ADVICE FOR MYSELF IN MY TWENTIES

by JACK SELF

Last year I turned fifty. To celebrate I went to Greece. Like you, I had seen the reports about the improved water, which is now almost safe enough to swim in without equipment. I was hoping to see a fish. I hadn't been back to Greece since my thirties, before the crisis. The beaches I walked then are long gone. Although, I suppose we never step in the same river twice. My daughter is twenty, and at my birthday party she asked me what advice I would have given myself at her age.

My advice to myself was this: Never accept the status quo, always be ready for change, and adapt your mental state to perpetual instability. Most of all, never stop being an active agent in the world—relinquish all your expectations, but not your ideals. If I had known this, I wouldn't have been fearful, I would have seen the coming decades as a necessary struggle to once again feel joy.

I was born in 1987, which makes me a Millennial—one of those strange, hybrid generations split across two centuries, two mindsets, two realities, and two paradigms. The Modernists were the same type of creatures. Until the crisis, my idea of normality was deeply formed by the twentieth century. I was a heavy smoker (American Spirit Blue, but only Swiss-made). I drove a petrol car (1991 Mercedes 500SL). I ate hamburgers. I spent holidays in Hawaii. I voted. I had a passport.

As a schoolchild, I met a veteran of World War I. He told me he was shot in the back at Gallipoli. As an adolescent, I knew a Holocaust survivor who had seen a man skinned alive at Bergen-Belsen. I once ate pancakes in the smoking section of the restaurant located in the Twin Towers. As a teenager, I spent several months in Syria. There I had lunch in Palmyra's Theatre (where ISIS would later execute the site's caretakers). I remember home telephones, televisions, post boxes, metal coins– common material culture which are now all extinguished. I remember the global economy, contactless payment, and air travel. I remember when the United States were the world's police, when China had a billion people, and when Europe looked down on Africa as a poor cousin, beset by weak governance and disease. Now it is me who could not claim asylum there.

When I reflect on my career, I am surprised at how slowly the field of architecture has changed since I was her age. It is a crushingly slow discipline, grinding forward towards truths we have known since the 1970s. The death of the great stars—Rem, Renzo, Zaha, Jean, Toyo, Frank—marked perhaps the only significant inflection. Their departure killed the personality cult of the heroic visionary. We no longer feel the anxiety to be singular, nor the aspiration to be individually recognised.

In spite of this, I'm not at all nostalgic for the past. My reasons for dwelling on these memories are ambiguous. Partially, I feel that to remember is to kill the past, every memory is a eulogy. I also increasingly feel like a living relic, a bridge to another time, and I want you to understand the spirit of those times as a way to make sense of the world today. Because my daughter does not know the angst of the past, she does not appreciate the relief of this Golden Era. I can only feel relaxed when I am in water. Back in Greece, I accepted the risks and went swimming naked. I lay on my back and stared at the horizon through my feet – a vision unchanged in several billion years, the defining postcard of Earth. I allowed my ego to dissolve into the sea, my body to abandon the self. And there I was calm, free from the myths of progress and advancement, from time itself, as I descended to a primal form at one with the world.

JACK SELF retired early from a career at NASA's OPAI (Outer Planetary Architecture Initiative) where he specialized in creating livable structures using the infamously unstable sands of Saturn. He is currently writing his first novel.

NOW LIVE ON KONRAD TV: THE COMPULSION TO OVERCOME THE FINISHED OBJECT

by JEANNE HU

It's time for the Venice Biennale. And it's architecture's turn. Unlike its small sister, the Art Biennale, Architecture tries to come up with answers: about our built and unbuilt environment, how we live together and how we organize coexistence. One of the highlights of this year's edition was the Platinum Lion for Konrad Wachsmann, laudated by Mark Wigley. Author of many books and films on Wachsmann and responsible for our recent Wachsmann adoration. Mr. Wigley used the occasion to emphasize, once again, the importance of Konrad Wachsmann as an architect of joints. An architect of the brain. And a TV Star.

100 years ago, Konrad Wachsmann was arrested as a dissident German living in Italy. Escaping to France, he was arrested again. For being a German. In the internment camp he sketched a design for a hangar. As a refugee in the United States he developed it into what he called a space frame—an ephemeral cloud-like mesh, able to take any size or form to host any activity. Here began what came after architecture.

"Konrad Wachsmann was the key to understanding that architecture was the problem, not the solution," Wigley opens. Architecture as a human order, created by our built environment; a meaning, given to humanity, other than non-human. Wachsmann vehemently opposed the disciplinary notion of architecture. His aim was the dissolution of professional boundaries by means of a single (architectural) element, the joint. "Imagine: a joint, so complex, combining 21 tubes, allowing you and me to construct any geometry and space, rendering the architect, as the one to join and master, obsolete." The joint, as an architectural metaphor for the dissolution of architecture, an exit strategy for the profession into the blur of reality.

The joints, as connecting parts, make the architect the designer of connections and not of fixed solutions. A network system that is radically democratic and in favor of the collective, rather than the individual; solidarity instead of competition. Wachsmann (just like Richard Buckminster Fuller) fed this radically modern notion back into architectural designs: interconnected, light as an airplane, equipped with technology, expanding the (built) borders that architects had established for centuries. "They were truly modern" Wigley states. What made their architecture so modern and real was their desire and compulsion to overcome the finished object as the main focus.

Yet Wachsmann was, in Wigley's eyes, more than an architect, "his anti-architecture is nothing but an idea about democracy. Infinite connectivity is a spirit that's democratic in the sense that every point has equal value to every other point. Depowering the old idea that the strength is not in the individual point [but in the] network and its connections. In a certain sense, there is nothing but net, no discrete subject or place, just a vast interconnected organism." Wachsmann thus delivered a blueprint for today's understanding of architecture as a collective action beyond individual and private interests.

Wigley refers to Wachsmann not necessarily as an architect but rather as the TV producer of his own reality show. With this analogy Wigley builds on Wachsmann's criticism of the architect. For centuries, architects have worked in denial, excluding reality from their projects. Here, Wigley concludes: "It's not just that Wachsmann thought that architecture was being replaced by television and actually devoted the last years of his life being a TV maker. Wachsmann was a broadcast, a TV program himself. TV meaning reality, being anywhere, although people thought it was gone. TV as an intrusion of the private sphere and the edited space. Hidden reality. If architecture was about control, TV was its biggest nightmare. Vietnam in your bedroom? Who would possibly want that? And not just Vietnam.

Editing the outside world through architectural means was suddenly impossible. TV is a codeword for the unexpected possibilities of future realities."

Wigley's speech was more than a homage to a historic figure. Konrad Wachsmann was neither a hero, nor the über-architect his colleagues wanted to see in him. For Wigley, Wachsmann is a way of thinking, or, as he puts it, "a broadcast" that aired with the "Fuller Show" or before the "The Price…". A TV channel about the future. The future of architecture. Today we call it reality, one that "cannot be the future, because the future is by definition what exceeds our ideas. Still, you should always speculate about the future, because the ways in which you get it wrong and it surprises you, will affect what you think the future is."

From Venice, more on this channel. Soon.

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