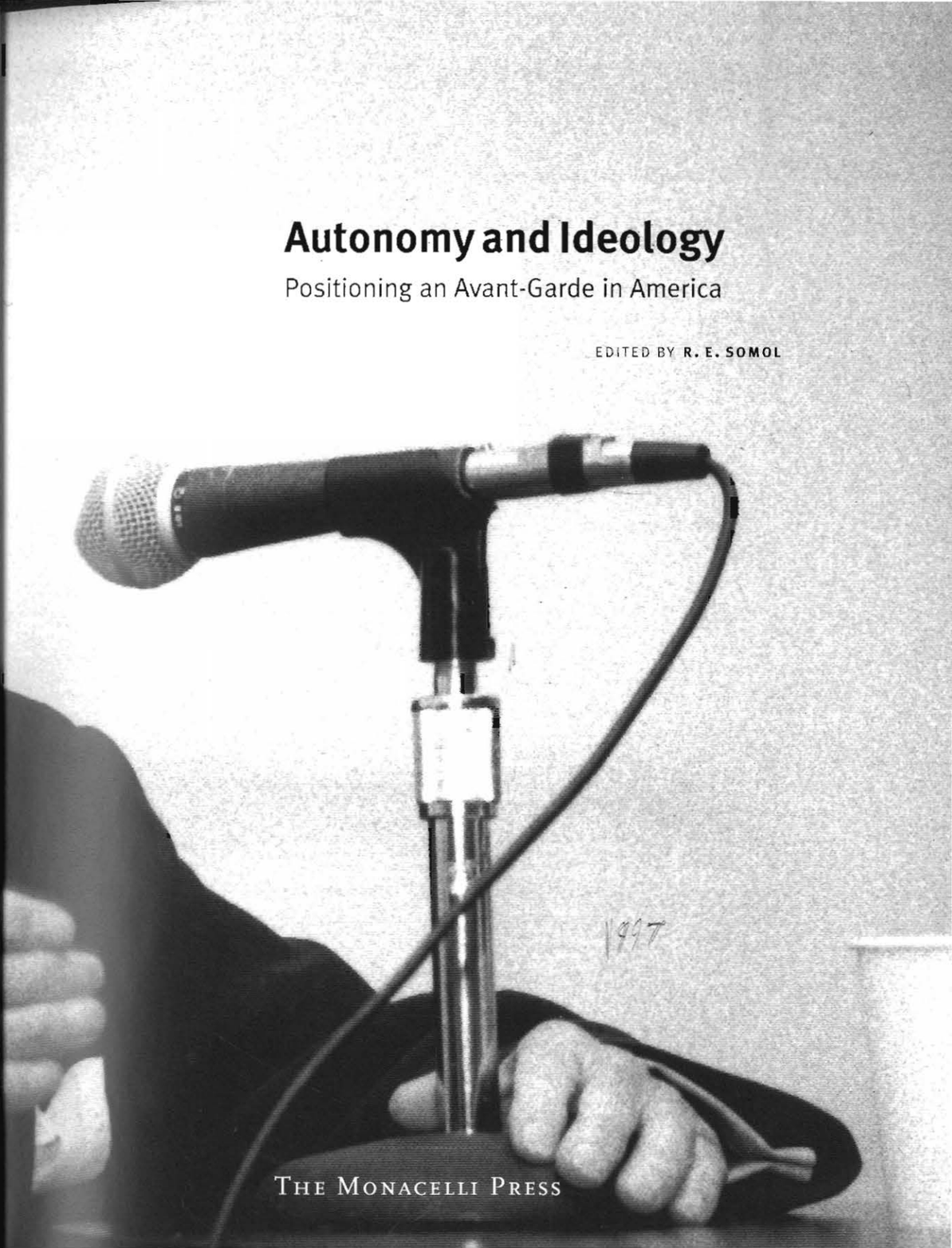
Autonomy and Ideology

Positioning an Avant-Garde in America

EDITED BY **R. E. SOMOL**



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Autonomy and the Avant-Garde

The Necessity of an Architectural Avant-Garde in America

Corsivo I: Going Last. *The problem with going last at any conference is that what one wants to say seems always to have already been said by everyone else. In turn, one then feels the compulsion to reply to everything that has been said. This latter feeling overcame me last night at about three in the morning after hearing Colin Rowe talk about our Stuttgart trip. I remembered the occasion and I also remembered where I had heard the term* corsivo *for the first time. It was in a search that I led Colin on to find magazines of Italian origin of the prewar period. One of those magazines we uncovered was a special issue on the Casa del Fascio published sixty years ago in a magazine called* Quadrante, *edited by Massimo Bontempelli and Pier Maria Bardi. What is interesting about this magazine is that there are no essays, there are merely* corsivi, *that is, a series of points,* uno, due, tre, *etc. Colin reminded me of this in his mention of the term last night, so I thought I would structure my talk today as a series of* corsivi *because I could not allow Colin the last word on the zeitgeist.*

