

# Dirty Regionalism

## The Perfect Imperfection of Onix Architects

### Exclusive Authenticity

The air is heavy with the desire for authentic experiences. We've had enough of the standardised products that the world of commerce offers us. "Cook your own shoes! Dream and spice it up as you please. This is your art and your invention" - that's the Puma "Mongolian Shoe BBQ" website.<sup>1</sup> Puma cleverly responds to the demand for exclusive authenticity. On the web, you can enjoy yourself sitting at a rather worn wooden table in a picturesque restaurant, and with the assistance of a handsome maître chef from Mongolia you can put together your own exclusive Puma shoes from a buffet of thirty different kinds of materials, colours, textures and types of leather. The personal touch and involvement have now come to join brand name and extravagant price as components of the cult of exclusiveness. You no longer go to a shop to buy something – as in the anonymous supermarket – but you set out in search of personal, authentic experiences. We want to be waited on, preferably by skilled and elegant specialists who are capable of tracing the very best in the archives of history, an exquisite wine region or an outstanding design academy. It's like classical music – you prefer not to play on synthetic strings. There's nothing above hearing the sigh of the natural string made of catgut. When the musician plays it at its best, the instrument should suffer.

Mass demonstrations against disaster capitalism are difficult nowadays.<sup>2</sup> We prefer to stay closer to home. We buy Max Havelaar fair trade coffee to enjoy an aromatic, politically correct cup at home. We'd rather savour biological, exotic fast-food soups produced by Michel Jansen's De Kleinste Soepfabriek in the Groningen countryside.<sup>3</sup> We've set out on the road of Practical Idealism as formulated by Natasja van der Berg and Sophie Koers.<sup>4</sup> We savour slow food, we buy products from the honest shopping list, we follow know what you eat, we wear hip and honest clothing, we help the cow into the meadow, use the car now and then, and give to charity once in a while. In short, you assume responsibility for your actions and their effect on the world around you without feeling guilty that you're doing something non-idealist. And the Like-a-local website guarantees authentic and exclusive experiences for this upper middle class when it is travelling: "Live in unique places; from a houseboat in Amsterdam to a loft in Barcelona".<sup>5</sup> Strolling through Amsterdam becomes an interactive journey past local galleries, special fashion and design stores like The Frozen Fountain,<sup>6</sup> Droog Design,<sup>7</sup> and the Paul Année bakery with its homemade unleavened bread with onion conserve and authentic French rye bread.

It's not just the quality of the product that counts; where it has come from, whether it has been produced in an environment-friendly, non-industrial way, the personal,

<sup>1</sup> <http://mongolianshoebbq.puma.com/> or via the website [www.puma.com](http://www.puma.com).

<sup>2</sup> Naomi Klein, *The shock doctrine. The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*, 2007.

<sup>3</sup> [www.kleinstesoepfabriek.nl](http://www.kleinstesoepfabriek.nl). The concept is a tasty soup – a French cauliflower soup or an exotic apricot and carrot soup – evoking a trip abroad that tastes surprisingly different every time by standardising the production as little as possible.

<sup>4</sup> See their *Praktisch Idealisme. Handboek voor de beginnende wereldverbeteraar* (2003) and *Fairshopping* (2004) or their internet site: <http://www.praktischidealisme.nl/portaal/tje.html>. Bill Clinton's recent *Giving. How each of us can change the world* (2007) belongs to the same ideology of Practical Idealism, witness his statement: "Almost everyone [...] can do something useful for others, and in the process, strengthen the fabric of our shared humanity". See <http://www.clintonfoundation.org>.

<sup>5</sup> [www.Like-a-Local.com](http://www.Like-a-Local.com). "Meet a local and be surprised by their secret addresses in the city. Dine with a local at their home, taste and experience the local atmosphere."

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.frozenfountain.nl/> The Frozen Fountain, beside the Prinsengracht in Amsterdam, is a shop/gallery that sells contemporary furniture and home accessories. The Frozen Fountain maintains close contacts with designers from the various art academies in the Netherlands and elsewhere, so that a dynamic collection comes into being as a result.

