

Formalism: Move | Meaning

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We do not experience the commonplace, we do not see it; rather, we recognize it. We do not see the walls of our room; and it is very difficult for us to see errors in proofreading, especially if the material is written in a language we know well, because we cannot force ourselves to see, to read, and not to "recognize" the familiar word. If we have to define specifically "poetic" perception and artistic perception in general, then we suggest this definition: "Artistic" perception is that perception in which we experience form — perhaps not form alone, but certainly form.

— Victor Shklovsky,
The Resurrection of the Word (1914)¹

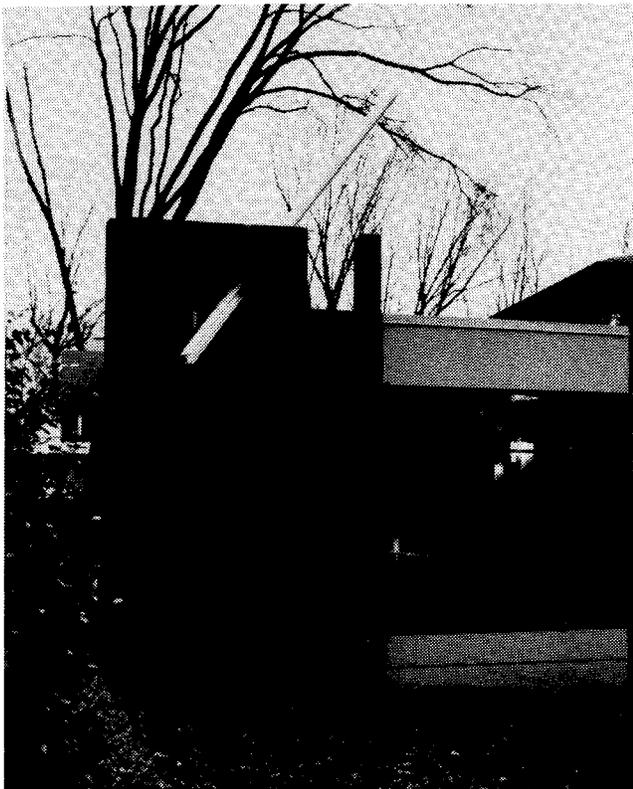


Fig. 1. Dante/Telescope House^{Zlome}

What is formalism? I have been thinking about this question since reading the special issue of *ANY* 718 on Colin Rowe (and since contributing to *ANY* 11 by way of response). *ANY* 718 makes clear that there is disagreement and uncertainty today as to what formalism is, and the opinion of its relevance to an advanced architecture tends to be alternately noncommittal or pejorative. I share the desire of Yve-Alain Bois, who writes: "I would like to rescue what is called formalism from the bad press it has received in much art historical writing during the past twenty years" (xv).

The issue is especially meaningful to me because I think of myself, at least on one level, as a formalist. That is to say, I am "concerned chiefly with the internal relationships that prevail within the work" of art (Lemon and Reis 61), and I adhere to the "necessity of starting with the specificity of the object" (Bois xv). The object may be a chair, a painting, or a building — a drawing, a wall, or a room. I think, not unlike Le Corbusier and Julien Gaudet before him, that architecture is, again at least on one level, a formal language, whose mastery requires visual literacy. Visual literacy involves an advanced apprehension of abstract and optical properties of line and plane. In his 1435 treatise *On Painting*, Alberti writes that "the best artist can only be one who has learned to understand the outline of the plane and all its qualities" (59). Le Corbusier writes in *Towards a New Architecture* that "profile and contour are the touchstone of the Architect...a pure creation of the mind; they call for the plastic artist" (202). Just as a musician requires ear training, the plastic artist requires eye training. Eye training seeks fluency in what Gyorgy Kepes calls the "language of vision." This requires knowledge of the interrelated conceptual/perceptual phenomena of such things as "mass, surface, and plan" — Le Corbusier's "three reminders to architects" (2) — figure and field, architectonic structure, and composition.² As Bois suggests, it is impossible for the plastic artist to "avoid taking the issue of form extremely seriously" (Bois xvii).

Does an acceptance of these ideas make one a formalist? If so, does it make formalism primarily aesthetic-centered? Moreover, does a definition of formalism that proceeds

along these lines require another classification for the architect who, on another level, is also interested in content, or meaning?

