



POLITICS

Aesthetics as a Form of Politics

University Library Utrecht, Wiel Arets Architects

*How could we preserve the architecture of our dynamic era in its initial stage from premature formalism and bourgeois perfection?*¹

GERRIT RIETVELD

*A building should have character, provoke conflict. Something has to happen which makes you think. The worst is a kind of neutrality.*²

WIEL ARETS

1 Frits Bless, *Rietveld, Een biografie* (Amsterdam/Baarn: Bert Bakker/Erven Thomas Rap, 1982).

2 Roemer van Toorn, "Duelling in skin," *New Working and Living Conditions in Cities*, (Berlage Institute, Institut Français d'Architecture, Fundació Mies van der Rohe/ETSAB, 2002). This was an interview I conducted with Arets.

An enigmatic black box

From a distance the library on the campus of Utrecht University looks impenetrable. A big, black, rectangular box nestles in all mystery and simplicity between the many different buildings of the campus. By manifesting itself as a black mass, it creates peace and order in the extremely untidy context of the location. Nothing gives away in advance the fact it is a library. The purity and perfection of the volume take you by surprise, like the rectangular monolith that lands among the apes in the desert in Stanley Kubrick's 1968 film *2001: A Space Odyssey*. The large black volume of the library is imposing and impressive, it provokes questions instead of providing answers. It is not one of those buildings that tells the viewer or user what to think; it does not tell them how they are supposed to read the building: "Look, I'm a library!" Like a book or machine, it invites you to explore further. Once you know the building better, you realize the black concrete houses a huge collection of books and that the activities of the users are concealed behind the glass of the façade. But there is more going on than what this first reading – massive clouds of books with transparent study rooms between them – suggests.

Autonomy

In the report of the Rietveld Award 2005, the jury rightly asked how a building can also "contribute to the quality of the city while, or precisely because, it detaches itself from the surrounding enclave?" According to the jury, the magnificent library by Wiel Arets shows that architecture also



University Library, Utrecht.
Wiel Arets Architects,
2005. View from NL
Architects' Basketbar.
Photo Jan Bitter.

has an autonomous domain that successfully resists the leveling effects of globalization. I agree with the argument of the jury that the syntax of architecture – its aesthetic – as a complex whole of material, form, program, appearance, color, plan, section, and façade is able to influence life positively. I only wonder whether the autonomous domain of the library is a work of art as the jury defines it in the words of Rüdiger Safranski: “Works of art that deserve the name are formally closed and because of that are able to bring about the experience of a wide and open space within strict confines. They show fullness within the confines and can therefore be an academy for a life that does not want to waste its time....”³ What Safranski says about autonomy is at first sight applicable to the library, but that’s not all there is to it. We need other codes in order to estimate the true value of this enigmatic black box.

The international architecture debate

A fierce academic debate has sparked in the US between critical architects who are opposed to the status quo and post-critical architects who resolutely want to engage with a society riddled with capitalist surprises. Critical architects like Tadao Ando and John Pawson oppose a consumer culture by deploying minimal symmetrical and abstract compositions, a limited palette of materials, and the elimination of decoration. The problem of critical

³ See Janny Rodermond, “Hoeveel fragmentatie kan Utrecht verdragen?” [How much fragmentation can Utrecht take?], Rietveld Award 2005 Jury Report.

architecture is that the autonomous sphere it creates shuts itself away in its own closed world in which only the criteria of the form, beauty, or truth of the medium count. Architecture wants to be architecture and nothing else. These architects of negation follow the recommendation of the philosopher Theodor Adorno – when the everyday world is corrupt, there is only one thing left for aesthetic experience to do: distance itself from reality to guarantee a pure aesthetic promise. The social function of art is to have no function, Adorno would say. This negation of reality is supposed to provoke resistance and rebellious energies in the political field.