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.droogdesign.nl/> Droog Design has its headquarters in a splendid historic building dating from 1641, Staalstraat 7a/7b, in the centre of Amsterdam. The 300m<sup>2</sup> space on the ground floor was designed by the Müller and Van Tol studios. The space is divided into a shop, furnished with products from the Droog collection which can be purchased on the spot, and a gallery space where new work by young talented designers is exhibited every two months.

creative story behind the product and how quality has been achieved during the process all play a decisive role too.

In fact, in every field there is an increasing emphasis on the sensual,<sup>8</sup> on personal and creative stimuli, attention for yourself, friendship, a sense of community, and caring about the environment. The lack of personal identity, the loss of long-term experiences and the fear of the unfamiliar in our global world not only inspire the upper middle class, commercial enterprises and religions, but they also arouse the romantic and sentimental nostalgia for what is local in the arts, design and architecture. While religious fundamentalists minimise every form of globalisation and adhere to the *Blut und Boden* of a region, it is precisely the global that many inspiring designers, artists and architects fail to repudiate in their concentration on what is authentic in a region. Glocal Regionalists would be a good term for them.<sup>9</sup> The local and the universal aspects of our global culture are brought into relation with one another in surprising and paradoxical ways. For instance, at the invitation of Puma, Marcel Wanders transformed the international style of the notorious white plastic party tent that you can buy in any DIY store.<sup>10</sup> The white tent was made lower, attractively decorated, and accompanied by all kinds of travel and picnic accessories under the name “A collection for those who hate camping”. Wanders’ subversive design intervention transforms the universal roof of the camp-site party tent into a lounge location for creative picnic activities in urban areas.

Playing with the new world under the influence of globalisation, standardisation and commerce alone is not enough for the architects, artists and designers – among whom I include Wanders – who practise glocal regionalism. They are tired of the datamania of the famous Superdutch architects who charted the universal standardisation and metropolitanism of our global culture industry.<sup>11</sup> Traditions, direct interaction with users, craftsmanship, sustainable and pure – preferably ecological – materials are rated higher by this new movement of designers, artists and architects in the Netherlands. They exploit the potential resistance that lies in the shock-proof, recalcitrant and asymmetrical qualities of the local to brake the homogenising force of the global. The question, however, is whether the present predilection for the local, in perverse collusion with the global, really is able to offer an alternative to the quasi-authenticity that the Wanders-Puma duo and others are developing. In other words, given the paradoxical condition of glocal regionalism, to what extent is it possible to develop a progressive alternative to the shock therapy of disaster capitalism?<sup>12</sup>

This is not the first time that architects are appealing to the individual, authentic and sustainable qualities of a region. By way of general definition, Alex Tzonis and Liane Lefaivre already commented on regionalism in 1981 that it “upholds the individual and local architectonic features against more universal and abstract ones”.<sup>13</sup> Kenneth Frampton, Alexander Tzonis, Liane Lefaivre – following Lewis Mumford<sup>14</sup> – launched the concept of Critical Regionalism to counter the placelessness and lack of meaning in Modern Architecture by using contextual forces. Frampton put forth his views in his essay “Towards a Critical Regionalism: Six points of an architecture of

<sup>8</sup> See too the 52nd Venice Biennale, *Think with the Senses – Feel with the Mind*, 2007.

<sup>9</sup> Sociologists use the term Glocal (= Local + Global) to indicate that the local cannot exist without the global and vice versa.

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.marcelwanders.com/> and <http://wanders.puma.com/> “I hate camping. But I love lounging in Style. Outdoor living usually conjures images of campsites, hot dogs and over-stuffed backpacks. Why should design and fashion be limited to city living?”

<sup>11</sup> Bart Lootsma, *Superdutch: New Architecture in the Netherlands*, Princeton Architectural Press, 2000.

<sup>12</sup> See note 2 (Naomi Klein)

<sup>13</sup> Alexander Tzonis and Liane Lefaivre, “The grid and the pathway. An introduction to the work of Dimitris and Susana Antonakakis”, *Architecture in Greece* 15, Athens, 1981.