If, as Alan Colquhoun writes, "the problem of architecture is part of a larger problem involving the whole notion of art" (115), then the question of formalism is important because its origins and boundaries extend beyond architecture. Furthermore, if we hope to understand the contemporary condition of so-called post-formalism, then it would seem that we ought to have an understanding of formalism first. In this paper, I attempt to recall an intellectual, historical datum for the debate about formalism, one that centers specifically on the researches of the Russian formalists. Though it is an intricate topic, I attempt to identify a number of main issues and then suggest an initial position for the making of an advanced architecture that extends the Russians' open-ended investigations.

STRANGE-MAKING AND PERCEPTION: ART AS DEVICE

The early modernist idea of perceptible, significant form as the *sin qua non* of art (and as the principal concern of criticism) was articulated not only in Victor Shklovsky's writings (Shklovsky was the leader of the Petersburg formalists; Roman Jakobson, the principal link between formalism and structuralism, was the leader of the allied Moscow Linguistic Circle). English critical theoreticians of art, notably Clive Bell in his book, *Art*, 1913, articulated similar ideas. Their subject was principally modern French/Spanish painting (Post-Impressionism and Cubism), for which the late 19th-century formal deformations and researches of Seurat and Cezanne (and perhaps Piero della Francesca before them) served as principal starting points. It is to the work of the Russian literary theorists and critics that we must turn, however, in order to find a deep inward look to the problem of structure and meaning in art on a serious intellectual level that underlies and extends the simple idea of perceptible, significant form.

As Victor Erlich points out in his classic study *Russian Formalism: Theory and Doctrine*, the Russian formalists believed that "before trying to explain anything, one should find out what it is." Fortunately, Erlich's classic study is indispensable in this regard. It is the scholarly foundation on which other essential scholarship on the subject rests, notably that by Jameson and Lemon and Reis. Another important source for a definition of formalism, one from within the literature of architecture, is Rosalind Krauss's brilliant essay in *Houses of Cards*, "Death of a Hermeneutic Phantom: Materialization of the Sign in the Work of Peter Eisenman." Central to the essay are the following propositions: (1) 20th-century formalism had its origins in literary theory, specifically Russian formalism; (2) 20th-century formalism was therefore linked inextricably at its point of origin to the avant-garde, namely modernism; (3) 20th-century formalism was the "strategic conversion of transparency into

opacity" (the former related to everything that was not art and the latter to everything that was) and relied on a taxonomy of devices for *defamiliarizing* (making strange) the artistic object — this idea is central to the critical posture adopted by Rowe and Slutzky in architecture; (4) given this and given the fact that Eisenman's House I and House II are paradigmatic examples of 20th-century formalism in architecture, formalism cannot be all bad.

Krauss does not mean to suggest that we should overlook Cubism as central to the emergence of the Russians' reexamination of the problem of form and perception in literature. Avant-garde experiments in literature pre-date Cubism, but the radical assertion of the autonomy of form that erupted in painting in the first decade of the 1900s did more than a little to inspire the Russian literary theorists and critics of the next decade to search out and promulgate an equivalent artistic differentia within literature.³ It is said that the Italian Futurist painter Boccioni, when he first encountered Marinetti's Futurist free-verse poetry in 1910 (a year before he saw Picasso's and Braque's paintings), exclaimed: "We need something like that in painting" (Lista 15). No doubt, the attempt on the part of the Russian literary avant-garde to sort out the difference between poetic/imaginative language versus practical language — to sort out a theory of heightened awareness, of perceptible form, as the basis of art — derived, at least in part, from a similar sentiment in reverse.

For example, is it not easy to think of Picasso's *Portrait of Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler* (fig. 2), 1910, while reading the following excerpt from Shklovsky's famous declaration of early formalist theory, "Art as Technique" (alternatively translated as "Art as Device")?:

Habitualization devours works, clothes, furniture, one's wife, and the fear of war. "If the whole complex lives of many people go on unconsciously, then such lives are as if they had never been" [here Shklovsky quotes Leo Tolstoy's *Diary*]. And art exists that one may recover the sensation of life... The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects "unfamiliar," to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged. *Art is a way of experiencing the artfulness of an object; the object is not important* (his emphasis)" (Lemon and Reis 12).

