

1,000 HOLES IN THE WALL: METAPHORS FOR THE END

“There is a crack in everything. *That’s how the light gets in.*”¹ – Leonard Cohen et al. (1992)

We should begin with: IT IS A WALL.



Image – Pablo Román, “The Wall,” Vienna, 2013.

0/ ABSTRACT

“Vienna” or “The Wall” is an ongoing project by architect/artist Pablo Román that, upon its completion, will consist of the round number of 1,000 images taped onto an off-white wall. One of the many walls he has designed/produced in the past months (architectural or otherwise), its elementary condition is at the same time enhanced and diminished by its very presence as wall-cum-images, or as images-out-of-a-wall, eroding its foundational condition to a flickering-tele-techno-pixelated spectral apparatus. Its radically modern *and* outdated presence reconfigures contemporary reflections on what architecture and what the modern is, indirectly referencing “Fundamentals,” the 2014 Venice Architecture Biennale curated by Rem Koolhaas.²

1/ PLATO’S CAVE

There is a crack in Plato’s wall. Perhaps it is called “The End,” perhaps it is called “Rebirth.” Since time immemorial images have appeared and disappeared through the aegis of the wall or

screen. If the 2014 Venice Biennale has anything to offer, other than a perverse denunciation of Modernism (and by inference Modernity), its somewhat prosaic section entitled “Elements of Architecture” conveys the sense that architectural metaphors still have resonance, even if the installations in this section were generally extolling the virtues of architectural techno-hubris.

In its classificatory (and somehow exhausting) archive-like ambition, the somewhat pedantic elemental aspects of the central pavilion flicker forever under the generic light of Boom(ing) design, a somehow dematerialized and deceiving presence. Or, walls supporting nothing, ceilings enclosing nothing, stairs connecting nothing, windows opening to pure nothingness, doors connecting/segregating nothing, corridors leading nowhere; in fact, nothing, turned into nothing more. The sheer catalog of the foundations/fundamentals of architecture was turned into standard supermarket aisles, a trade-show spectacle of sponsored and branded bric-à-brac, postmodernity finally overcoming the plain white cloth of the 1980 Portoghesi-curated Biennale 34 years earlier.

Elements of architecture, nevertheless, remain what they are: fundamentals of representation (or building blocks for errant children).

Take for example the wall. A wall, the wall, is of course, a *support*, but it is more than a mere support in its physical-mechanical sense. It is (among other things) a surface of appearance (for spectral images); and it is also, as all architects only know too well, a support in the sense of a *subiectum*: a material substratum that is present as such, yet not represented. What lies below a wall? What is shown in the very envelope of the wall? Both shallow and deep, the wall has been endlessly problematized by architectural theorists, and still remains a wall. Remains, resists, supports: not that it only supports loads (as ghastly, Schopenhauer-like *monstrum*), but lightness as well, yet through the disembodied flickering of holy and unholy specters (images).

In addition, a wall is also always positioned in a political way: it occupies a space that cannot be occupied at the same time for any other purpose or for any other *subiectum*; it claims space as its own and expels (violently) whatever other thing that may try to interfere, cross or transgress it. What is on one side of the wall cannot go through to other side without violence, its stubborn materiality never more dull and opaque. Yet, consistent with the modernist white cube (gallery), it might also be populated by as many ghosts-masks as one may like; or one may fit or project onto the wall – say, 1,000 images. Today, even if we have the option of translucent concrete and fiber optic walls, those that quite literally might under the right conditions transmit on one side what is passing on the other, the wall remains ineluctably stranded *as wall*.³

Is this to say, then, that the wall is only its materiality, that it does not have any other meaning than either the one that can be applied (stuck) to its surface or the one derived from its physical material, no matter how techno-mediated (as with the kinetic wall)? What about, then, metaphor? Architectural meaning is always metaphorical, even when it pretends to be either technocratic or natural. Such as with political regimes, a technocratic solution almost always fails – for, it is a presumption to objectivity, which is, of course, impossible in the realms of metaphor or ideology. Taking the wall as a metaphor does not mean departing totally from its “materiality” (i.e., the technique of its construction), since the “applied” images cannot exist without this techno-ontological support (no matter how free, evanescent, or tele-spectral they may seem).