<sup>14</sup> Vincent B. Canizaro (ed.), *Architectural Regionalism. Collective writings on Place, Identity, Modernity and Tradition*, Princeton Architectural Press, 2007.

resistance."<sup>15</sup> He evokes Paul Ricoeur's question of "how to become modern and to return to sources; how to revive an old, dormant civilization and take part in universal civilization". According to Frampton, Critical Regionalism should adopt modern architecture critically for its universal progressive qualities, but at the same time should value responses that are specific to the context. The emphasis is on topography, climate, light and tectonic form instead of scenography, and on tactile rather than visual qualities. However much we might welcome Critical Regionalism's search for social alternatives, however, I don't think that it goes far enough. In applying the concept of Critical Regionalism to the current practice of the Onix firm of architects, we shall discover that, on the one hand, Critical Regionalism has a limited conception of the local and of how the architectural object works. On the other hand, Critical Regionalism forgets time and again to indicate how architecture can function democratically. In fact, this article raises the question of to what extent the renewed interest in and physical appearance of the local, as a form of discovering authenticity under the influence of the global, may offer a shock-proof and more universal form of resistance than Critical Regionalism can ever provide. Unlike Critical Regionalism, Dirty Regionalism embraces the dirtiness of everyday life, with all the risks that that entails. It is in the dirtiness of the glocal – and not in the élitist and essentialist perfection of the local, where Critical Regionalism situates it – that Dirty Regionalism seeks its opposition and alternatives to the lack of meaning under the influence of commercialisation, standardisation and globalisation. Drawing on the work of Onix, I shall discuss the five main principles of this Dirty Regionalism.<sup>16</sup>

### 1) Dirty hands

The Dogma manifesto "The Vow of Chastity" (1995) was an attack on the sclerosis and decadence of commercial cinema by the film directors Lars von Trier, Thomas Vinterberg and other important members of the group. They had had enough of corrupt illusionism, the arsenal of technical tricks and sentimentality in film. Dogma 95 challenged the dominance of Hollywood on the basis of its loss of authenticity and whom it represented. The Onix architects cleverly profile themselves by writing a similar Dogma manifesto for architecture, and they are also opposed to the star architecture of such Hollywood architects as Frank Gehry, Rob Krier, Sjoerd Soeters and the many different kinds of commercial architecture. Since manifestos of this kind are rare, it is worthwhile to cite the dos and don'ts of the Onix Dogma: "(1) The design is made specifically for the location. (2) Façades are never designed independently of ground plans and vice versa. (3) Drawings and models are made by hand. (4) Materials are used in their natural state. (5) Illustrations in drawings and reference images are prohibited. (6) The building should not contain any referential or unnecessary ornaments. (7) Architecture takes place here and now. (8) All drawings are done by the architect. (9) Stylised designs are not accepted. (10) The architect is not referred to as such." And what goes for Dogma 95 applies to Onix as well: "I swear as a director from personal taste. I am no longer an artist, I swear to refrain from creating a 'work', as I regard the instant as more important than the whole. My supreme goal is to force the truth out of my characters and settings. I swear to do so by all the means available and at the cost of my good taste and any aesthetic considerations."<sup>17</sup> The Dogma of Onix and the Danish film directors does not really operate on the basis of the need for social criticism. They do not implement political projects to criticise the middle class or the status quo, or to champion the oppressed. Any commentary on the status quo is a chance side-effect. Onix is

<sup>15</sup> Kenneth Frampton, "Towards a Critical Regionalism: Six Points for an Architecture of Resistance", in Hal Foster (ed.), *The Anti-Aesthetic. Essays on Postmodern Culture*, Bay Press, Port Townsend, 1983.

<sup>16</sup> Dirty Regionalism is not a condition but a position. I thereby exclude a condition whereby all kinds of local practices such as rickshaws and the Thai TukTuk (<http://www.tuctuktuk.nl/site/tuctuktuk.php>) are imported into the West as quasi-authentic identity gadgets. A Dirty Regionalism of this kind is at home in the condition of dirty realism, i.e. perverse glocal conditions in which the local cannot be divorced from the glocal and the global cannot function without the local.

