality starts with changing how we think about the real. "By transgressing the orthodoxy of thought," Adorno continues, "something becomes visible in the object which it is orthodoxy's secret purpose to keep invisible." [8]

[7] Terry Eagleton, *The Function of Criticism* (London: Verso, 1984), 123.

[8] T.W. Adorno, "The Essay as Form," trans. Bob Hullot-Kentor and Frederic Will, *New German Critique* 32 (Spring–Summer 1984): 170-171.

Coming after Germany's "unsuccessful and lukewarm Enlightenment"—by which Adorno meant that intellectual work had only partially achieved real freedom from "higher authority"—the essay is opportunistically fluid, refusing categorization in the hopes of producing something new and standing both within and without the traditional structures of academia. "The essay," he writes, "does not permit its domain to be prescribed. Instead of achieving something scientifically, or creating something artistically, the effort of the essay reflects a childlike freedom that catches fire, without scruple, on what others have already done." As had been the case throughout the history of the essay, it is seen as a contingent form of writing without pretense of totality, universality, or authority: "It does not begin with Adam and Eve but with what it wants to discuss; it says what is at issue and stops where it feels itself complete—not where nothing is left to say.… Its concepts are neither deduced from any first principle nor do they come full circle and arrive at a final principle." [9] Adorno is following here on Georg Lukács, whose "On the Nature and Form of the Essay" of 1910, framed as a personal letter to Leo Popper, posited that the essay might provide "a conceptual re-ordering of life," one distinct from "the icy, final perfection of philosophy." [10] (And, of course, both are following here on Montaigne, who made much the same point, if more modestly: "Could my mind find a firm footing, I should not be making essays, but coming to conclusions.") [11]

[9] Adorno, "The Essay as Form," 152.

[10] Lukács, "On the Nature and Form of the Essay," 1.

[11] Montaigne, "On Repentance," in *Essays*, 235.

Perhaps the most canonical account of the critic's mandate can be found in Walter Benjamin's "The Author as Producer," in which he discusses the work of Sergei Tretiakov. "His mission is not to report but to struggle, not to play the spectator but to intervene actively," Benjamin

writes. "He defines this mission in the account he gives of his own activity." [12] In short, he essays. This two-part description of the Tretiakovian "mission"—the writer's obligation to see the critical act as a form of political intervention rather than description, and to position that critical act within a field of discourse and within a socioeconomic order—is what endures, more than Tretiakov's specific politics (as with each of these figures, he occupied a historical moment and a political position that doesn't require recuperation for the present). Benjamin's interest lies mainly with the change that Tretiakov provokes in "the conventional distinction between genres, between writer and poet, between scholar and popularizer…between reader and author." [13]

[12] Walter Benjamin, "The Author as Producer" (1934), in *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility and Other Writings on Media*, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Brigid Doherty, and Thomas Y. Levine (Cambridge: The Belknap Press, 2008), 81.

[13] Benjamin, "The Author as Producer," 83.

Interrogating those conceptual structures that are most taken for granted, for Benjamin as for his compatriots, was the critical form of production opened up by the essay form. One need not traffic in nostalgia for the interwar European left (nor for the idealism of the public sphere of print culture somewhat optimistically described by Jürgen Habermas) to think that such conceptual reordering remains urgent in our present architectural, cultural, and political milieus. To write is, in its modest but ever necessary way, to participate.

Every age brings its own conventional distinctions, and the essay form remains an important tool for illuminating and even sometimes undoing them. We are at a moment in architecture when the specialization of intellectual labor has created its own conventions—in particular a dissociation between architectural production and architectural critique. This is a rift that has gone by many names, and has produced an outsized atmosphere of anxiety, but has also found palpable shape in a discipline that increasingly sees its critical apparatus, if you will, existing to the side of architectural pedagogy and practice.

