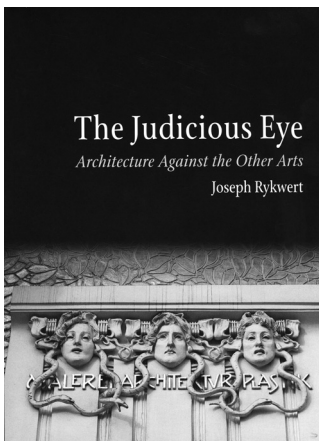


# The Judicious Eye:

## Architecture against the other arts

by Joseph Rykwert

### Review by Gevork Hartoonian



1. A different version of this review appears in *Architectural Theory Review* 14 (1), 2009

2. Quoted in Ackerman (2002:16)

No contemporary account of architecture's rapport with the other arts will be able to do justice without considering Adolf Loos' remarks on the subject. Exasperated by the Secessionist and Art Nouveau movements, and the utopian claims underpinning the objectives of the reformist schools of the time, Loos made a characteristically modernist distinction between art and architecture. In his opinion, art has no responsibility to anyone. Thus, it can be radical or even revolutionary. Architecture, however, is responsible to everyone. There is a purpose to it, it is a public art. This was enough for Loos to depict the art of building as a conservative, and yet, collective practice.

Karl Kraus, an artist and friend of Loos, underlined the difference between art and architecture, saying that what he and Loos were trying to do was to "show the difference between the urn and a chamber pot". The distinction turned out to be significant, considering Loos's design strategy, the *Raumplan*, where interior spaces are theatrically juxtaposed in plan and different levels. Loos also believed that a building should evoke the sentiment proper to its purpose. Still, the interiors he conceived would restrict the inhabitant from a closer visual proximity to any external relation to the environment of the metropolis. Loos' theorisation of architecture suggests that the *res publica* was no longer available, at least in the way public space was appropriated and experienced before the "Fall of the Old Regime", to recall the title of the first chapter of *The Judicious Eye*.

The opening pages of Joseph Rykwert's text speak for the untold story of how the bodies of contemporary cosmopolitan cities are tattooed with electronic images. This in conjunction with the author's modest claim that he has no intention of inviting the reader to consider "whether the reconstitution of a useable public space is possible or desirable". Rykwert's judgement is rooted in history, even though it is not spelled out in reference to the conventions of historicism.

Starting with the title of the book, one is reminded of the Renaissance discourse on *disegno* and *giudizio*. Considered the father of the three arts of painting, sculpture and architecture, Giorgio Vasari wrote, "we may conclude that *disegno* is not other than a visible expression of and revelation of our inner conception or that which others have imagined and given form in their ideas".<sup>2</sup> First, we have the notion that the foundational arts are embedded in *disegno*. Then we have the issue of *giudizio*, or judgement, where the visual turns out to be the critical aspect of any public judgement. Therefore, what we have here are two juxtapositions: one between visible expression and revelation and the second between judgement and eye.

Of further interest is the iconographic dimension of the two concepts of *disegno* and *giudizio*. In the Renaissance treatises, a well-dressed person holding a

compass in one hand and a reflective tablet in the other represents *disegno*. *Giudizio*, by contrast, is represented by the figure of a naked old man sitting on a rainbow holding a square, rule and pendulum. What is implied here is the possibility of reducing the secret of *disegno* to the skills of the artist. This was believed to be the case with Donatello's abacus (1400), at least until the artist revealed that the alleged secret lies in his capacity to hold on to what is called "the judgement of the eye". In the dictionary, the word "abacus" is defined as both a flat slab and a device for solving arithmetical problems. More interesting, and related to how I would like to end this short review, is the Hebrew origin of the word, meaning "dust".<sup>3</sup>

Rykwert might not like to have anything to do with the naked figure of *giudizio* described earlier. This is too visible an association, which in the manner of Vasari has to be balanced with the notion of revelation. To this end, I would like to draw your attention to a short essay Rykwert published in the summer issue of *October*, 1984. I will skip the autobiographic account in an article titled, "On First Hearing about Hermeneutics". Toward the end of the essay, we are cautioned against the hazards of "matter-of-fact piety and rationalised sifting of sacred laws". Instead we are told that every utterance could contain "a coded revelation", and that a "text could flower into gesture and excess". Rykwert concluded that only the person who sees the possibility that the whole world "may well be a succession of theophanies come nearer the truth" (Rykwert 1984). Having said this, the intention of his book, *The Judicious Eye*, is to unfold a rationalised argument against the nihilism of modernity, which should be interpreted in reference to Donatello's abacus. Here, I am interested in the Hebrew meaning of the word, connoting "dust" which, if removed, might make a revelation that should be decoded "against historical realism", to recall an essay by Hayden White (with whom Rykwert might not want be associated). For White, history unravels itself without any moral or metaphysical purpose. To understand history one should endure it, "if lucky" (White 2008).

In his last chapter, Rykwert makes a comparison between the Sistine Chapel and a work by Monet. The French painter's *Water-Lilies* is presented as an example of a work that has the capacity to provide "the totality of a sensory experience through which every member of the audience should be able to overcome his individuality and have access to another, an ambiguous transcendent reality" (299). What is involved here does not concern Rykwert's long lasting dislike of instrumental rationalism. At stake is a theoretical mind that inclines to a quasi-phenomenological approach to everyday life and a critique of modernism that draws from anthropological structuralism, popularised by Claude Levi Strauss. This is spelled out not only in his review of the 15th *Triennale di Milano* published in *Domus*, 1974, but also discussed in an introductory essay for a book titled *Meaning and Building*, 1960. In this latter text, Rykwert resonates with Aldo van Eyck, the Dutch architect, who in 1950 wrote that the time has come for architecture to reconcile basic values. In his essay published in 1960, however, Rykwert famously said that, when entering his house, a person needs to have the conviction that "he is, in some sense, at the centre of universe".

Whatever the statement was intended to convey at the time, it demonstrates, as one reads through the final pages of the book, the difficulty in reconciling architecture with other arts even in a revolutionary situation of the magnitude of post-October 1917. The urge to create a different "Man" under circumstances that were marked by feverish events of making and unmaking ended, ironically,

with an official decree that architecture by definition should conduct a conservative practice (compare this to the work produced by painters and sculptors, let alone the agitprop quality of the films produced, and the plays staged, during the first five years of the Russian Revolution). We are back full circle to Loos and the fact that, in modernity, architecture has little to do with the business of changing the scope of everyday life, let alone creating a totalised ambience of the kind the author attributes to Monet's painting.

*The Judicious Eye* is informative and demonstrates the author's comprehensive knowledge of the history of art and architecture. Rykwert also challenges the state of architectural education. He reminds architects of their ethical responsibilities. More importantly, the author exhorts academics to take architectural historiography more seriously without reducing it to a story telling, or formulating an operative criticism that reduces history to an intellectual enthusiasm for a particular period or, for that matter, a particular architect's work.

### **References**

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