Theo Van Doesburg's pictorial transformations of the cow (fig. 3), which he produced the same year as Shklovsky's essay (1917), is an example of Shklovsky's definitions of the purpose and technique of art. Van Doesburg's primary objective was to decode the underlying plastic structure of the cow. It was an exercise in abstraction, whereby the forms that underlie the representational facticity of the cow might not only be revealed but brought to the foreground of perception. Van Doesburg thereby makes a familiar object "unfamiliar." He increases the difficulty and length of perception. The

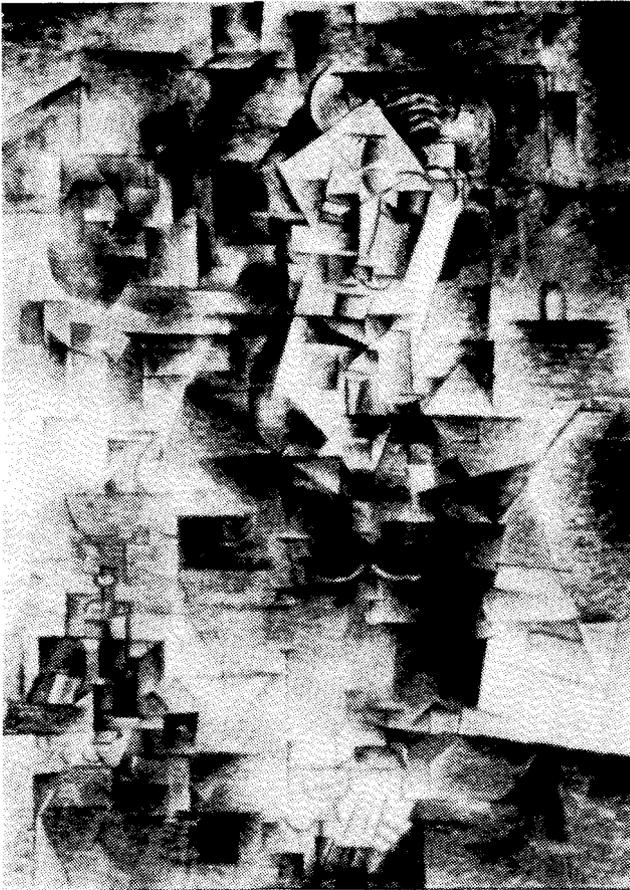


Fig. 2

subject of the painting is not immediately recognizable as a cow. In fact, is it not the name alone (cow) that gives it away? As Shklovsky writes, "Tolstoy makes the familiar seem strange by not naming the familiar object" (Lemon and Reis 13). Van Doesburg's act of aesthetic, formal "defamiliarization" brings the object of cow into a sphere of new perception. He makes it strange. Shklovsky writes:

After we see an object several times, we begin to recognize it. The object is in front of us and we know about it, but we do not see it...**Art** removes objects from the automatism of perception...(Lemon and Reis 13).

In "Art as Device," Shklovsky's main concern is identifying the difference between practical language and poetic language. One of the main ideas under attack is what he calls "the law of the economy of creative effort" (Lemon and Reis 9). This law suggests that, in the words of Spencer, "a satisfactory style is precisely that style which delivers the greatest amount of thought in the fewest words" (Lemon and Reis 10). Shklovsky argues that this is a virtue for "practical" language, whose chief purpose is to convey meaning. Poetic language, however, requires "roughening" and "difficulty." As Boris Eichenbaum summarizes in his essay, "The Theory of the 'Formal Method,'" 1926:

Shklovsky likewise repudiated the principle of artistic economy, a principle which had been strongly asserted

in aesthetic theory, and opposed it with the device of "defamiliarization" and the notion of "roughened form." That is, he saw art as increasing the difficulty and span of perception "because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged"; he saw art as a means of destroying the automatism of perception (Lemon and Reis 114).

Shklovsky focused on the problem of metaphor. He attacked the deep-seated idea that the purpose of metaphor in poetic, imaginative literature is to make the unfamiliar familiar. He proposed that, in fact, the opposite is true. Metaphor, in the service of poetic **form/language**, causes our perceptions to be prolonged, causes us to stop and think, and in fact distances the familiar from us. The devices of euphemism and riddles (such as cross-word puzzles) are prime examples of this. For example, when I say "I need a cup o' joe," I am defamiliarizing the familiar. I am making the familiar strange. I am transforming, through the roughening device of slang, the practical, non-poetic phrase, "I need a cup of coffee." The visual slang of Frank Gehry's house in Santa Monica functions as strange-making in a similar way in architecture, for example. Gehry's strange-making is also dependent on another of Shklovsky's devices of defamiliarization, "seeing things out of their normal context" (Lemon and Reis 17). The juxtaposition of Gehry's formal slang (or visual cubism, depending on how we look at it) to the existing context heightens our awareness of the presence of artistry all the more. The chain-link fence, in particular, is an obvious example of this device of defamiliarization, of seeing the familiar out of context.