According to Robert Somol and Sarah Whiting, we should no longer get our fingers burned with hot (critical) architecture, but start up so-called "projective practices"⁴ that are "cool."⁵ Instead of tackling reality with a priori points of view as the critical architects do, projective practices analyze the facts and hope to make micro-decisions during the creative stage of a project that will transform it in a tangible and specific way. Not a view of reality but a passion for reality is the measuring rod. Not what architecture is, but what architecture can do, is the key question for projective architecture. It therefore also calls for a return to everyday experience, instrumentality, and functionalism, for a pragmatic and technical practice that takes into account the interdisciplinary influences that play a role in the implementation of a project. The paternalistic justice that architecture has pursued for so long is over. Architecture can be just beautiful again, and there is no need to apologize for the fact, as Somol states.⁶ The basketbar by NL architecten, which won the Rietveld Award in 2003, bears witness to this projective approach. As an alternative to the success of the lifestyle market – such as the New Urbanist approach in the US – or the success story of architect Sjoerd Soeters and Rob Krier in the Netherlands – projective practice wants to develop a different but equally successful lifestyle. Instead of opposing the system and thus ending up on the margin, projective practices nestle inside the system. Complicity with the system is not regarded as a problem, but as the only possible chance of success. While the projective practice is excellent at analyzing critical architecture, it is extremely vague about exactly what it wants politically now.⁷ Hence, please keep in mind my remark that if projective architects are not on the lookout, their practices may fall victim to a fresh conservatism.⁸

In search of a third way beyond consensus

The problem of both (1) autonomy as a critical commentary on society and (2) the embrace by projective practice of the everyday world in which we live is that both – albeit with a completely different aesthetic – generate consensus. The idea that autonomous architecture improves collective life by creating a detached space aimed at individual meditation is not a bad idea in the light of the fragmentation and leveling of our existence, but it does not change or intervene in the status quo. No longer the form and the appearance matter, but the embodiment of what Jacques Rancière calls "living attitudes," which are manifested "in the materiality of everyday sensory experience."⁹ The shared and everyday experiences in society need to be interwoven with the detached

4 Why the word "projective?" "Because it includes the term project – that is, it is more about an approach, a strategy, than a product; it looks forward [projects], unlike criticality, which always looks backwards." Sarah Whiting in an e-mail.

5 Sarah Whiting and Robert Somol, "Notes around the Doppler Effect and Other Moods of Modernisms," *Perspecta: The Yale Architectural Journal* 33 (2002). For more information about the "post-critical" see: George Baird, "Criticality and Its Discontents" and Roemer van Toorn, "No More Dreams?" in *Harvard Design Magazine* 21 (2004); Sanford Kwinter, "Who is Afraid of Formalism?" *ANY* 7/8 (1994); "Equipping the Architect for Today's Society: the Berlage Institute in the Educational Landscape," (dialogue between Wiel Arets, Alejandro Zaera-Polo, and Roemer van Toorn), Stan Allen, "Revising Our Expertise," Sylvia Lavin, "In a Contemporary Mood," and Michael Speaks, "Design Intelligence," in *Hunch* 6/7 (2003); Jeffrey Kipnis, "On the Wild Side" (1999) in *Foreign Office Architects: Phylogenesis, FOA's Ark*, Farshid Moussavi, Alejandro Zaera-Polo, eds., (Barcelona: Actar, 2004). For a vigorous debate on critique between Hal Foster, Michael Speaks, Michael Hays, Sanford Kwinter, and Felicity Scott see *Praxis: Journal of Writing and Building* 5: *Architecture after Capitalism* (2003).

6 Robert Somol, "12 Reasons to Get Back into Shape" in *Content*, Rem Koolhaas, OMA-AMO, eds., (Cologne: Taschen, 2004).

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aesthetic qualities that can be produced by the freedom of autonomy. You could call this a third way, or a form of negotiating between the freedom and equality that autonomy stands for and what projective practice would like to give priority to with its focus on everyday experiences and sensations.

If we can intertwine these two apparently contradictory domains with one another, then we can no longer speak of consensus, but rather to a large degree of what Rancière calls “dissensus.” Consensus is the concern of the police, according to Rancière. The police (and the legal system) are there to keep law and order and to draw up rules to normalize, as quickly as possible, a situation that has got out of hand. Dissensus, on the other hand, is a political situation, which invites everyone to reposition themselves anew in the everyday field of experience. The quality that an antagonistic constellation achieves is one of coalitions and opposite terms. It is this third way, what Rancière calls the “politics of aesthetics” in his book of that title that can also be found in the work of Arets and Gerrit Rietveld, after whom this award is named. Both of these architects create what I believe to be forms of dissensus, which enable different insights and experiences: an aesthetic of spatial differences of opinion about use.