The images require the physical support to *have* sense: there is nothing totally free-floating. But, on the other hand, and images being masks, such walls with images question, or quietly (perhaps preternaturally) reference, the death mask (hence the support of the wall as a dead body), and the mask invokes, as impersonation (mask=person and vice versa), Levinasian hyper-subjectivized time-space. In terms of politics, then, Régis Debray may say – correctly – that De Gaulle is more interesting than Mitterrand (and certainly Sarkozy).⁴ “More interesting” because of the absolute necessity of ideology versus its simulation – which translates back to Architecture in the sense that forms mean nothing unless they also mean something beyond their own pathetic and willful condition (thus, too, the curse of contemporary politics).



Image – Pablo Román, “The Wall,” Vienna, 2013.

2/ 1,000 SUNS

The atomic bomb has often been referred to as 1,000 suns.⁵ Walls covered with images also connote a post-Hiroshima wall, those walls that survived the inferno but are marked by vaporized being. Rebirth cannot be otherwise than a tainted, deformed, radioactive rebirth. Yes, life goes on, but at what price!

3/ 1,001 NIGHTS

The image of the *One Thousand and One Nights* is perfect in this regard. The figure of 1,000 is expressive of completion and 1,001 seems to confer incompleteness, as in no literal end or, again, rebirth. Dawdling never really works.

This figure, with its numerical, perhaps symbolic value is the very incarnation of modernity: the daily night crisis that at the same time forbids and allows perfect realization.

Modernity, if 500 years old, 1,000 years old, or 2,000 years old, is molting. Walls molt just as birds molt, or as snakes shed their skins. There is no crisis that should go unused.

Curiously enough, the story that recommences every night, repeating the same pattern and hence forbidding any narrative progress (which, of course, accounts for the survival of the feminine narrator), shows a too-intriguing coincidence with the very story of the “modern” and both the continuous efforts to dating its closure (and hence allowing the beginning of a new era, our own epoch) and its continuous resurfacing of what still is a modern time. And so it seems that modern times, like the dawn after the night of every one of the 1,001 nights, brings again a new period that, not being modern, is – paradoxically – the horizon of the modern, as if after the first moment modernity was identified as the wish-time to come, like a horizon, constantly receding only to re-appear “else-where,” bureaucratic-like, stating the obvious, “Closed. Come back tomorrow.” This is, of course, what etymologically transpires within the “modern”: for example, the third- to fifth-century Latin term *modernus*,⁶ meaning “now,” and, perhaps appropriately, “not ancient.” The dialectic between what remains (what *is*) or actual (even recent) and what is not, by opposition, or ancient, is one that, constantly renewed, cannot be superseded in Hegelian dialectical terms but is constantly re-enacted as the absent question that no one wants to ask any longer because it cannot be answered definitively. If Heinrich Hübsch issued the question in 1828 via *In Which Style Should We Build?*, 186 years later the question remains the same, being nurtured each night by the promise of a modern architecture to come that, Dorian Gray-like, each morning appears as dated as ever.

Jean-François Lyotard stated or configured this conundrum as follows: “Modernity is constitutionally and ceaselessly pregnant with its postmodernity.”⁷ The new-born baby comes to walk among us, the living, in the form of the only-too-well-known specter of repetition. Would 1,001 images suffice to explain this horrendous but perfectly appropriate “day-to-day” presence?

GK + JVC

ENDNOTES

¹ Mike Strange, Leonard Cohen, Shanna Crooks, “Anthem,” *The Future* (1992), Sony/ATV Songs LLC, Stranger Music Inc., Shanna Crooks Songs. “Ring the bells that still can ring ...” Ibid. “Anthem” is available for a ringtone on your mobile phone. See: <http://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/leonardcohen/anthem.html>.

² “Fundamentals,” 14th Mostra Internazionale di Architettura, June 6 through November 23, 2014.

³ Section 9 of “Elements of Architecture” addressed this situation through the tri-partite exhibition of: A/ a seventeenth-century Huis Huydecoper stone wall; B/ a period wall by Neil England; and C/ a Barkow Leibenger kinetic wall.

⁴ See Régis Debray, *Charles De Gaulle: Futurist of the Nation*, trans. John Howe (London: Verso, 1994). First published *A demain de Gaulle* (Paris: Gallimard, 1990).

⁵ Robert Oppenheimer is credited with making the analogy, in 1945, but by appropriation. The image appears in *The Bhagavad Gita*, which Oppenheimer had read.

⁶ Late Latin, from *modo*.

⁷ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), p. 25. First published *L'inhumain: Causeries sur le temps* (Paris: Galilée, 1988).