FORM AND CONTENT: THE ULTIMATE RIDDLE

It is important to distinguish between early formalist statements and mature formalist statements (Erlich 171-191). They differ chiefly with respect to the not insignificant and thorny problem of the semantic issue in art. One of the fascinating aspects of the evolution of formalism is that Shklovsky and others were ultimately forced to grapple very

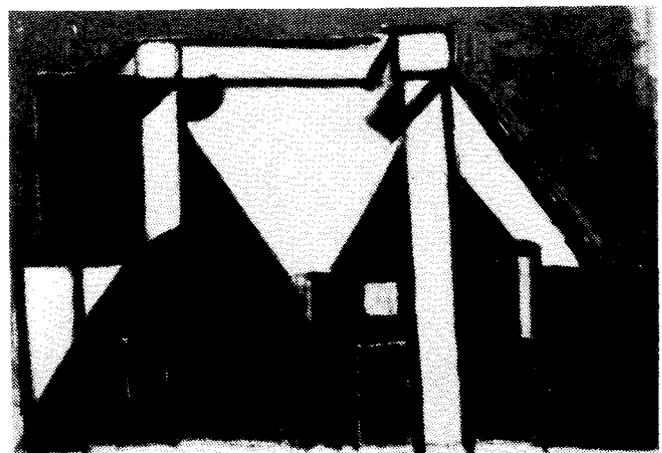


Fig. 3

directly with the conundrum of form and content — or, as is suggested by the chess analogy that fascinated both Shklovsky and Ferdinand de Saussure, the problem of move and meaning. Here, it is clear that the Russians, working during the cultural upheaval of the nineteen-teens, whose Petersburg organization was called *Opoyaz* (The Society for the Investigation of Literature), reinvented the nature of this relationship. Lemon and Reis comment on the implications of Shklovsky's theory:

The purpose of art, according to Shklovsky, is to force us to notice....To the extent that a work of art can be experienced, to the extent that it *is*, it is like any other object. It may "mean" in the same way that any object means; it has, however, one advantage — it is designed especially for perception, for attracting and holding attention. Thus it not only bears meaning, it forces an awareness of its meaning upon the reader (4-5).

Shklovsky first attempted to define poetic form (artistry) by replacing the traditional dichotomy, form and content, with devices/techniques and materials.⁴ He may well have been trying to define a non-objective poetry, such that literature could have something that painting had already achieved. For we must remember that Shklovsky initiated his formalist theory at the same time as Malevich's revolutionary exhibition of non-objective paintings and publication of his manifesto "Living in a Non-Objective World" (1915). Later, Shklovsky attempted to sort out more directly the issue of content/meaning. What has come down to us from the mature statements of Russian formalism is a dilemma of the unity versus the separability of form and content.

Is form content? Early formalism allowed as much, perhaps. Mature formalism regarded the idea as too simplistic and problematic. Do the elements of content have an independent existence that is exempt from the adopted laws of aesthetic structure? According to early formalist theory (and radical formalists, or "aesthetic purists"), no. According to mature formalist theory (and moderate formalists), yes. Is there not content — in a Mondrian painting, for example — that sustains what might be called the "truth of the aesthetic object (so as to differentiate it from a physical forgery), but that is categorically invisible? Does the matrix of Mondrian's canvas, a chess game of visible/optical moves, admit to underlying, invisible, poetic meaning? Surely *Broadway Boogie Woogie*, for example, includes meaning as an inherent part of its artistic totality that transcends its optical facticity. Even his paintings that do not have representational titles, such as *Composition in White, Black and Red* (fig. 4), 1936, are arguably a manifestation of non-aesthetic meaning that underlies the visible phenomena. Jaffe's book on the origins of De Stijl, in which he discusses Mondrian's Calvinist and Theosophical epistemology, makes it difficult to conclude otherwise.