Aesthetics as a form of politics

Social and human demands, as well as the expression of power, might fall outside the purpose of architecture. This might be for the benefit of people, but would not strengthen architecture.¹⁰

RIETVELD

As an architect I operate as a part of society, not as someone criticizing society. Architects, artists, and writers represent what is going on in society. I think that as an architect you are a part of a society that wants to progress, that is always looking for

new ideas.¹¹

ARETS

Of course, architecture cannot engage in parliamentary politics. Spatial constellations cannot advise on how to vote, and even less can they convey messages about the social and/or political situation or its problems. Architecture is politics precisely through the distance it adopts with respect to these functions. Architecture is politics in so far as it frames works in a particular way as a space-time sensorium, which defines ways of being apart or together, organizes inside or outside, in front or in the middle. Architecture is politics through the way in which it makes things visible with its aesthetic syntax or leaves them out of sight through specific articulations such as orientation, suggestions of movement, directions, and concentrations. Through its form of distribution architecture influences the sensorium of being, feeling, hearing, and speaking, which combine to form the atmosphere and sensation of a spatial constellation. This aesthetics as a form of politics can be achieved through an ongoing process of moving beyond boundaries, as applied by Bertolt Brecht with his epic theatre, in the films of Jean-Luc Godard,

7 See my article “No More Dreams?” in *Harvard Design Magazine* 21 (2004). There is a shorter version of this text in *Architectuur in Nederland, Jaarboek 2003-04* (Rotterdam: Nai Publishers, 2004).

8 Roemer van Toorn, “Fresh Conservatism, Landscapes of Normality” in *Quaderns Re-active* 219 (Barcelona, 1998).

9 Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics, The Distribution of the Sensible* (New York: Continuum, 2004).

10 Gerrit Rietveld, “Eenige uitspraken over architectuur, als één der plastische kunsten,” in *8 en opbouw*, 1939. See also *Rietveld Teksten*, Helma van Rens, Utrecht, 1979.

11 Wiel Arets, “Duelling in skin,” op. cit.

at tells the viewer or user what to
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a library!”



Surrealism, and, for example, the Dogma films of Lars Von Trier and Thomas Vinterberg. The pathetic-emotional perception of the viewer is broken through the montage of contradictions. Suddenly the public is able through distancing and self-observation to arrive at a reflective process of what Brecht called permanent education. By combining political education with the pleasure of the cabaret or the musical, allegories of Nazi power are discussed in a verse about cauliflowers in Brecht's epic theatre. The main procedure of an aesthetics as a form of politics consists of composing possible encounters that lead to a conflict between heterogeneous elements. The conflict that arises between the heterogeneous elements must cause a break in our perception in order to reveal a certain secret connection of new possibilities that lie hidden within everyday reality.

Library entrance level.
Photo Roemer van Toorn.

"A form that thinks"

Truth becomes reality by delimiting the unlimited. Although clay is used to make ceramics, the use value of the object lies in what is not there; that is why, in taking advantage of what is, people make use of what is not.¹²

RIETVELD

The most you can do in this situation is give an initial impetus to "combinatorial thinking," as one of my favorite philosophers, Paul Valéry, described it. Valéry's thinking relates to a world in which two things put together produce something. The person reading it is the binding agent. Not only what you are presented with but the various combinations you are handed make possible what he calls combinatorial ability.¹³

ARETS

12 Rietveld cites Lao-Tzu and a Chinese proverb in his second, more or less repeated lecture during the architecture exhibition in the Centraal Museum Utrecht, published in Fritz Bless, op. cit.

13 Arets, "Duelling in skin," op. cit.

The Rietveld Schröder house, colorful, open, and with an informal interior, seems at first sight to come from a different world than that of Arets' black, closed, and massive library. But appearances are deceptive. Not only does the

work of Arets bear witness to the same intelligent sequence of spaces, a wealth of sobriety, functionality, and simplicity we find in Rietveld's Dutch Pavilion in Venice, the villa in Ilpendam, the house in Heerlen, and the Art Academies in Amsterdam and Arnhem, but in my view the work of Arets and Rietveld also shows evidence of heterogeneous combinations full of dissensus.

