

# Lessons in Matter: From Canvas to Built Work

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## 1. Introduction

The work of the Swiss architects Jacques Herzog and Pierre de Meuron challenges contemporary architecture by proposing a new terrain. Herzog and de Meuron's buildings revive the historical debate on how architecture is understood as art and public space. They also offer a new sensibility to the subject of matter and form in architecture. Through their works the fundamental nature of materials is broadly investigated, and brings the Vitruvian principle of *venustas* to the forefront.

The architects acknowledge that since the beginning of their partnership, their ideas on architecture were not derived from concrete buildings, but rather from pictures, photography and even video. Around 1979, when postmodernism was emerging and inviting deconstructivism to follow afterwards, the architects were looking for alternatives. The perception of ordinary life and traditional interiors in the movies of Powell & Pressburger, Hitchcock and Antonioni influenced them to produce videos exploring the familiar and banal, focusing on human events which could potentially inspire architecture. Herzog says that what appealed to them through these movies was "the idea of ordinariness, ordinary architecture, people wearing ordinary clothes, which for us expressed the whole drama of human life much more subversively and profoundly than any over-expressive, fictional stage architecture."<sup>1</sup> The research into the ordinary became a path towards the search for essence in architecture, which basically consisted in making materials talk. Initially it was expressed through a more archaic nature of the materials themselves, and later it was

manifested in sophisticated investigations that challenged the very nature of materials such as glass and concrete.

Embracing a variety of media to interpret the phenomena of life was not strange to Jacques Herzog, who was initially trained as an artist and afterwards decided to concentrate in architecture. Subsequently he collaborates extensively on architectural works with artists. Among them is the Swiss German Helmut Federle, who investigates the contradiction between geometry and gesture, within multiple layers of interpretation. He was commissioned by Herzog and de Meuron to develop the color concept for the Housing Pilontegasse in Wien-Aspern (1987-92), and also worked on the exhibition spaces for the new Goetz Collection in Munich (1989-92). In the Goetz gallery, the spontaneous effect of human gesture can be perceived by the glass surfaces in the base and cornice of the building. Depending on conditions of light and seasonal change, 'lightness' is defined and re-defined by the perception of the inside and outside. This effect is mediated by the wood surface in the middle of the building, upon which rectangular lines are drawn, which presents a more static surface volumetrically floating between two voids.

In a 1992 competition for two libraries at the *Université de Jussieu* in Paris Herzog and de Meuron covered the façade of their model with portraits from Gerhard Richter's *Atlas*<sup>2</sup>. The artist was commissioned by Herzog and de Meuron to prepare a new series of portraits based on the library's collection for serigraphic application to the glass façade. This work was not realized.

The architects tested the idea of making a façade with printed images in 1988 at the Architekturmuseum in the exhibition *Architektur Denkform*, in Basel, where they defined architecture as a form of thought. The architects pioneered a unique conception of exhibition in which silk-screened pictures of their buildings were applied to glazed facades of the museum. Herzog later said: "What one could perhaps call philosophy is an edifice constructed from thoughts, texts and images. Our architecture helps us to perceive that edifice, one piece at a time."<sup>3</sup> The final accomplishment of this technique in a building came for the first time in the The Ricola-Europe Factory and Storage Building, Mullhouse-Brunnstatt, France (1992-93).

### 1 Reflections on Matter

At first sight, the Ricola Storage building in Laufen, Switzerland (1986-7) is a large and simple rectangular volume (Fig. 1). Placed next to a rock formation, the building is a remnant of an old quarry. As we approach, our perception changes and the building is revealed layered in many parts, with every element structurally placed and following their attribute as industrial elements. Close inspection continues to instigate human senses as we realize that the structural weaving of wood planks progresses in proportion from bottom to top, emphasizing the idea of visual compression. The visual emphasis in natural forces was certainly inspired by the vicinity of natural rock formations, creating a visual contextual relationship, whereas a cultural relationship is also established with the traditional stacking of sawn timber boards around the numerous sawn mills existing in the area.

Gerhard Richter's work can also be defined as an investigation into reality. Using photography as a source for his creations, he plays with its informative and a-stylistic characteristic, exploiting altered ways of seeing. He points out: "Photographs are almost Nature. And they drop onto our doormats, almost uncontrived as reality, but smaller."<sup>7</sup> According to him, a work of art is almost always an analogy, and if it's a good picture it should demonstrate an endless multiplicity of aspects, taking away our certainty, because of the intentional denial of name and meaning<sup>8</sup>.

