

EDITORIALS

A Particular Encounter

Defined by domestic ritual, a house speaks to “houses” of many other times and places; it occupies the enviable condition of simultaneity. The resonance of the individual architectural project holds true within other building typologies as well.

At the same time, individual architects often wish to bring something of their particular selves to the architecture project, to enliven it, to particularize it as we are. Architecture is not necessarily responsive to this particular calling.

Our human dilemma is that while we identify ourselves and our work with the particulars of our individual being, these are always subject to universals. The particular and collective dimensions of living were, of course, fiercely debated in Vienna between Freud and that notorious circle defined by Wittgenstein, Kraus, Schoenberg and Loos—the contest between the determination of an organism and the life of language.

If we boldly make a claim for the individual life, then we can say that while architecture lives many lives, we each live but one particular life; or as Milan Kundera wrote in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*,

“We can never know what to want, because, living only one life, we can neither compare it with our previous lives nor perfect it in our lives to come.”

To the project of architecture, architects must persist in drawing that breathe of life that one discovers in the sketch; to enliven architecture, to particularize it, even when it resists us. Through a tense labor, the individual has the cunning to conceive a near-vital architecture.

Keith Evan Green

Specifications

As art of ordering architecture demands a coherence, a bringing together, a joining, a jointing of specific differences. A construction joint or a room do not have to hold together the way a garden or a city, which is never finished, do but a building at a certain level must be assembled and hold together. The challenge of the particular, however, is the threat that nothing might be able to be said of it or made of it. It poses the limits of language. Can we even say that the particular is an idea, except in so far as it is already brought within an existing system of sense, which is to say, a system of universals? The moment of resistance by something truly specific to any form of generalization, any elevation to the level of unity and of ideas that sustain a unity, is potentially a moment of sublime breakdown to be contemplated and even prolonged with a certain cultivation. This very attempt at editorializing, with its necessary demands for an overview, must acknowledge its own limits in the face of this.

The unique, the singular, the heterogeneous, the new, fall outside the canon, they fall outside sense, raising the dilemma of authentication and authorisation in the guise of other singulars: the individual witness and the signature. But even the ‘I’ in its declaration of singularity does not turn out to be a stable entity.

At the furthest limits of certainty and the known world chance and unaccountable phenomena demand to be brought into the realm of intelligible systems and institutionalized knowledge. The task of ordering, mapping, and bringing to the level of cultural visibility is an intimate part of the colonial universalization of productive and habitable space that is now so questioned by exposure of internal conflicts. Places, sites, texts, for example, are not simply ‘found’ but are a product both of the coloniser’s expectations, intentions, and interpretations and of dialogue between coloniser and colonised. Thus a diversity may be exposed between and within presumed homogeneous discourses where the smallest

particulars may become the focal point of their intersection.

In effect it is the smooth finish of discursive rationality itself which totalises and enslaves in its refusal to risk the death of meaning in anything that stands outside its empire. Order, classically, was constructed by a systems of substance and accidents, form and matter, part and whole; relationships supported by grammar, metaphysics, power structures. With the break up of such systems has come the need to think otherwise - obliquely and peripherally - to elude the totalising effect of purely rational thought.

Architecture is never simply analytical but necessarily projective. The sort of conjectural thinking that Ginzburg locates in the minute and specific narratives of clues and traces has been related by Marco Frascari to architectural knowledge, itself a way of thinking that cannot be explained through the use of demonstrative reasoning or by the scientific method. If Mies' minute concern with the particularity of the building craft relative to the universals of modernist space, was typified by his "God is in the details," a notion with its own particular micro-history, Frascari reads the detail as site of creation itself. The exercise of detailing here becomes the guiding concept for the discipline of architecture where by invention the elements and jointing are seen as a fertile nexus of all forms of connection in a chiasmus, a tense dialectical crossing, between reason and constructing, between the construction of construal and the construal of construction.