Various publications by Arets refer to the work of the film director Jean-Luc Godard. Cinema is for Godard a form that thinks, in contrast to television, which for him exhibits pre-defined content no longer open to interpretation or, in effect, nothing. It is this affirmation, says Godard, "where there's no longer anything to see: neither reality nor image."¹⁴

People have forgotten how to see. It is our task, Godard might argue, as creators to provide them with a key so that they can see again. The method that Godard uses for this – the coexistence of juxtapositions, combinations of fascination and repulsion, of emptiness and love, freedom and consumption, and many other conjunctions – is intended to challenge the viewer to establish new connections, to offer the viewer a key for the active interpretation of image and text. "You should not create a world, but the possibility of a world," Godard says. So for him the images are not what they are. The visible world is haunted by "the possibility of another world." That is why the images are attractive, not in their beauty, fixity, or completeness, but precisely in their transparency, fragility, and potentiality. The essential aspect of the work of Godard – and I think that the same can be said of Arets and Rietveld – is that a type of space can emerge that has neighborliness: links between one small part and another arise in an infinite number of ways. This is a form of aesthetic distribution that is interested not so much in the things themselves (the form or program of requirements), but in what goes on between and through the things as an event.

The consequences of such a position for architecture are considerable. It means that you have to design in plan and section, that form and program, façade and interior, route (infrastructure) and volume, material and color, looking and feeling, rationality and subjectivity, representation and presence, experience and object, city and location, the specific situation and "universal" principles, cannot be understood in isolation from one another. Not the object itself but the ensemble of relations is what counts in this architecture. Taking the example of the award-winning library designed by Arets in Utrecht, I shall now discuss some essential dimensions of this aesthetics as a form of politics.

A_Spatial thinking

*As I see it, art should not produce embellishments, which are a sort of luxury, but its major task is that of raising the complicated, confused, small-minded, and cloudy to the level of great visual clarity.*¹⁵

RIETVELD

*For me everything has to have a reason, which emerges from the making or use. I would never use a bent form because I like arched forms. The arched form I use has a reason within the logic of the use or the situation.*¹⁶

ARETS

*The interrelationship of the dimensions is typical of Rietveld.*¹⁷

TRUUS SCHRÖDER

During his holiday on Lake Como in 1964, Rietveld made sketches for high-rise projects. We can see in these "thought models"¹⁸ that space is not a "means to enable the construction of a building mass (that was the dream of every architect at the time), but the delimitation of the space must become the means of realizing the potential of the space."¹⁹ Rietveld composes a space of horizontal and vertical surfaces that slide over and into one another to create

14 Jean-Luc Godard, *Cinema, The Archeology of Film and the Memory of a Century, an interview between Jean-Luc Godard and Youssef Ishaghpour* (New York: Berg, 2005).

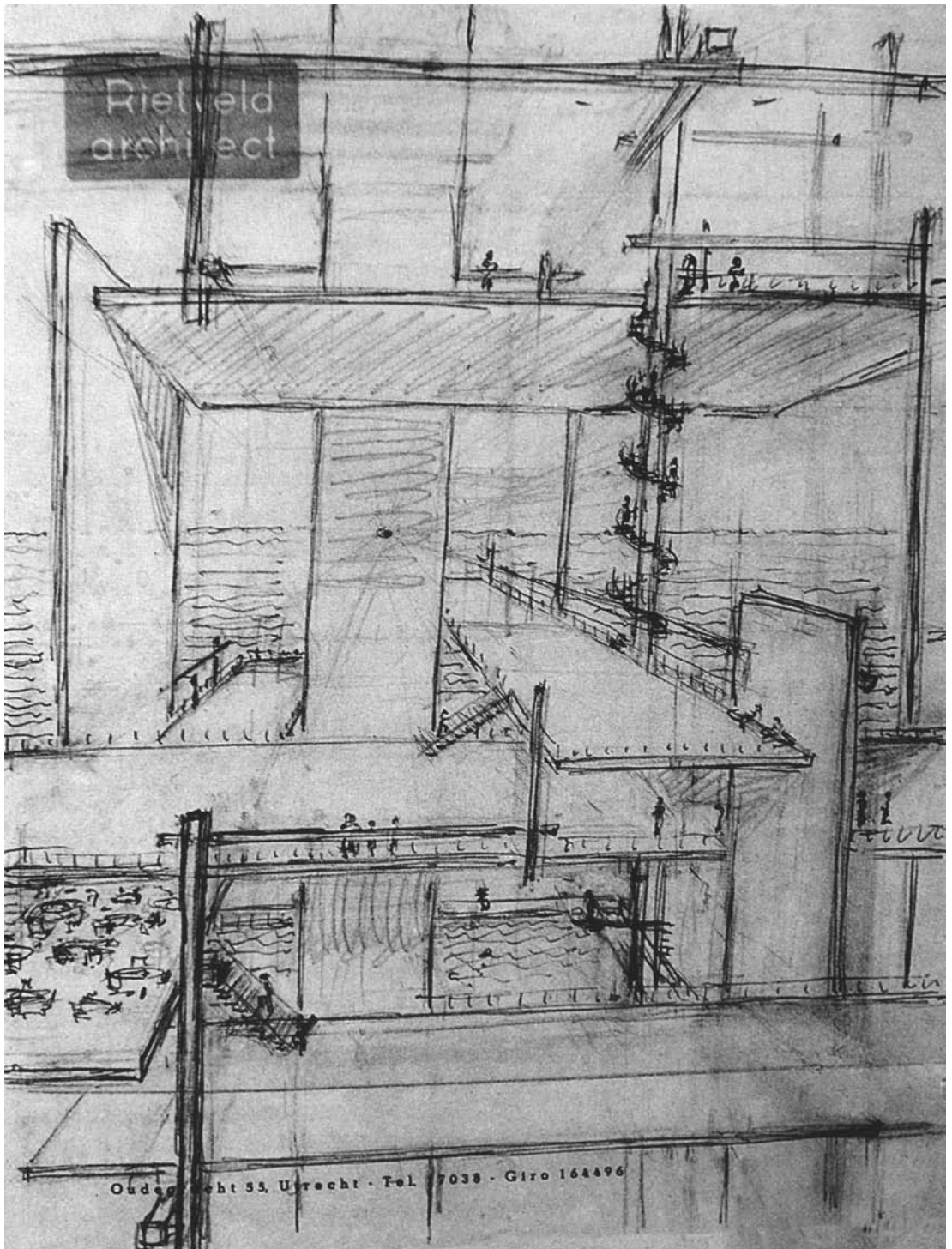
15 Cited in Bless, *Rietveld, Een Biografie*, op. cit.