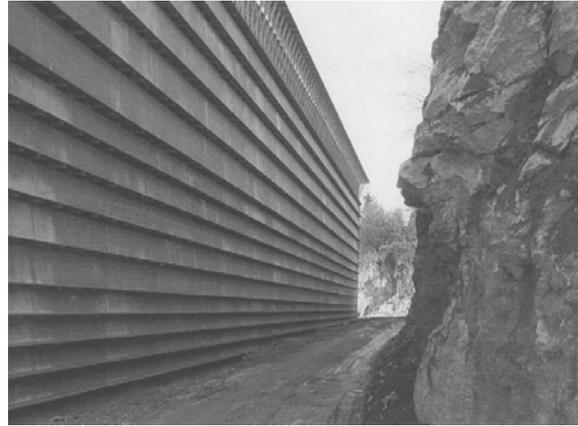


Figure 1: Ricola, Laufen

He also points out his interest in the object, as attested by the diverse choice of subjects in his *Atlas* and in his paintings. However, his goal is to subvert the simplicity of objectified representation with other layers of perception. He believes that form generates content, finding the confirmation for his belief in Nature, which produces material changes without any intention (or cause) related to content, but taking on this or that form in accordance with its own preconditions<sup>9</sup>. His landscapes describe several points of view of the same site, attesting his interest in the different meanings regarding form, playing with the 'mindless character of Nature; the total antithesis of ourselves'<sup>10</sup>.

The interest into the investigation of reality relates the work of Richter with the work of Herzog and de Meuron. The exploitation of photography can be analogous to the exploitation of the surface in architecture. What we see can present different perspectives, and report different layers, according to our proximity to the canvas or to the façade. As earlier stated, the Ricola-Laufen building offers different perspectives to the eye. It shares with photography the immediacy of a simple volume which nevertheless is enhanced in its sense of reality as we approach it. Richter's work generate the 'not transitory'<sup>11</sup>, or the essential, transcending the neutral information of photography, similar to what happens in Ricola-Laufen building, where form in matter transcends the singularity of a simple geometry.

Through his *Atlas* Richter filters the universal in several views, taking us to look for the specific, such as in 'Fragments of the Sea,' (1975). He

destabilizes the mental categorization that helps us understand the world, and suggests distrust in ideologies and classifications of every sort. Both Richter and Herzog manifest their disapproval regarding ideologies, and their interest in a kind of reality that is seen and experienced<sup>12</sup>. A painting by Gerhard Richter such as "Grau" (Gray), from 1974, can help us to bridge analogies with Ricola-Laufen building and understand the double meaning of what is presented. The theme is the investigation of a complete grey surface where close inspection reveals subtleties of light as well as traces of the brush stroke.

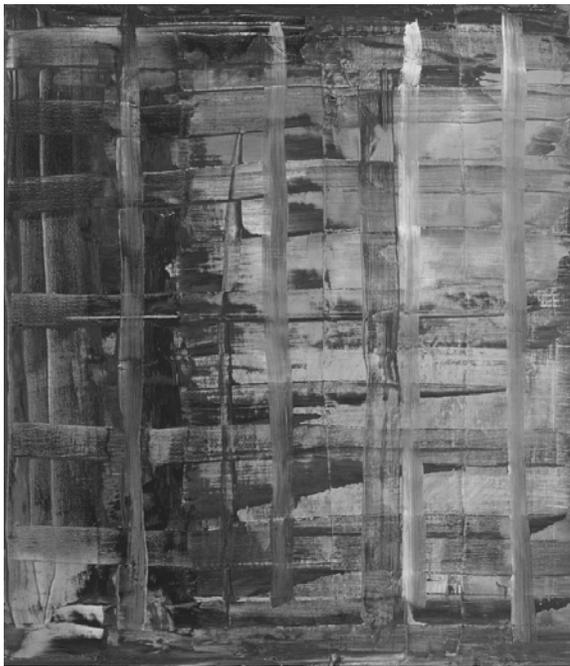


Figure 2: Abstraktes Bild (791-3), 1993

Also abstract paintings such as "Abstraktes Bild" (791-3), 1993 (Fig 2), "Abstraktes Bild" (833-2), 1995, and "S. mit Kind" (827-4), 1995 (Fig. 3), investigate layers of information within structures, transparency and opacity, penetration and obtrusion, simplicity and density.