This raises the critical distinction between the visible and the visual. I would argue that the interrelation of the visible (the aesthetic) and the invisible (the poetic, the

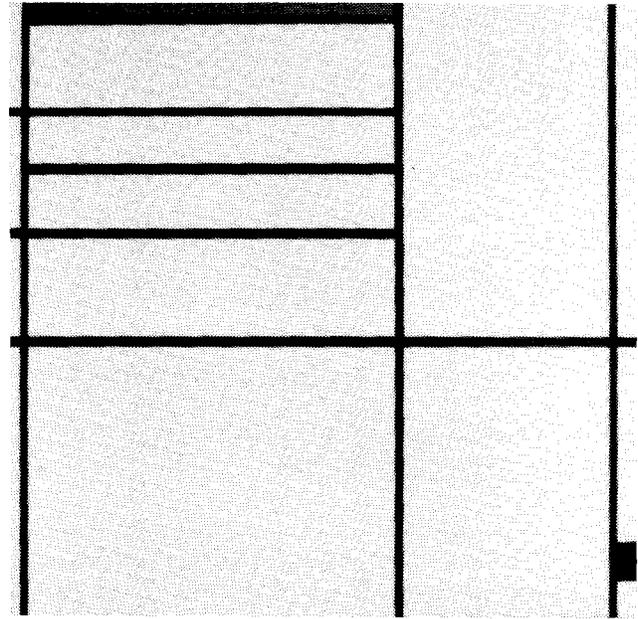


Fig. 4

semantic, the philosophical) constitutes the visual, and that formalism, therefore, ultimately addresses the problem of vision. As such, it questions what the critical, educated eye sees. Van Doesburg, Mondrian, and other De Stijl artists understood vision to be first, both optical and plastic (the latter refers to seeing underlying relations, or abstraction), and second, the intellectual "seeing" of non-aesthetic ideas that establish the cognitive matrix of the work on other levels. This complex network of visible/invisible interrelationship calls to mind Rosalind Krauss's image of "the infrastructure of vision" (15).

In point of fact, though Shklovsky tried to expose the fallacy of the notion of separable content, he was tripped up by the double problem of philosophical and semantic complexities and ultimately failed in his attempt to articulate a cogent, mature position on the issue. He thus made it possible to consider the problem of the unity of form and content under the rubric of formalism in two very different ways. As Erlich writes: "Was he implying that all that matters in art is form, or was he simply saying that everything in the work of art is necessarily *formed*, i.e. organized for an esthetic purpose?" I am currently persuaded by the latter proposition, which represents more the viewpoint of advanced formalist theory at the point when it evolved into structuralism. I believe, however, that at the heart of this concept of formalism is the unmistakable conviction that, in fact, nothing matters in art *more than* or even *as much* as form. I suppose that it is a matter of wanting to have it both ways, and that, perhaps, formalism is defined precisely by this equivocal point. Moreover, I am trying to sort out the degree to which my acceptance of this formalist position is really at odds with Meyer Schapiro's counter-argument against the unity of form and content. In "On Perfection, Coherence, and Unity of Form and Content," Schapiro wrote:

In practice, form and content are separable for the artist who, in advance of the work, possesses a form in the habit of his style that is available to many contents, and a conception of a subject or theme rich in meaning and open to varied treatment. In the process of realization these separable components of his project are made to interact and in the finished work there arise unique qualities, both of form and meaning, as the off-spring of this interaction, with many accords but also with qualities distinctive for each (46-47).

Ultimately, the Russian formalists were unable, if not unwilling, to avoid the semantic reality of poetry. Thus, they arrived at the surprising inclusivist conclusion that the aim of poetry is, as Eichenbaum declared, "to make perceptible the texture of the world in all its aspects" (Erlich 185). Mature Russian formalism concluded that poetry is "a complex transaction involving the semantic and morphological, as well as the phonetic, levels of language" (Erlich 186); that "the hallmark of poetry as a unique mode of discourse lies not in the absence of meaning but in the multiplicity of meanings" (Erlich 185). This recognition is still important, I believe, for the contemplation of an advanced, poetic architecture today.

All architecture seems to be a conscious or unconscious commentary on this larger problem of art. So, though it is a popular idea that formalism is to poetics as syntax is to meaning (ANY 718, Gandelsonas 64), I am persuaded by the Russians that not only is syntax simply one of the devices of art (along with, for example, transposition, displacement, realignment, recentering, gridding, plan/elevation reciprocity, disorder, and delay), but that formalism is not situated on one side of the virgule in the form/content, move/meaning dialectic. Rather, the dialectic is at the very center of formalism's philosophical construct.