<sup>17</sup> Dogma 95 manifesto as quoted in the article "Dogma 95" by John Roberts in *New Left Review*, no. 238, 1999.

concerned with authentic expressions and actions that go beyond hypnotic representations. They are interested in experiential diversity in space, in a location as a form of social action. Unlike Critical Regionalism, that mainly presents intact, tidy Modernist buildings, Onix opts for rough, unfinished materials. Their buildings are just as unfinished, grubby and dirty as the handheld camera shots that Vinterberg used in *Celebration*, or Von Trier's shots of the countryside in *The Idiots*. Vinterberg and Von Trier turn the viewer into an almost pornographic voyeur. They use the subversive dirt of our society to hold a looking-glass to us – we recognise our own perversion and secretly feel at home in it – while at the same time we perceive through it the possibility of a different world. Instead of turning their backs on the cliché as the Critical Regionalists do, Von Trier, Vinterberg and Onix make clever use of the cliché in their quest for social authenticity. In other words, the dirt of society harbours a critical potential, not as an independent factor, but as a communicational instrument to be deployed in the striving for emancipation. While the Critical Regionalists sterilise the everyday by absorbing all local influences in the autonomy and abstraction of tectonics,<sup>18</sup> Onix is prepared to run risks in embracing the popular, the folkloric, even the cardboard qualities of the everyday. Onix has no qualms about imperfection or the taste of others. Onix is prepared to dirty its hands in its negotiation with the users, the sub-contractor, the situation on location and vernacular traditions. Instead of isolating itself in the sterile world of art for art's sake, Onix endeavours to relate to the reality around us which is just getting dirtier and dirtier. It is precisely by embracing what is conventional – the typology of the farm, the sentiments of the users and complex economic limiting conditions – that Onix is able to communicate with the local setting and its users, while at the same time the unprecedented rough and imperfect tectonics opens up new worlds of use. The road that Onix has chosen is by no means an easy one. All kinds of cultural and social meanings are suddenly at stake that go beyond the architectural profession. It's no longer possible to steer a course blindly following the automatic dictates of architecture. What counts is to take notice of what gives direction to the profession outside its own discourse. It is not for nothing that Onix is keen to take the actual architectural experiences of users and visitors into account and to build installations together with local users and architects.

## 2) From representation to information

Critical Regionalism and Dirty Regionalism do not comment on the status quo; they both offer an alternative to it. Critical Regionalism's alternative clings to the representative expression of architectural tectonics; how the construction, its principle of cladding and thereby the details of a building can embody durable values. The starting point is not so much the (changeable) programme of life as what can be (permanently) incorporated in the disciplinary practice of the profession. A rolling mountain landscape can be beautifully picked up in the roofscape of a building. As for the interaction of the user, how a construction generates complex narratives is not the strongest point of Critical Regionalism. Critical Regionalism adheres to essential binary oppositions. It manifests itself against the visual and for the tactile, against the space and for the place, against the city and for the countryside. While Critical Regionalism is exclusive, Dirty Regionalism opts for a hybrid approach: both urban and rural, both natural and artificial, both visual and tactile, both beautiful and ugly, both smooth and rough, and so on. Critical Regionalism puts its trust in the permanent aspects of architecture. Critical Regionalists forget that our experience and the life of things are much more complex than they would have us believe. And that complexity is only increasing under the influence of the global culture industry.<sup>19</sup> Our relation to objects in our global culture long ago became a dynamic instead of a static one. Cultural identities assumed a dynamic form of their own in our culture of

<sup>18</sup> Local influences are such factors as the topography (roofscape, earthwork), climate, light, material and craftsmanship.

<sup>19</sup> See too Scott Lash and Celia Lury, *Global Culture Industry. The Mediation of Things*, Polity, Cambridge, 2005.