### 3. Reflections on Abstraction

The Ricola-Europe Factory and Storage Building in Mullhouse-Brunnstatt, France (1992-93) is located on an idyllic region between a canal and a river. Basically, it is a box with cantilevered extending roofs on two sides, which create shade and afford weather protection. The larger walls filter light, built in



Figure 3: S. mit Kind (827-4), 1995

printed translucent polycarbonate panels, sided by concrete walls. The differential in this project is the sophisticated treatment of the polycarbonate with a silk-screened maximized plant motif (Fig. 4) based on a photograph by the German artist Karl Blossfeldt.

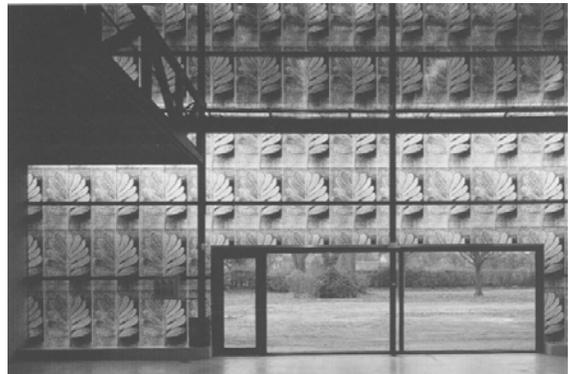


Figure 4: Ricola-Europe, France

The overall intention is the effect in the articulation of an abstract surface. From inside it works as a curtain, meshing with the surrounding nature and from outside, as the day ends it approximates the concrete's opaque effect of the near lateral walls. The concrete lateral walls display the changes provoked by weather and time. Water from rain transforms concrete into an apparent transparent surface, which can be appreciated during daytime. The project is a careful investigation on ornament, but also in "the hidden geometry of nature," an expression used by Jacques Herzog as the title of a paper

given in 1988.<sup>13</sup> Through this expression Herzog describes the spiritual principle hidden in geometry, rather than the mere exterior appearance.

Asked<sup>14</sup> by Philip Ursprung about the strong feeling for nature in his architecture, Herzog pointed out that romanticism, nature, instinct, and past are all somehow related by the fact that they are all considered anti-intellectual. However he didn't acknowledge instinct as a hindrance to intellect. As an example, Herzog referred to Goethe's drawings of cloud formations testifying the attempt to understand and keep a record of nature, in order to assimilate it. As earlier stated, Herzog's idea of 'Natural' comprised all the cultural diversity present in the world, within a complex network of relationships, observing potential and 'interesting analogies in art and society.'<sup>15</sup>

Herzog seems to point to continuity between these two architectures here analyzed, and not to a turning point in their careers as architects. The continuity is implied in the assumed choice for Vitruvius's *venustas* and the choice for fragile materials and forms of construction that comprised both buildings. As Herzog put it: "We can only hope that our fragile constructions, like silk-screened panels, glass panels, moss, wood or walls of stones piled up without any mortar, will generate enough magic to encourage the love and devotion necessary for proper maintenance." [16]

In Ricola-Laufer the understanding of materiality was defined within a sense of the primitive and archaic, which is replaced in Ricola-Europe by a sense of modernity and abstract sophistication. The abstraction here is an imprint of a leaf maximized in proportion and elevated to a monumental size, which can be compared with some works with totemic and iconic features by Helmut Federle. "Norwegische Sicht" (Norwegian View), 1997, is a huge painting with 330 x 495 cm, and is defined by a translucent black background where two other darker geometries are embedded, exposing the double game between figure and ground. As in several other paintings by Federle, the observer has to step back in order to contemplate it, requiring more than visual a corporeal experience. Light plays also an important role and is revealed through brush strokes that don't cover the surface perfectly, leaving several traces of light in the

whole canvas. Norwegian View explores time and light in the Boreal latitudes, where day light slowly disappears, and when the crepuscule changes our perception of colors and forms. In this painting, nature is recreated through abstract forms similarly to the sensual abstraction of nature that is proposed in Ricola-Europe, and the maximization of symbolic forms (the leaf) which enhances the content.

Another work by Federle analogous to Ricola-Europe are the series of 26 canvas entitled "Für die Vogel" (For the birds), realized in 2000, in small sizes, and in which each painting received in their name a letter from the alphabet. Visual language is approximated to linguistic. As earlier stated, Herzog and de Meuron were clear about their interesting in the power of images to convey meaning, as Federle here realizes. In a gold or copper background color, the artist imprints geometries that contain abstract forms, playing with issues of perception in distance, transparency, opacity, proportion, light, and serialized compositions.