The menace and instability of the particular, is in that it is accidental, it is what simply befalls and denies classification. The risk, so common in our local architecture, is that a work may, in the absence of an idea, fall apart into an assemblage of details or else never rise beyond the banal, that is, the general which is opposed to the particular, for in becoming common property, a commonplace, the particular is transformed into the banal, being the particular we know too well to see. The banal is "the singular in general," that is to say, the inability to maintain the two terms in their difference. Unlike Duchamp's "beauty of indifference" that comes so close to it but instead raises the question of what was not already art, the banal defies the impulse to become symbol, or figure; it belongs to no poetic genus. The challenges are to transform the everyday detail into myth, to join and make differences visible while maintaining their fertile particularity.

Ross Jenner

Counting Particulars

"Et n'est-ce pas le fantasme lui-même qui appelle le 'detail,' la scène minuscule, privée, dans laquelle je puisse finalement prendre place?..."

(Roland Barthes, *Le Plaisir du texte*)

To film is to particularise.

A film shows everything at the same time on the same surface.

Yet the number of things we chose to distinguish in a film is confusing and variable.

Its completeness never ceases to be there in front of us, a power from afar, but viewing is somehow never a complete act.

We are ever aware of what we miss.

One never *looks at* a film, at least heuristically speaking, we *gaze* which is not the same mode of apprehension.

To gaze is not to see, not to see at all.

We gaze to see more in the whole, to discover the imperceptible.

Perhaps what we gaze at is really the more we cannot see?

So what can it mean to possess a detailed knowledge of film, a film?

Or to turn that question round, what is the role of detail in film?

To film is to engage the triple operation which marks detail.

The first is to approach or enter into a field, to enter into the particulars.

This is the penetration of an elective epistemology of the intimate which the action of the zoom lens or the rack of focus brings with it.

Descending to particulars.

This intimacy however also conveys with it a perverse violence, and surely it is perverse.

One approaches thus only to cut to something else, or to cut up, to morcelise.

This is the fundamental meaning, the 'part', of particular and it is the etymology of detail, too, in *la taille*, 'to cut from.'

The cutting bench of the film edit.

Finally the particular, in a move no less perverse, designates an operation that is symmetrically opposite to the cut: the assembling together of the pieces of the whole.

As if the cut has only provided for the collection together of all the pieces, was only to provide for the possibility of a summation in the pan of the camera around a room across its objects, or over the faces in a crowd, entranced with diversity.

It is also there in the totalising systematics of combination in film montage.

So a triple and paradoxical operation is in play.

The particular with its three operations - proximity, partage, summation - depends upon an ideal of knowledge and totality.

The whole depends upon the part.

But fixing the particular also allows us to redefine and reconstitute the whole.

The particular is not a fragment.¹

For the fragment relates to a whole in order to put it in question by posing it as absence or enigma or lost memory.

The fragment is not defined by its position in a compositional chain since, as Barthes has noted, it is "syntagmatically irresponsible."²

The fragment can only be explained according to the whole.

In contrast the particular imposes the whole, its legitimatised presence, its hegemony, its recovery.

The great fortune of the particular in the field of interpretation is that it is not simply restricted to its common sense meaning.

The assumption that simply in order to know something one needs discover it in detail, discover its details.

As if the enigmas of the visible have but one solution.

But the particular, as we have seen, is more of an event than an object.

Its presuppositions are certainly more complex and more strategic and in this sense it is a risk for thought.

It is this risk which interpretation must indicate: it can only indicate, not measure, it.

The intractable which constitutes its object.

The object of the particular is not a representation of the visible world but the fragile moment of its defiguration.

Every film ends with a cut but also keeps going.

The reel never stops like the endless list of the *et cetera*.³

This *et cetera* is the trope of inexpressibility and incompleteness which seems to dominate all discourses of the particular.

For the particular is a discussion that is without end.

Laurence Simmons

¹ See Omar Calabrese, *Neo-Baroque. A Sign of the Times*, trans. Charles Lambert (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), in particular Chapter 4

'Detail and Fragment'; and Jacques Derrida, "Les morts de Roland Barthes," *Poétique*, XII 47 (1981): 269-292.

² "Le troisième sens: notes de recherches sur quelques photogrammes de S. M. Eizenstein," *Cahiers du cinéma*, 222 (1970): 17.

³ See Alan Liu, "Local Transcendence: Cultural Criticism, Postmodernism, and the Romanticism of Detail," *Representations* 32 (Fall 1990): 75-113, p.84ff