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«To a certain extent, we are probably not even aware of how not cool our designs are. But that's okay, no need to pretend.»

EUROPEAN COOL

Artai Sánchez Keller

During the last months of 2019, which I spent in the US, it seemed that whatever I was looking at — or found at least mildly interesting — was dubbed as boring, boxy and, incidentally, non-spatial by someone in the school. As harmless as this might sound, at some point in your academic education you don't expect this to happen anymore and won't take such a comment lightly. But instead of countering or defending my dear precedents, I decided to let the roasts pour over me and, in turn, let my fellow students flood me with new references. Thus, rather unwillingly, but driven by a fidgety curiosity, I forced myself to scroll through projects of a completely different category than what my Instagram feed would normally fuel me with: instead of only @elarafrizenwalden_ and @florisvanderpoel; @preliminary_research_office, @solid-objectives and @mmmosarchitects started to pop regularly on my screen.

Even though these projects were refreshing and formally appealing, there was clearly something to them that left me wondering about their designers' motives for certain decisions — but nobody would talk about those decisions. There seemed to be a general acceptance for designing without any apparent reason, for the very nonchalant «pulling off» of things, for an absolute coolness about how a scheme came into being.

Fittingly, I came across this not-so-recent-anymore essay by art-critic Dave Hickey about American art in the seventies. Many of his preferred works and artists were being dubbed by other critics as «cool and ironic». Hickey states that they are in fact cool, but have nothing to do with irony. He argues that: «irony and cool are incompatible means to the same end. They are both modes of deniable disclosure. Each enables us to speak our minds while maintaining a small margin for disclaimer. When we use irony, we suppress the sense of what we mean. When we resort to cool, we suppress the urgency we attach to that meaning.» For his deliberation on democratic practices (very American of him, yes), he boils the dichotomy of cool and ironic down to the political ditch between Europe and America.

In Hickey's argument, European artists, who «no longer have any concept of cool, do irony best,» whereas the Americans more clearly embodied their belief, without making it a subject of pleading or concealing. Comparing Katz and Warhol to Duchamp and Picabia, the author makes a shockingly blatant point. And if this was so true for art, it could also have been a reasonable argument about the architecture of the time. Indeed, architects who started their work about fifty years ago seemed quite cool about their design strategies in America — Gehry & co. — and correspondingly ironic in Europe — Koolhaas & co.

Things have changed since the seventies, but this hypothesis still seemed to explain, at least to a certain extent, why these loose ends felt so uncomfortable. There is still an acerbity in the European practice, a restless obsession about making everything

fit tightly — even if we claim to be candid and optimistic. To a certain extent, we are probably not even aware of how not cool our designs are. But that's okay, no need to pretend.

However, reading on Hickey's essay, it becomes apparent that sticking to irony can be a stuck-up practice. Yes, we can use irony to make a subversive statement about our current condition. But if the irony is a mere product of our obsession to entertain our academic counterpart, it will end up melodramatically presuming an inexistent repression. Instead of bringing an existent contradiction to the foreground — which was, as we know, the deconstructivists' favorite paradigm — we have started to design our arguments through effort. We grind our teeth while sketching as if we were stitching up a wound, force statistics into our narratives like play dough through little spaghetti holes and try to fill every detail with some kind of meaning in order to come up with the most ironic and tensest of designs.

In addition, and irremediably so, the field faces the ubiquitous burden of — very generally speaking — shifting regulations, elusive clients and financial caps. These seem to provide exactly the repression that ironic statements need as a base. Thus, our designs critique the conditions they are being created under, and therefore also criticize themselves, and thus criticize their designers, which is why we need the irony in the first place: these statements need to remain only a «deniable disclosure,» without further implications. It is needless to point out that this ironic disclosure does not solve the problem, neither does it deliver a way to actually deal with it, even though that was the goal in the first place.

But there is also an irony where the second, concealed meaning is not directed against the project itself, but against the idea that there could be no ambiguity in design. There's no need for self-contradiction, auto-critique and self-mutilation. Instead, given the tight corset around actually built architecture, the mere fact that several layers of reading can coexist already repudiates the general perception that this is impossible. This irony thrives spite the inherent tensions and pressures of the field. If for Hickey cool art was «theatre without drama, demonstration without pleading, distinction without status, and dissent without violence,» then for us ironic architecture could be theatre spite shortage, demonstration spite exposure, distinction spite standards, and dissent spite economic dependency.

This irony would be closer to what Jack Self called a Trojan-Horse-strategy (and to what Hickey described as cool). For Self, «The corporatized individual, [...] creates for themselves a false persona, an idol, that can be battered by fortune without damaging the ideology of their core.» The ironic project, then, creates for itself a false persona, an idol, that can be battered by speculation, efficiency and regulations without

damaging the joyfulness of their core. These moments exist already, we see them in Lütjens Padmanabhan's humorous housing elaborations, in Harquitectes' search for impeccable geometries in cheap building materials and in Arrhov Frick's austere attacks on austerity.

What I suggest here is that the idea of an ironic project does not necessarily contradict that of a cool project, or only does so in a superficial way. American architecture is, still today, somehow cool at first glance. European architecture is not that cool, it is obsessed with its own coherence and right(eous)ness. However, I remain beguiled by the possibility that a design can also carry its irony inscribed in its coolness, instead of dealing only insidiously with difficult issues. Things can be done just for the reason that, in fact, it is possible for them to be done. Thus, maybe, the question of the motive needs not always be answered right away.