Through his paintings Helmut Federle achieves the des-objectification of abstraction, playing with geometry and structure along with more expressive forms. He proposes in his painting, the exact moment of an experience, similarly to Richter's altered way of seeing through photographs.

In an interview with Jose Luis Mateo, Jacques Herzog recounts various influences throughout his career. Herzog mentions the strong influence of the artist Joseph Beuys, who left the lesson and value of experience as the primary artistic moment, not the object. Questioned about the validity of relationships in his work between visible and non-visible elements, Herzog put it:

"Scientific research explores reality and finds images which are no less real for being invisible; it finds images of matter which are invisible and real: images of our world. What interests us is the relationship which exists between the visible and invisible images of this world..."<sup>17</sup>

Herzog explains that every natural object, all organic and inorganic matter such as plants and stones, possesses a highly complex structure of visible and invisible images. This

idea is analogous with artificial objects, such as buildings, sculptures in the art gallery, or even with the furniture we make and use. The stone in its natural context has a meaning. However, removed from this context, the stone loses its meaning and needs a new one. If meaning is based in contextual relationships, the stone can be understood to have lost its context. Herzog explains that the same happens in architecture. The matter we use no longer has meaning, nor does it have energy. As a result, matter needs to enter in a new dialogue with its context. He reaffirms that this is our new tradition as architects, to fill the emptiness with the energy of thought, with the reflections of the artist and the scientist, and equally with the perception of the observers. Herzog and de Meuron define their work as an instrument of perception in order to understand life in its overall meaning.

#### Endnotes

- 1 Cristina Bechtler (Ed.), *Pictures of Architecture. Architecture of Pictures. A Conversation between Jacques Herzog and Jeff Wall, moderated by Philip Ursprung*. Künsnacht: Kunsthaus Bregenz, 2004, p. 30. Jacques Herzog mentions specific images in movies such as "the vertiginous mansion in Alfred Hitchcock's *North by Northwest*, the gloomy interiors in Powell's *Small Back Room*, and the winding stairs in Antonioni's *Identificazione di una donna*."
- 2 In 1969, already in Düsseldorf, Gerhard Richter decided to organize a photographic collection he had since 1961, when he was still living in Dresden, East Germany. The collection of photographs was organized in several categories, sometimes with images of the same subject placed together with only small changes in the angle of view. The collection kept growing in number with the passing of years. They were displayed in exhibitions as well as used as basis for new paintings. Juan Antonio Ramirez, "Filtros de la imagen. El Atlas de Gerhard Richter," In: *Arquitectura Viva* 67, Julio-Agosto, 1999, p. 70-1.
- 3 "Herzog & de Meuron", In: *Fragen zur Architektur, 15 Architekten im Gespräch*, ed. Marianne Brausch and Marc Emery (Base: Birkhäuser, 1995), p. 43.
- 4 Bechtler, *Ibid.*, p. 17.
- 5 Jacques Herzog, "The hidden geometry of nature" (1988). In: Gerhard Mack, *Herzog & de Meuron, 1978-1988, The Complete Works* (Basel: Birkhäuser Verlag, 1997), vol.1, p. 209.
- 6 Philip Ursprung, *Herzog & De Meuron. Natural History*, Canadian Centre for Architecture and Lars Müller Publishers, 2002, p. 55.
- 7 Hans-Ulrich Obrist (ed.) *Gerhard Richter. The Daily Practice of painting. Writings and Interviews 1962-1993*. Cambridge: The MIT Press and London: Anthony d'Offay Gallery, 1995, p. 187.
- 8 Hans-Ulrich Obrist. *Ibid.*, p. 35 and 63.
- 9 Hans-Ulrich Obrist. *Ibid.*, p. 127.
- 10 Hans-Ulrich Obrist., *Ibid.*, p. 124.
- 11 Hans-Ulrich Obrist., *Ibid.*, p. 99.
- 12 Hans-Ulrich Obrist., *Ibid.*, p. 39 and 218. Philip Ursprung, *Ibid.*, p. 21-22.
- 13 *Ibid.* Jacques Herzog, "The hidden geometry of nature" (1988). In: Gerhard Mack, *Herzog & de Meuron, 1978-1988, The Complete Works* (Basel: Birkhäuser Verlag, 1997), vol.1, p. 210.
- 14 Bechtler, *Ibid.*, p. 16-17
- 15 Herzog, "The Hidden Geometry of Nature", p. 210.
- 16 Bechtler., *Ibid.*, p. 19.
- 17 Jose Luis Mateo, *Herzog & de Meuron*, Barcelona: Editorial Gustavo Gilli, 1989.