Depending on your vantage point, you might link this to any number of causes, each of which is too simplistic on its own. The expansion of PhD and non-design master's programs across the past few decades has created separate credentialing tracks for practitioners and scholars/critics, meaning that much of the best criticism is housed in specific trade journals that don't reach the larger discipline. (This institutional transformation has another side effect, by which architects, knowing that these writerly cadres are receiving this training, slip into a comfortable sense that someone else is out there to do the critical work.) For practitioners, especially those of an academic stripe, the idea of research in the form of iterative experiment and serial information gathering has seen a remarkable expansion in the past decade, often quite productively—but this focus has also displaced critique and informed dialogue in favor of apparently nonjudgmental research practices. Writing about one's interests, or one's own work, has become more common than thinking through the work of someone else; we perform the conventional roles that seem appropriate to our work, rarely troubling those distinctions. And for all of the common language that passes across the divisions that define different forms of professional participation in the world of architecture, there remain few common platforms for discussion.

Much has been made recently of a "crisis of criticism" in architecture—to such an extent that metacriticism, or the criticism of criticism

itself, sometimes seems to have outstripped actual discussion of buildings and books. [14] We write amply about the decline of writing. But look again—there is fantastic critical work happening across the discipline, with an always expanding horizon of what constitutes the field of architecture. Schools are producing increasingly skilled cohorts of thinkers and writers. Important ideas are in the air, and the critics at major newspapers are more frequently augmenting their "architectural" analysis with questions of politics, labor, ecology, and culture, among others. As Eagleton noted (making use of Benjamin's chosen word to describe Tretiakov's work), criticism as we know it was born of a struggle against absolutism—and there remain plenty of writers willing to engage in struggles against our era's own hegemonies, and for whom the critical essay is indispensable.

The essay form has also achieved a place of privilege in architecture's current media sphere. To a remarkable extent, architectural publishing is turning to the essay, in the guise of the small book, the pamphlet, or the ebook, as a preferred way of presenting ideas—to see this in action, one need only look at the excellent Strelka Press (edited by Justin McGuirk), Sternberg's Critical Spatial Practices series (edited by Nikolaus Hirsch and Markus Miessen), the AA's Architecture Words series (directed by Brett Steele), or some of the projects undertaken by our own Office of Publications at Columbia University GSAPP. Portable, digestible, and text-centered, these essays/books mount a resistance against the hyper-aestheticized gloss so common to architectural publishing, and against the regrettably persistent idea that the field of architecture doesn't need to think too hard about what its products do in the world. One could argue that the twenty-first century's fascination with the essay sidesteps scholarly depth—but this has always been a part of the essay genre, and given the incisive work being done by this generation's architectural historians, the more pressing question is how the emerging sensibilities and ideas of scholarship might reenter the world of more casual reading.

It hardly needs to be said that architecture's digital reading culture has, for the most part, not kept pace. The major websites are oriented toward the self-promotional, the image-based, and the uncomplicated (in marked contrast to many other fields, for which the Web has become a space of lively and experimental writing and debate—in literature alone one finds the *New Inquiry*, *Public Books*, *n+1*, the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, to name but a few). If our most ubiquitous sites of architectural media sometimes add critical features and editorials, that work, even when excellent, has the effect of a compensatory pocket of thoughtful discussion that legitimates the larger promotional enterprise. There are, of course, invaluable individual voices across the blogosphere. These voices require (and reward) seeking out, and these writers give cause to think that there might be room for a digital journal like this one—and that the Web, that "scene of the limitless debasement of the word," as Benjamin might have put it, already has ample pockets of thoughtfulness amid the impatience that accompanies the medium. [15]

This is the terrain into which the *Avery Review* essays, in the dual spirit of ambition and deference that Lukács found so integral to the form. Whether something emerges from this experimental space for essayistic

[14] A recent issue of *Volume* magazine devoted to "ways of being critical" explores this changing nature of architectural criticism.

[15] Benjamin, "The Author as Producer," 83. Benjamin is here quoting from another of his own essays, titled "The Newspaper," also from 1934.

reviewing remains to be seen. Like any essay, this project is an "attempt," one that opens a question without certainty as to where it leads, and whose success will be determined by the dialogue that takes place. To paraphrase Montaigne, the writers collected here are themselves the substance of this website, and we hope that you'll join them—as readers, writers, architects, critics—as we collectively work toward producing a discipline that's a little bit different from the one we know.