Corsivo II: Obiter Dictum. *On February 3, 1959, in Clear Lake, Iowa, an anniversary to this day, Buddy Holly, the Big Bopper, and Ritchie Valens died in an airplane crash while they were taking off in a snowstorm in a small plane:* the Geist of the Zeit.

Corsivo III: Obiter Dictum. *I remember flying to Seville not many years ago. I had arrived at the Madrid airport. I used to worry, when I needed to make a connection, that there would be some kind of weather problem. On this day, however, the Madrid airport was brilliantly lit by a blue sky, not a cloud to be seen. Since I had a confirmed first-class ticket from Madrid to Seville, there would be no problem in flying. I arrived at the check-in counter, speaking little Spanish, but enough to communicate to the person of authority who was to check me in for my continuing flight. This person was both less and more of an authority, since she referred herself to a computer in front of her. She said, "Well, I am afraid, Mr. Eisenman, that your name does not appear on this computer. You have no ticket." And I said, "But you don't have to worry about the computer, here is a ticket and it has my name on it, and it says OK, it is even in first class." And she said, "I am sorry, the computer says that you are not going." So despite the beautiful weather and despite the fact that I had a confirmed ticket, I did not get on the flight:* the Geist of the Zeit.

Corsivo IV: Mad Dogs and Englishmen. *Eighteen months after Buddy Holly's plane went down, and after a series of strange coincidences, I met Colin Rowe. From that moment on, some thirty-six years ago, he has been in one way or another railing against the zeitgeist. What I always find strange about this continuing antagonism toward the zeitgeist is that if, as he says, it doesn't exist, why has he been going on so long about it? How is it that architectural historians can speak of the color and texture of a place, such as a city, or even the style of an architecture, in abstract terms, but they are not able to discern the same abstraction about time? Clearly, therefore, the idea represents some concern for him and for me. Because if Rowe was so passionate against the zeitgeist, in my oedipal condition, I should inquire as to what it was that stirred up such passion. If there is no zeitgeist, or if there is, how does one act to change things, and what determines the value of our actions?*

Corsivo V: Taste and Temperament. *I remember Colin introducing me to a book with this title that I believe was written by a Joan Evans. It was in 1961 when he suggested that an alternative to the zeitgeist might be a condition of a psychological imperative. Evans' book is a bastardization of the Jungian typology of sensation, intuition and feeling and thinking. In it she says that there are artistic temperaments, which deal with things not according to taste but according to psychological makeup. She categorizes these types as quick and slow, introvert and extrovert; here, then, is another* Geist: *that of the psychological.*

Corsivo VI: The Two Tents. *Colin mentioned yesterday that there were two tents in his Southern apocalyptic fantasy, one circular and the other oblong. He mentioned that I was clearly expounding in the circular tent but he never told us that he was the person, the Episcopalian priest manqué, in the oblong tent. Was it for Colin merely a question of taste, or was it also a question of temperament?*

Corsivo VII: The Dream Before. *I was reminded as I listened to Colin Rowe last night of a Laurie Anderson tape called* Strange Angels. *On it there was a song called "The Dream Before" dedicated to Walter Benjamin. Now I am not about to sing this little verse to you. Although Colin is always wanting to sing little songs, my voice is not up to it. What I find so interesting is that it begins with words to the effect Hansel and Gretel are alive and well and living in Berlin. While Colin mentions Stuttgart, he does not tell us much about his role in Berlin. Hansel, for me, is the recently deposed Hans Stimann, and Gretel could be the* Geist *of Colin Rowe. And it is very interesting how much the current planning in Berlin resembles the Hansel and Gretel story. The end of the verse goes, "And she said, what is his story? And he*

said his story is an angel being blown backwards into the future. And he said, and, there is a storm blowing from paradise and that storm keeps blowing the angel backwards into the future and the storm, that storm, is called progress." That is also dedicated to Colin Rowe.