16 Arets, "Duelling in skin," op. cit.

17 "Interview with Truus Schröder," in Paul Overy, Lenneke Büller, Frank van den Oudsten, Bertus Mulder, *The Rietveld Schröder House* (Houten: De Haan/Unieboek, 1988).

18 Bless uses this term in relation to Rietveld's high-rise sketches in his *Rietveld, Een biografie*, op. cit.

19 Rietveld, cited in Bless, op. cit.



"Sketch for highrise,"
Gerrit Rietveld, 1964. Image
taken from Frits Bless,
Rietveld, 1888-1964.

a continuous space of different relations that can be accessed via a route of different staircases and program areas. The parallels with the interior of the library in Utrecht are striking. What we can see from this sketch is that Rietveld, before Arets followed, attached a lot of importance to thinking on the basis of a spatial interior and how the route through the building connects everything, often by means of ingenious visual links and the deployment of minimal resources. "I don't seek complexity of form, I seek complexity of content," is what counts for Arets.²⁰ Rietveld would agree: "Pragmatic architecture must not slavishly satisfy existing demands, it must also reveal conditions of life. It must be not a statement, but an intensive experience of space."²¹ In short, both Arets and Rietveld are concerned with creating, not defining, conditions in space.

20 Arets, "Duelling in skin," op. cit.

21 Arets, *ibid.*

B_On the razor's edge

*That embellishment of the building mass was not able to change the space. That space should not be a means to enable the construction of a building mass (that was the dream of every architect at the time), but the delimitation of the space must become the means of realizing the potential of the space.*²²

RIETVELD

22 Rietveld, cited in Bless, op. cit.

*Architecture is therefore a between, a membrane, an alabaster skin, at once opaque and transparent, meaningful and meaningless, real and unreal.*²³

ARETS

23 Arets, in *An Alabaster Skin: Wiel Arets Architect*, (Princeton: Princeton Architectural Press, 1993).

Rietveld wanted to liberate architecture and life from classical architecture. Consider Theo van Doesburg on the Rietveld House: "The walls are no longer supporting walls, they have been reduced to points of support resulting in a new, open ground plan, totally different from the classical one, because inside and outside interpenetrate."²⁴ Classical architecture indicates the place of people, it disciplines their lives, while modern architecture allows people to clarify their position as individuals vis-à-vis the world in which they live. The new architecture liberates people, giving them the opportunity to develop their selves, according to Rietveld. Now that history has advanced further, we know by now that belief in total transparency has many limitations and illusions, but what unites Arets and Rietveld is that they both generate meaning at the point where different spaces meet one another. A series of neighborly relations arises on the razor's edge that separates inside from outside, motion from stasis, route from workspace, abstraction from the everyday, institution from use, ground from air, emptiness from fullness, and so on.