circulation; value is added in the movement. The effect of an object on social subjects is no longer determined from above as it was in the era of Theodor Adorno,<sup>20</sup> but is subject to the constant differences and multiplicity that the global cultural industry produces. We are the ones who put together our exclusive Puma shoes. It is no longer a single panoptic centre that is in control, but the active participation of every individual in the economic process. It is not for nothing that the Onix book *MaNUfesto towards an authentic architectural experience* is entitled *Awaiting Significance*.<sup>21</sup> The experience of the user is the main factor for Onix. Their book *Awaiting Significance* searches for “the illuminating spots where the everyday forces its way in, where there is also place for exception and resistance; spots where academic autism is riddled by the rhizome of authenticity”. Onix are not after a representative final image, but a result that is interactive and geared to change. It is not for nothing that Zwolle residents are invited to plot their own routes through the Exodus building. The imperfections and uncertainties of life are an important ingredient in the work of Onix. A construction must have an interactive capacity. Critical Regionalism hopes to confer identity on people with its static tectonics, while the Dirty Regionalism of Onix creates authentic moments by the production of difference. Onix are out to establish relations between things – what the performance of a building can mean to the viewer and the user. Seen in operational terms, Critical Regionalism is representative of origin, while Dirty Regionalism is informative by nature. Dirty Regionalism is dirty because it embraces the logic of the global cultural industry. While Critical Regionalism is concerned with the industrial, agricultural and cultural processing of raw materials, the global cultural industry is not focused on the primary quality of materials but on a culture of the constant exchange of meanings based on a collective ideal of sharing. The work does not set out to manipulate references or to cite, but it redefines notions of creation, authorship and originality through the use of cultural artefacts. The materials that they use are a part of our global cultural industry. The work has script-like qualities. The screenplay becomes form. “It is no longer a matter of elaborating a form on the basis of a raw material”, Nicolas Bourriaud writes, “but working with objects that are already in circulation on the cultural market, which is to say, objects already informed by other objects and subjects. Notions of originality (being at the origin of) and even of creation (making something from nothing) are slowly blurred in this new cultural landscape marked by the twin figures of the DJ and the programmer, both of whom have the task of selecting cultural objects and inserting them into new contexts.”<sup>22</sup> Through its method of postproduction, Dirty Regionalism explicitly positions itself vis-à-vis our mass culture, which is full of Dirty Realism. Retreating into the academy, or withdrawing into an élitist and usually expensive tacky (Western) home with Critical Regionalist allure are not the answer. The benchmark is not the *genius loci* or its embodiment, but the narrative of the construction – in other words, how what Onix call the *scenius loci* can be activated by involving the user in the project.

### 3) Unfamiliar familiarity

In the theatre of Bertold Brecht, the audience is constantly reminded that the actor is both a fictive character and a flesh-and-blood actor. Such a consciousness creates critical distance while you remain a part of everyday reality. You suddenly perceive what you belong to, what its principles are, what is problematic and where the openings lie. So it is not a question of the one or the other, but of the qualitative linking of the unfamiliar and the familiar. The dialectical conjunction of universal principles and local values makes a work interesting. Thus the Onnen Villa, the island farm (ecological care farm) in Noordlaren, and the DogmA house – all by Onix –

<sup>20</sup> See Theodor Adorno, *The Culture Industry. Selected Essays on Mass Culture*, Routledge, London, 2001 and Max Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944), Continuum, New York, 1973.

<sup>21</sup> Onix, *Awaiting Significance. MaNUfesto towards an authentic architectural experience*, NAI Uitgevers, Rotterdam, 2005.

<sup>22</sup> Nicolas Bourriaud, *Postproduction*, Lukas & Sternberg, New York, 2007.

skilfully combine the idea of the continuous space with the typology of a folkloristic farmhouse. Alienation as method is a problematical principle for Critical Regionalism; it is primarily about homecoming and reconciliation after a hectic working day in the bustle of the city. Onix do not determine the identity of the homecoming; the experience of climate, natural surroundings, material, light and landscape in an ecologically sound climate is not all that counts. It is precisely the absurd contradictions too that can make the experience of homecoming so rich. The car, asphalt or folklore need not damage the idea of homecoming – as Frampton supposes – but they can in fact widen one's view.<sup>23</sup> The DogmA house, for instance, is both a picturesque little home and an inviting collective roof. For Onix, alienation only takes on meaning in an ambiguous relation with the familiar. This is not to produce creative and aesthetically attractive shock effects, but to gradually allow familiar worlds to grow accustomed to alienation. Onix immunises familiar worlds by confronting them with the unfamiliar.