Corsivo VIII: Stasis as Movement. *A remembered quote from Colin Rowe: "There is nothing worth talking about in architecture since 1965."*

Corsivo IX: Esprit Nouveau, Towards a New Architecture, City of Tomorrow, 1965. *These correspond with the death of Le Corbusier and, in a sense, the death of Colin's fascination with the avant-garde architect. Like his fascination with the zeitgeist, his preoccupation with Le Corbusier is quite remarkable. It is no coincidence that nothing happens for Colin after 1965.*

Corsivo X. In the context of this conference, this *corsivo* may seem somewhat heretical. This is because in the terms of the definition of the avant-garde that is being proposed, the architectural avant-garde in America did not exist until 1966. While there have been various modern or modernist tendencies that from time to time may have appeared in the 1920s and even the 1930s, these tendencies, it can be argued, should not be confused with the avant-garde. To propose such figures as Frank Lloyd Wright, Louis Kahn, or perhaps even a Bruce Goff as the avant-garde is to misread the essential differences between an avant-garde, modernism, and individual expressionisms.

The argument that there was no avant-garde in American architecture until 1966 coincides with the date of the publication of two books by architects, which in their essence, and unlike anything these architects were to write or do after that moment, contain the seeds for such an American architectural avant-garde. These two books, Aldo Rossi's *The Architecture of the City* and Robert Venturi's *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture,* each in their own way propose an idea of an autonomy of architecture. It is this idea of autonomy that I suggest will begin to distinguish modernism from the avant-garde, and the architectural avant-gardes from those of other disciplines.

While both books seem at first glance to be returns to a former historicizing mode of speculation about architecture, upon closer inspection this turns out not to be the case. For Rossi, the issue of autonomy is very clearly spelled out; in Venturi's book, the idea of autonomy is implicit. Basically, both say that in the restoration of the hegemony of Western capital after the war, and in the return to the possibility of architecture as a social instrument, one aspect of modernism that had been lacking from its social contract was the idea of history, the history of the language and discipline of architecture, and thus the historical conditions for meaning. What both books argue, in one way or another, is that in order to understand the city, architecture must be placed back into its historical discourse, that is, onto its own historical language. The idea of architecture and its own historical language in both Venturi's and Rossi's cases becomes a condition for autonomy.

This is not the first time that the idea of a historical language of architecture as a condition of its autonomy had been debated in architecture. For example, in the Italian Renaissance the difference between the work of Serlio and Michelangelo rests on this issue. For Serlio, autonomy was to be found in the historical language, and his speculative work was always rooted in variations of that language. For Michelangelo, autonomy lay in the invention of new forms of language, and not in variations. Clearly the idea of invention also involves the idea of the constantly new, the original, and originality, terms that have underpinned the more recent discussions of the avant-garde. So in a sense, from the beginning autonomy has been linked to either invention or variation in architecture. Yet in Rossi and Venturi it is the first time that the idea of a specific linguistic concept of architecture, as both autonomous and outside the classical idea of an architectural language, is introduced in the American context. This is not merely the idea of language as an abstract concept but rather the idea of a continuing language of architecture, which in a sense exists outside of and thus autonomously of any style, whether that style be classicism or modernism. What Rossi and Venturi are arguing is that the historical language, which had been lost in the modernist impulse, was in fact constituted against the propelling vector of the zeitgeist, and thus stood outside of both narrative time and the zeitgeist. It is this standing outside of linear time that becomes part of the idea of an autonomous language, autonomous to the history of architecture, and becomes an autonomy in itself. Here for the first time, autonomy is no longer linked to either invention or variation. It is also the first time that such an idea enters into an American architectural discourse. And because of this, another idea of the avant-garde is proposed, one not linked to time or, in the particular case of the present, to a modernist notion in twentieth-century architecture.

it was the separation of the idea of modernism from that of the avant-garde—a link that had previously conditioned all twentieth-century avant-gardes up until that moment—that would forever change the assumption that avant-gardes in general would now be modernist in their disposition. What Rossi and Venturi did simultaneously was to break this linkage. It is this break that is important in this context. For in doing so, both Rossi and Venturi introduce, each in his own way, the idea of autonomy into the idea of the avant-garde. This in turn begins to separate the idea of an architectural avant-garde from those of other disciplines.

This idea of an autonomy linked with the avant-garde is a departure and perhaps even an inversion of these terms as they are commonly understood today, wherein modernism is usually associated with autonomy and the avant-garde with a social project. To link modernism with a social project and the avant-garde with autonomy has the following consequences.