24 van Doesburg, cited in Bless, op. cit.

C_Time-space sensorium

*I feel that as the architect I should never put myself in the viewer's shoes. That's like meddling. As an architect I should make a product with which a viewer can do something with his own ability to comment. The user should be able to construct his own story in the building.*²⁵

ARETS

25 Arets, "Duelling in skin," op. cit.

*Our existence grows with every active perception. Our existence shrinks with every passive perception.*²⁶

RIETVELD

26 Cited in Bless, op. cit.

The wealth of sobriety – as Rietveld called it – of Arets' architecture does not turn its back on everyday life, but activates it by appealing to the everyday sensibility of the user. Architecture, says Arets, should enable narratives, but not in a linear way. It should not tell the story itself: "They should be narratives that can change every day and every hour while remaining within the emotional world of the themes chosen by the architect. Architecture should be a multi-interpretable phenomenon without dogmas."²⁷

27 Arets in "Un-C-City," the inaugural lecture of the Technical University Delft, 30 June, 2004.

The architect turns the visitor to the library into a cameraman. The visitor walks through the building and sees things through the manipulation of the route. On the ground floor the visitor enters a space of modest proportions, sees the entrance to the café and terrace to the left of the entrance, immediately feels at home (nowhere in Utrecht is the cappuccino as good as here), and grows curious about what he or she is to find there. The monumental staircase leads to the heart of the building. By entering the building, a ritual unfolds that is like finding the secret code by which a jewelry case can be opened. The floor as a shiny grey carpet, which widens the further you enter the building, leads the visitor to the heart of the library. Once you have reached the center of information, an enormous void that reaches to the ceiling confronts you. The visitor suddenly discovers that this library is not massive at all, but open and transparent, that you move among the powerful black clouds with millions of books. The construction of the route seems to be simple, but that is only because you do not immediately notice a number of interventions. The route through the building is in principle the route that the cameraman takes in the film. Arets fully exploits ordinary, everyday life, with all its optimism and sense of possibility, by appealing to the unconscious bodily and sensual ways of moving that every visitor uses to find his or her way in the library. The fact that the library is black provides security and calm precisely because it directly addresses our unconscious. As the painter Francis Bacon said: "It's a very, very close and difficult thing to know why some paint comes across directly onto the nervous system and others tell you a story in a long diatribe through the brain." Arets' use of black and grey in the library comes extremely close to what Rietveld meant by art: "Art is not the same as beauty... Beauty is satisfaction of personal sympathy. Art intends pure perception as the basis of awareness – exercise and development of our capacity to distinguish – leading to the growth of our senses through specialization. A work of art is not an act of creation in the sense of making something that did not exist before, but the registering of a keener sense of reality through contemplation with predominantly one of our senses. In vision we distinguish by means of three senses: 1) seeing colors (red, green, blue); 2) seeing forms (sphere, surface, cavity); 3) seeing space (outside, inside, in between). The aim of architecture is to make us experience the latter and to provide us with dimension."²⁸

28 In Bless, op. cit.

D_Alienation technique

*The architect is not concerned with confirming and improving existing customs, ideas, and traditions. What Rietveld is looking for are the conditions of a new architecture and with it a new society. He sees his work as a beginning, not an end.*²⁹

29 Bless, ibid.

FRITS BLESS

*Architecture should deploy a qualitative terrorism to enable quality to make its presence felt, for quality never renounces itself. We must use the virus as a weapon to intervene in the aimless landscape. There is no need for architects to want to be heroes. They should be working and thinking laborers at a time when architects seem to be consumers within a meandering environment.*³⁰

30 Arets, inaugural lecture, op. cit.

ARETS

Spatial thinking as we have discussed it – on the razor's edge and within a time-space sensorium – take us to this so-called third way. Space is created for an exchange of insights, but exactly how heterogeneous conflicts activate another possible world and a different interpretation of use has not yet been stated in so many words. Bertolt Brecht once said "Would it not be easier for the government to dissolve the people and elect another?"³¹ What he meant was that following public opinion with its indolence and opportunistic choices is not enough. Both theatre and architecture are concerned with creating a different public. In my opinion, it is only possible to transform conventional patterns of behavior if people are prepared to adopt an extreme position. We cannot, however, deny the functions to which we are accustomed. After all, it is on the

31 Bertolt Brecht in *Brecht Sourcebook*, edited by Carol Martin and Henry Bial (New York: Routledge, 2000).



Floating workspaces
between clouds of books.
Photo Jan Bitter.

basis of what we are used to that we recognize the world and feel at home in it. What Brecht proposes – instead of overturning existing functions – is the *Umfunctionierung* of existing functions by means of a technique of alienation.