In sum, I have begun to sort out formalism's identity and relevance in the following elementary way: As it has descended from the post-Cubist contemplations of the Russian literary critics and theorists, formalism is a difficult, multivalent, and open-ended proposition. It has nothing to do with formula or sterile aesthetic purism. It is only superficially a purely aesthetic approach to art. It is far more complex and equivocal than the simplistic idea that all that matters is form or that form is content. It is inherently more polemical (and demanding) than thoughtful theories that over-privilege seductive form-making or an aesthetic of materials. For formalism, as Bois writes, is "far from being wholly uninterested in meaning" (xviii).

The popular idea of formalism, which I articulated at the beginning of this paper, is, therefore, a false notion unless it is seen in relation to the deeper (and surprising) theoretical premises that underlie it. Otherwise, it is part of the structure of the prevailing misperception of formalism, which, as Bois contends, depends on a false opposition (xvii). According to Bois, this false opposition is the basis for the "blackmail of antiformalism" (xv). Bois writes, "either one is a formalist,

hence necessarily oblivious to "meaning," or one is an antiformalist, hence entirely uninterested in formal matters. The either/or structure...[is] the generic structure of blackmail" (xvii).

Formalism, as it has descended from the Russians, springs from the simple, but polemical idea that the purpose of art is to rouse us to a new perception of the world. This heightening of awareness and consciousness results from the act of defamiliarization, or strange-making, which involves at least three major ideas: (1) that art involves applying devices (techniques), to materials, including conventional devices and invented ("free") devices; (2) that difficulty, density, or "roughened" form are the chief devices for achieving strange-making — they destroy the automatism of perception by prolonging the gaze, and thereby distinguish poetic form from practical, ease-of-perception form; as Shklovsky writes, "density (*faktura*) is the principle characteristic of this peculiar world of deliberately constructed objects, the totality of which we call art" (Erlich 177); and (3) that the various devices that constitute an artistic construction must be "'revealed,' or 'displayed,' or 'laid bare'" (Lemon and Reis 26). At the core of aesthetic perception are the concepts of devices of "deviation," "divergence," "creative deformation," "semantic shifts" (Erlich 176-180) and "metaphoric displacements" (Bois 83).⁵ These and similar ideas are central to formalism's metaphysics, its starting point, which maintains an age-old view of "art as a rediscovery of the world" (Erlich 179) and involves the dialectical phenomenon of move/meaning.

DANTE/TELESCOPE HOUSE ^{ZLOWE}

It is said that the idea of art as research started with Cezanne. I regard my recent work, *Dante/Telescope House*^{Zlowe} (fig. 1), as the built form of my research of these and other Cubist-related ideas. I am interested in heightening the perception of architecture as a dense, multivalent "infrastructure of vision," in making an architecture that is defamiliar with respect to everyday building, if not also with respect to prevailing advanced styles. I am wary of the "familiar way" because, as Lemon and Reis write, "precisely because it is the familiar way, it is not the artistic way" (25). I am concerned both with architecture's identity as an abstract plastic art and also with its ancient, original iconographic and ontological function as text and observatory. My work centers on the interrelated connections of architecture to painting, literature, and astronomy. I attempt to bring architecture into a sphere of new perception through devices and techniques applied to materials and engage directly the problem of move/meaning.

The primary architectural event of the project is the garden facade, which includes what I call the Dante Monolith and Diptych Column. The Monolith is structural (in the engineering sense, that is). The free-standing Diptych Column is not. The primary function of both is to support an idea. The steel beam — the "Telescope" — in the

Monolith is sighted on the North Star, a device of orientation as well as a device of memory (it recalls architecture's original connection to astronomy; for example, the first architects were astronomer priests). The word "DANTE," which is written across the Monolith, employs a principal device of Synthetic Cubism, thus signifying the connections between architecture and painting, and between Cubism and literary formalism. It also recalls architecture's ancient, original connection to writing, or literature (i.e., the idea of the building of a book, and the book as building). Moreover, it is intended to recall Terragni's *Danteum*, which I believe is a paradigm of early twentieth-century formalism in architecture. Thus, the word "DANTE" functions ultimately as a device of self-reference: that is, it refers to architecture's own ancient and modern interdisciplinary history, and it signifies architecture's unavoidable engagement of the problem of formalism.