First, autonomy must be separated from an idea of originality, and from the value of origins. Second, autonomy must be understood as a singularity that for its preservation requires it to be cut from its previous modes of legitimation. For this idea to make any sense it is necessary to go back to the supposed origin of the avant-garde in the late eighteenth century and the early nineteenth century.

According to most definitions, there are two factors that animate the idea of an avant-garde. First, that there is a consciousness of a bourgeoisie and, second, that this consciousness carries with it the idea of a zeitgeist. This produces two different forms of the avant-garde, one hostile to the mechanisms of bourgeois society and the other complicit with it. In the former, which is evident in the first avant-gardes in the 1820s and 1830s, the avant-garde was seen as a form of aestheticism, as a withdrawal from the consumptive and instrumental mechanisms of a modernizing society. This withdrawal occurred at the same time as the formation of aesthetics as a separate discourse in philosophy. Both of these conditions led to the idea of art as an autonomous discipline, distinct not only from philosophy but also from the practices of bourgeois society. So from the earliest beginnings of the avant-garde, the detachment of art from a means-ends society—that is, the autonomy of art—was the precondition for the possibility of an avant-garde.

Thus in one sense, the European avant-garde movements of the 1830s can be defined as attacks on the changing status of art in a bourgeois society, that is, the art of the new marketplace. What Peter Bürger says is "What we negated was not an earlier form of art as style but art as an institution that is unassociated with the life praxis of man." He says that the avant-garde did not negate previous art as style, but challenged the autonomous institution of art. It negated artistic institutions that allowed art to be separated from social praxis. Bürger in this context is defending the historical avant-garde's attack on autonomy.

However, what develops in the avant-garde of the 1920s is almost diametrically opposite the conditions proposed in the nineteenth century. Ironically, instead of disassociation, and thus an autonomy from social practice, the avant-garde of the 1920s demanded that art be practical once again, that it should become socially significant. Another commentator on the avant-garde, Manfredo Tafuri, has a different view of the phenomenon. For Tafuri, this meant that art was a model for action, a coming to terms with the new laws of production as part of the universe of conventions. Here the implication remained that the autonomy of art was important. It was, as Tafuri says, a recognition that art and life were antithetical and that some mediation had to be found even if it meant the realization of the Hegelian prediction of the death of art.

It is here that Tafuri makes the necessary distinction between avant-garde art and architecture. He says that while art attempted to represent the chaos of the modern condition through an irony and thus a new frontier of visual communication, through the forms of assemblage, through a control of formlessness and chaos, it was architecture that offered the possibility of dealing with the real place of the improbable, and that was the city. It was at this point that architecture could enter, according to Tafuri, absorbing and going beyond the avant-gardes. The result, he says, was that the aesthetic experience of the city was revolutionized by formal dissolution through the processes of assemblage from the standardized cell to the city.