#### 4) Dirty Details

Authenticity is not a static concept – something of the tectonics itself – in Dirty Regionalism, but it comes to life through activity, once the users occupy the building by being active. This form of authenticity is activated by a smaller or larger degree of inconsistency in the whole. Like the Japanese principle of Wabi-sabi, something does not become authentic until it satisfies three simple realities: nothing has eternal life, nothing is complete, and nothing is perfect. Perfection lies in imperfection. Such Dirty Details take into account the programmatic and cultural narratives that a detail manages to communicate through its technical and aesthetic discourses. Sometimes the very material that Onix deploys is dirty. Literally dirty, as rough as sandpaper. They are down-to-earth materials, weathered or unpainted wood that changes colour in the sunlight and intensely stimulates the senses. Is it a house or a barn? From a distance it looks so completely wooden, unfinished in both senses of the word. Sometimes Onix deploys stronger generators of difference, such as a continuous floor that finds its way to the roof. Besides offering shade and a sense of security, the roof invites the user to possess it. It is as though the street blends into the roof and becomes a square. It enables the residents to enjoy drifting in from outdoors as in the DogmA house. It is the forms and the material that interrupt, agitate, and sometimes even insinuate. The presentation of the Onix Dogma manifesto was accompanied by that of a pack of sanding paper. Material is allowed to be dirty, unpolished, imperfect, fragile, urban and extreme.

While Critical Regionalism encounters the region, digs it up and strips it of its scenographic bad taste, Dirty Regionalism reinvents it through the schizophrenic condition of the global society. For Dirty Regionalism the global society is also capable of developing potential differences that generate freedom. Freedom is produced not only in the dialectical difference between the local aspect of traditional societies and the universal. Not just the earthscape, the roofscape, the local climate, the topography, or local materials can have an emancipatory effect, but global influences – those of our mass, reflexive culture – can have one too.<sup>24</sup>

It is the dirt of the earth that has an inspiring effect. With an adherence to a preindustrial idea of ground, Mondrian's and Van Doesburg's movement De Stijl could never have emerged. Their abstract colours, fields, lines and patterns may not literally be found in the landscape of the Netherlands, but they are certainly determined by the Dutch cultural landscape. What is authentic is not finding a craft, traditional or particular material, but what its deployment generates for use. While the craft or material of a potato crate is fairly crude, as perfect imperfection it can fulfil its purpose if you take into account the collective memory of a site and know

<sup>23</sup> See too the unimplemented Onix design for an interior showroom in Leek.

<sup>24</sup> We even find new forms of communality on internet – the virtual reality par excellence. See [www.facebook.com](http://www.facebook.com) or [www.couchsurfing.com](http://www.couchsurfing.com).

what it has to target. In East Groningen, Onix designed a crate house made of materials from the immediate surroundings that had been used before. The crate house consists of 4,000 stacked crates with the smell of potatoes from a distant past. This collection of dirty crates transformed into a resting point in the landscape embodies the social history of a largely erased past. These Dirty Details, referring to potato cultivation in Groningen, reflect for a moment on a landscape that was completely different in the past, before the idyllic reforestation had permanently eradicated every historic trace of the agrarian landscape.

### 5) “We make the road by walking”

In 1987 Paulo Freire invited his colleague Myles Horton to engage in a dialogue about education as an emancipatory practice.<sup>25</sup> Freire asks: “Is it possible to discuss, to study the phenomenon of life without discussing exploitation, domination, freedom, democracy, and so on?”. They are in agreement that the answer is no; they reject the idea of neutrality in education. According to Freire, what matters is not having an opinion, but the sharing of ideas in such a way that more room is created for the students to disagree, so that they can find their own way in a better understanding of things. Freire and Horton create a space in which everyone comes to a richer insight into the topic under discussion on the basis of disagreement. In other words, disagreeing, saying what is at stake, and coming into collision helps you to find your way. It is precisely the jolts – the dirt on the road – that point the way. With *Awaiting Significance* in the Exodus project and the “doG manifesto (a non-contemporary pilgrimage in 10 paths)”, Onix opts for the same educational approach as Freire and Horton. Their list of assignments for ten spaces in *Awaiting Significance* challenges the visitors to discover them for themselves. “Space 1 Walk around the building before you enter it. Space 2 Sketch the building. Space 3 Find a way through the building by getting lost. [...] Space 8 Smell, feel, see, listen and taste the building. Space 9 Meet other people in the building. Space 10 Be receptive to the experience of another.” “doG a non-contemporary pilgrimage in 10 paths” is an attempt to indicate 10 directions in which various installations can be built on location in collaboration with local architects and users.<sup>26</sup> So the beauty of a building by Onix lies not in its overall appearance nor in its utility – only through the road you make by walking through the building and how you produce it together. Or in the words of Onix: “It is not a question of restoring the true relation between the tectonic and the a-tectonic, or of revising the relation between the functional and the poetic. It is about building on what is said about it, because that is connected with how it is used and experienced.”<sup>27</sup> Onix is thereby stating that architecture is by definition ambiguous and enigmatic, an endless work in which a story arises from several stories, detached and intertwined, in a hermetic openness. Critical Regionalism, on the other hand, adopts a position based on a single authority: that of the architect and his (Western) profession.