While the Utrecht library is a strange, enigmatic building, everything functions as it should. However, the building raises questions rather than providing answers. In that sense, the library is a form that thinks. Through the alienating effects of the abstraction, the black, grey and red, and the photos etched in the concrete and on the glass, it is as though the viewer has landed in a crime novel in which any casual fact or object operates as a clue to a possible murder. In a film the most everyday things suddenly become signs, and every sign leads to another sign because of the desire to see and to know what is going on. This – what Walter Benjamin called the psychoanalysis of viewing – applies not only to film but also to the library in Utrecht. This alienating technique of the thriller can be combined with the technique of montage. Montage stimulates the logic of the imagination by experimenting with the association between two images. Arets' library makes little use of the montage principle (in contrast to the OMA's Seattle Public Library). Arets' library emphasizes instead the emptiness that we know from films like *Dogville* by Lars von Trier, in which the white chalk lines on the black asphalt indicate in abstraction and essence what the village looks like, or from the photographs by artist and photographer Thomas Demand, whose photographs are images of absence. The library is

an architecture without side-effects, lacking in human traces and additions. In Demand's photographs you have to find the point at which the story of the photograph comes to life; in the same way, the Utrecht Library only comes to life when it is occupied by people and books. The movement of life gives the building color; the building itself is monochrome. It does not fill life in, it invites it. The immobile enigma of the structure makes your heart beat faster. It is a building like a school blackboard waiting for traces of life. If you look closely, you can see that Demand's photographs of everyday locations are made of paper models. Every detail that might indicate what is going on has been removed from sight. As in the case of the railings in Arets' library, details are invisible. You cannot see how the railing is attached to the floor. Walls, windows, and doors seem to have been set cold next to one another without the mediation of complicated joints. Floors and ceilings are treated as pure surfaces. Cameras, cables, lighting, air conditioning, and other attributes that could disturb the total picture have been removed from sight. What counts is the abstraction, the purity of the material, the construction and the volume, and the roughness of the black – all to provoke the mystery of life.

The technique of alienation has no parallels in Rietveld's thought. In other words, Rietveld would never have deployed alienation to generate conflicts in a work. Rietveld used new forms, rough materials, and details to radically oppose the bourgeois era and herald a new era, but the voyeuristic condition that Arets wants to achieve in a building is alien to him.

E_Other programs

What the architect and the university in Utrecht have understood is that the classical function of the library as a public space is even more important in our privatized society. In the present information era of digitization, consumption, and increasing individualism, the importance of the public sphere is underrated. While people try in all kinds of ways to reinvent public space, commerce annexes and controls what was originally a free realm. Most design decisions are determined by consumer behavior and budget instead of being free choices that have repercussions for other domains. The library as a public institution is an excellent place to offer other forms of freedom – investing in encounters that can blossom independently of pure profit. The essence of the library is not confined to documentation and offering access to information. A library is about places where you can read. A library is a social center with a number of responsibilities. With the library in Utrecht, our society is not only investing in an advanced distribution center full of digital information that flows to different private domains, but it is also creating a space for a rich public domain free of commercial interests. Knowledge and human interaction, not shopping, are the focal points in the library in Utrecht.

In this text I have tried to show that there is a method of aesthetics as a form of politics, and that we can find many clues for such a practice in the history of architecture, especially that of Rietveld. Arets' library offers exemplary anchor

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Library bookstack.
Photo Jan Bitter.

points for a further development of this third way. While the library manifests itself autonomously in architectural terms, it suppresses the autonomy of the aesthetic by investing in the everyday space-time sensorium that we reflexively expect. That apparently paradoxical combination of both aloofness from and an embracing of everyday life constantly yields inspiring conflicts in the library building. While critical and post-critical architecture try to generate consensus through the imposition of norms and many technocratic regulations, Arets once again tries to generate a progressive dissensus in his building based on a conflict that can never be resolved.

English translation Peter Mason.

A longer version of this text was originally published in Dutch in *Rietveldprijs 2005* (Hilversum: Thoth Uitgeverij, 2006).

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