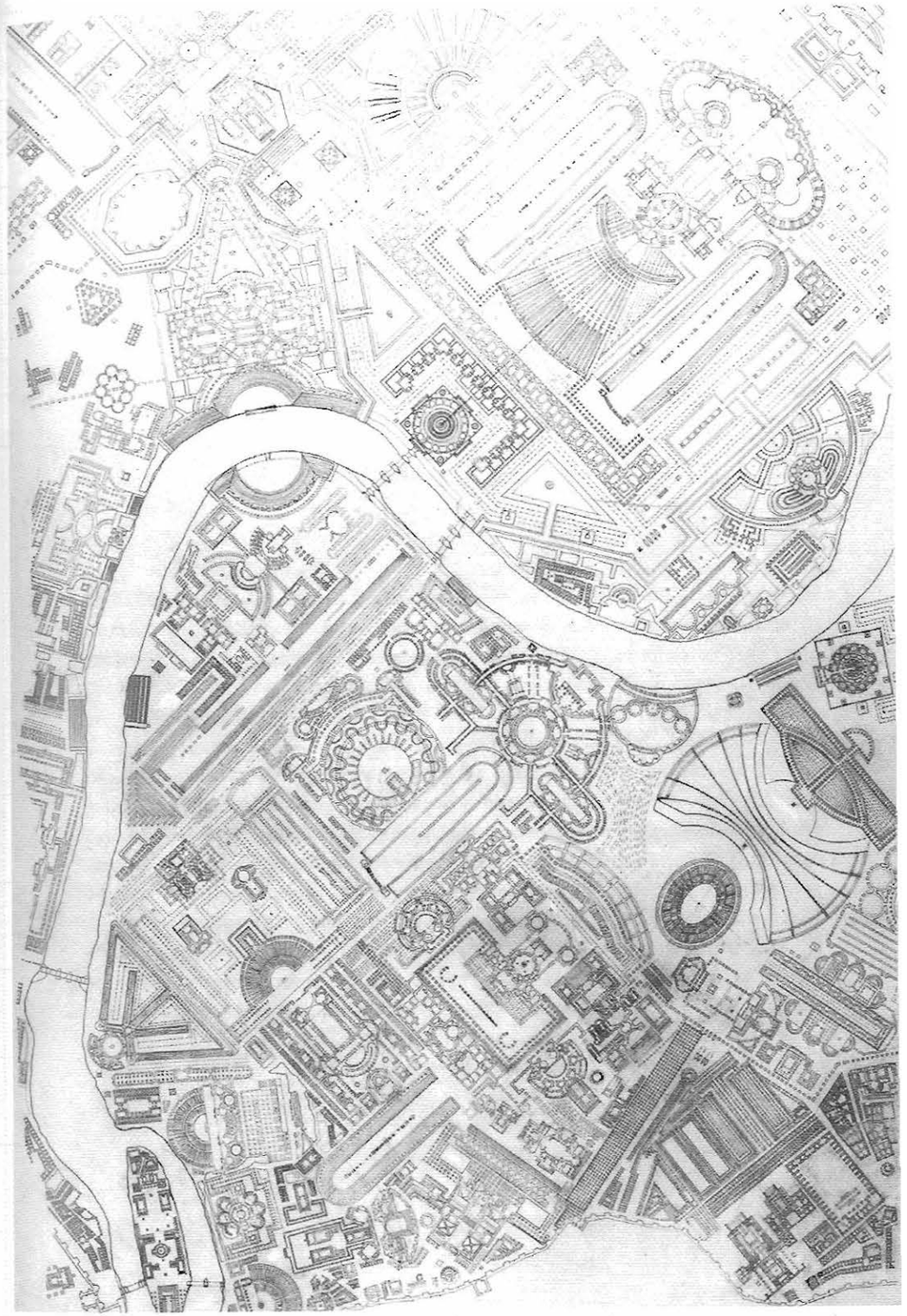
Unlike other arts, specifically painting, what constitutes the autonomy of architecture is always conditioned by a certain form of social practice. This gives to architecture a specific condition of autonomy unrelated to that of painting. For example, while painting is a form of social practice, no one has any trouble distinguishing conditions of its autonomy from its social practice. The idea of the materiality of the canvas, the saturation of paint on a surface, the edge stress and the frame, are never confused with the social practice of art. When similar formal characteristics are

found in architecture, they have always been inextricably linked to its social function: shelter, accommodation, symbolism, etc. The problem for architecture has always been to define its autonomy by attempting to remove it from precisely the social practice that supposedly defines it. This removal or displacement has various functions. For one, it defines the autonomy of architecture as transgressive of its time and place, thus counter to any idea of the zeitgeist. This idea of autonomy as transgression of architecture's social practice—cutting it off from its previous modes of legitimation—already defines a condition of its avant-garde nature.

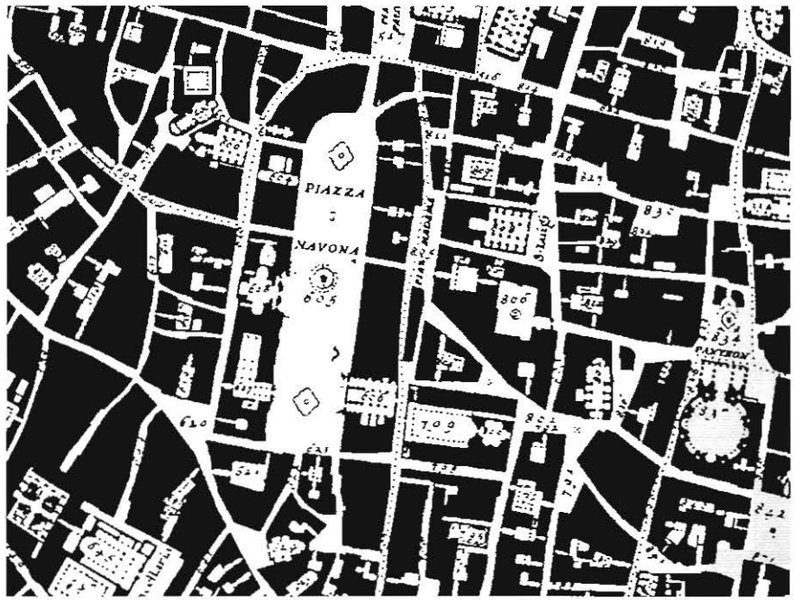
It is in this sense that my linking of autonomy and the avant-garde disagrees with Tafuri. Tafuri makes a distinction between what he calls the constructive or experimental and the absolutist or totalitarian aspects of the avant-garde. The absolutist, he says, claims to build a brand-new context, while the experimental is constantly taking apart what exists, moving toward an unknown from within the known. He says that while the absolutist subverts, the experimental decomposes and recomposes linguistic material, the infringement of codes. For Tafuri, this experimental attitude is called the critical, and he opposes it to the avant-garde use of irony or, as he says, the disenchanted game. Tafuri's distinction between the avant-garde and the critical suggests that the avant-garde is always wrapped up with the new and therefore with a zeitgeist and the constant notion of change, while the critical always involves a measure of experimental work. In my discussion the avant-garde is by nature critical of the zeitgeist, rather than an apparatus of it.