In the context of a typical suburban neighborhood, where walls are brick or horizontally sided and windows are double-hung, we see a defamiliar sight/site. To one side of a free-standing steel column is a stucco wall. It is opaque. To the other side is a glass wall. It is transparent. The opaque part (which we understand to be a "symbolic" window) reads as an enigmatic vertical monument. The transparent part (the "real" window) reads as a not atypical, horizontally delineated, modern window. We understand that the monument wall (the "memory" wall) is to be looked at primarily from the outside (the visual rays originate from the landscape) and that the glass wall is to be seen through primarily from the inside. The monument wall forces itself upon us as an object of contemplation and density/opacity. The glazed wall offers a counterpoint — dissipation and literal transparency. It functions more as an optical device for observation. The opposing sides of the diptych operate in dialectical tension like the left/right lenses of Osip Brik's spectacles in Rodchenko's photograph (Brik was a formalist theorist). The visual and conceptual differences between the two walls (which together form one wall), heightens our perception of each.

The black, almost free-standing vertical wall commands our attention on its own. It has writing and painting on it. A steel beam passes through it and points to the sky. It is strange. We are caused to perceive the nature of wall in a new light. It can be marked, painted on, written on, interrupted, pierced. It is like a painting: wall as canvas. It is like a book: wall as page. Where before, due to the routinization of perception, our eyes might have merely *recognized* a wall, they now *see* wall. Our perception is heightened in regard to what the making of a wall in architecture is all about ("the rediscovery of the world"). Not only form but meaning is forced upon us. We are forced to see and read a familiar word, "DANTE," in a new context. We wonder what it means."

Finally, like Yves-Alain Bois, I will let Roland Barthes provide the last word on the subject:

The formalism I have in mind does not consist in "forgetting," "neglecting," "reducing," content ("man"), but only in *not stopping* at the threshold of content (let's keep the word, provisionally); content is *precisely* what interests formalism, because its endless task is each time to push content back (until the notion of origin ceases to be pertinent), to displace it according to a play of successive forms (Bois xxiv).

NOTES

- ¹ Quoted by Boris Eichenbaum in "The Theory of the 'Formal Method,'" 1926 (Lemon and Reis 112).
- ² On the subject of composition, for example, which has always been celebrated in music as the supreme artistic act, Julien Gaudet writes in *Elements et Theories de l'Architecture*, 1902: "Nothing, to be sure, is more engaging than composition, nothing more seductive. It is the true realm of the artist with no limits or frontiers but the impossible" (Banham, 20).
- ³ Jakobson provides specific evidence of the impact of Cubism, as well as Saussure, on the Russian literary school: "Arriving in Prague in 1920, I procured myself the *Course in General Linguistics*, and it is precisely the insistence, in Saussure's *Course*, on the question of relations which especially impressed me. It corresponds in a striking manner with the particular accent given by cubist painters such as Braque and Picasso, not on the objects themselves, but on their relations" (Bois 86).
- ⁴ As Eichenbaum writes: "Concerning form, the Formalists thought it important to change the meaning of this muddled term. It was important to destroy these traditional correlatives and to enrich the idea of form with new significance. The notion of 'technique,' because it has to do directly with the distinguishing features of poetic and practical speech, is much more significant in the long-range evolution of formalism than is the notion of 'form'" (Lemon and Reis 115).
- ⁵ Bois notes that "plastic metaphorization [is] at the heart of cubism" (85).
- ⁶ The word "DANTE," in addition to the larger significations explained above, refers to a specific passage in the *Cornmedias* (*Inferno* I, 10): "Io non so ben ridir com'i' v'entrai" (*I do not know well how to recount how I entered there*). (My interest in this quote was inspired by Schumacher [108], though his translation is slightly different.) I intend for Dante's uncertainty to signify the root ontological conundrum, which involves the problem of metaphysical "orientation." This stands in contradistinction to the greater certainty that the "Telescope," pointed at the North Star, signifies with respect to the comparatively elementary problem of physical orientation. This and other aspects of the move/meaning structure of *Dante/Telescope House*^{Zlowe} are explained in my article "Celestial Contemplation: Architecture and Astronomy," as yet unpublished.

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