### Democratic Design

As we have seen in the introduction to this article and in the work of Onix, the importance of the authentic and the desire for exclusiveness can assume many guises. Puma also jumps onto the desire for exclusive authenticity bandwagon. When Onix invites visitors to enter the Exodus building with Captain Beefheart Revisited music on the iPod, this “dirty” approach seems to have a lot in common with the quasi-authenticity of subversive commerce. Both the work of Onix and that of subversive commerce derive the strength of a work from the differences that it can generate in

<sup>25</sup> Myles Horton and Paulo Freire, *We Make the Road by Walking: Conversations on Education and Social Change*, Temple University Press, Philadelphia, 1990.

<sup>26</sup> “Path 1 NOWthentic, is each time a new road that ends in a mimesis of the authentic. Path 2 Scenius Loci, is trodden together by local parties and outsiders. Path 3 Unfamiliar familiarity, convention is illuminated through emancipation.”

<sup>27</sup> See note 21 (Onix).

dialogue with the viewer and user. The meditative moment arises through the lack of an all too direct and fluid conjunction between the different worlds that are brought together in the design. It is as though there is a gap, a void, between the one and the other that causes agitation and invites you to complete the work. What distinguishes the designers in the exhibition *Tangible Traces* from the world of commerce is that their dirty conjunctions have a highly specific goal in mind. They join Frampton and myself in asking: “How exactly do we reenergize and reactivate the design professions and, above all, our digitalized, consumer society, politically speaking, given the way it is currently sequestered by the triumph of globalization? How do we recover the references we have lost or are in process of losing?”<sup>28</sup> While Frampton opts for a double critique, a strategy of tactile elements as opposed to the visual, and of tectonic elements as opposed to the stenographic – i.e. a distanced, unimpaired identity – Dirty Regionalism focuses on how the field of tension between the differences can steer emancipation. What Onix brings out in its work is that the desire for the authentic along the lines of the cleansing rules of Critical Regionalism does not work politically at all. Critical regionalism confines itself to the tectonics of architecture instead of investigating how spatial constructions generate democratic narratives. Critical Regionalism does not like the unexpected, the uncertain, difference and unfamiliarity. It prefers answers to uncertain and open constructions. In this respect Critical Regionalism resembles the police. Unlike politicians, the police want to normalise everything that is subversive or revolutionary as quickly as possible. Uncertainty is what the police always want to combat, while politics is a question of fertile disagreements that keep on inspiring reflection and further emancipation in conflict with the status quo. It is therefore hardly surprising that the Critical Regionalists have never issued pronouncements on the city (polis). Unlike Dirty Regionalists, Critical Regionalists lack a cosmopolitan vision. Under the provocative title of Dirty Regionalism, I have tried to chart a technique of stoppages, gaps and assemblages that, with its intrinsic critical capacity, emancipates the idea of a wall, roof or type in relation to the “choreography” of use.<sup>29</sup> Like the political scientist Chantal Mouffe, I am searching for democratic designs “which would provide the basis for a vibrant agonistic (as opposed to antagonistic) debate as to the shape and the future of the common life”.<sup>30</sup> I am convinced that the Dirty Regionalism of Onix is on the right track towards an agonistic space by means of their perfect imperfection.

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<sup>28</sup> Kenneth Frampton in ‘Postscript to “Critical Regionalism Revisited”: A Response to Mark Gilbert and Bart Lootsma’ at <http://agglutinations.com/archives/000014.html>. 10 November 2003.

<sup>29</sup> It is the democratic space of the visual, physical and non-verbal, the space of the body and of (ritual) procedures.

<sup>30</sup> Chantal Mouffe, *The Return of the Political. Thinking in Action*, Routledge, London, 2005.