Tafuri is caught up with the separation of the critical, or creative, work from the new in its reaction to time or, more specifically, the zeitgeist. Tafuri seems to imply that the avant-gardist, in dealing with the perpetual new, is always bound up with the zeitgeist. For me, critical work exists in some form of an internal time, or what will be called here an autonomous time, that is embedded within the history of architectural discourse.

It is Tafuri's division of the experimental from the avant-garde that is problematic for this argument. For me, the critical or experimental work and the subversive absolutist must both be seen as avant-gardists. The latter is involved with manifestations of the zeitgeist, while the former is concerned with a denial of the zeitgeist and the question of the autonomy of time. It is this autonomy, introduced by both Venturi and Rossi, as a historical time internal to architecture, that is outside any consideration of the zeitgeist. In both the idea of autonomy is no longer concerned with originality.



(1)
Piranesi,
Nolli Map of Rome, 1754



(2)
Piranesi, Campo Marzio, 1762

What must be understood in this context is that my definition is not autonomy as a neo-avant-garde (as some of the other papers have suggested) but rather autonomy as the idea of a singular difference. And it is this idea of autonomy in its many guises—from time to language to space itself—that ultimately answers Jeffrey Kipnis's diagnosis as to the possibility of an avant-garde today. Neither the autonomy of architecture nor the idea that this autonomy, in particular with respect to architecture, constitutes a permanent condition of the avant-garde can be merely willed away. To attempt to do this, as both Rowe and Tafuri have done, despite their apparently opposing interests, is to demonstrate the continuing power of such an idea. It remains for us today to continue to explore and expand the possibilities for such an autonomy in the face of the hegemony of world capital.

Corsivo XI: Piranesi. *Figure (1) is what is known as the Nolli Map of Rome of 1754. Figure (2) is the Piranesi drawing of the Campo Marzio of 1762. It is interesting that they are both drawn by Piranesi, but more important is the change in the eight years between 1754 and 1762. The Nolli Map is one way of looking at what exists. It has became an enormous source of fascination for Colin Rowe, and for his ideos of Collage City and of the contextual. Why Colin assumes that such a figuration, which had a significance at that time and at that place, which relied, as it were, on a* Geist, *can assume that same power in a new time and a new place, can assume the transference of not only a zeitgeist but also the genius loci, which he prefers, has always been, for me, problematic in his argument. What is interesting is that while Colin focuses on figure (1), he owns figure (2) and looks at it every day. In some way he manages not to engage that drawing. For me, figure (2) possesses a notion of criticality and autonomy in its notion of autonomous time, in its movement of buildings, in its invention of buildings, in its denial of the hierarchy of the baroque city. In all of these it transgresses the established norms of the time to establish an autonomous discourse of architectural time.*

Corsivo XII: The Gust of the Zeit. *I tried to make it in eleven but I will settle for twelve—the twelve apostles, the twelve tribes of Israel, etc.—and go on from there. Yesterday, Colin Rowe mentioned the idea of "the Gust of the Zeit" as spoken by Christopher Wren in 1728. Christopher Wren started his architectural practice, as we are reminded by Sir Bannister Fletcher, in 1662. He had no work until 1666 when the Gust of the Zeit, the great wind that fanned the fire of London blew London, away, and created an instant practice for him. Now really, Colin, of course Christopher Wren had an investment in the Gust of the Zeit: he made his practice out of it. And of course Peter Eisenman has an investment in the Gust of the Zeit: he has made his practice out of it as well.*