

The Architect's (Sub)Conscious: Travel Log From Excursions Into Koolhaas's Subconscious

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Introduction

"The only difference between me and a madman is that I am not mad."

- Salvador Dali

"Coherence imposed on an architect's work is either cosmetic or the result of self-censorship,"¹ confesses Rem Koolhaas in the introduction of his remarkable tome *SMLXL*. By *coherence*, Koolhaas seemingly means a consistency or unity derived by some overarching conceptual framework that regulates an architect's body of work. Koolhaas is suggesting that his work has not such framework. Indeed, have no such framework is one of the reasons his book is organized by project-size (small, medium, large and extra-large) rather than some concept or set of ideas. One suspects that most architects would not likely make such a confession, preferring not to reveal this secret to even themselves, let alone begin a monograph with it. Yet Koolhaas is interested in "restor[ing] some kind of honesty"² to the discussion of architectural work. His confession is indeed honest, but, as this paper argues, it is honest in a way other than he may have intended.

Koolhaas's statement may be read as not referring to a lack of unifying conceptual framework. Rather, his statement may, in fact, be read as a description of such a framework. This alternate reading requires the term *coherence* to be thought of as synonymous with the consistency or unity derived from *sense-making* or *logical thought* rather than that derived from a conceptual framework. It also requires the term *self-censorship* to be thought of as the workings of

a robust ego or conscious-self that denies the workings of one's unconscious. Seeing these terms in this way allows Koolhaas's statement to be read as suggesting that coherence, as in sense-making or logical-thought, in an architect's work is a result of denying the work of the unconscious. Putting it another way: Koolhaas is suggesting that an architect's work is fundamentally incoherent in the way that a madman's ranting is: that an architect's work, like the madman's ranting, is, or should be, a product of one's unconscious.

This paper proposes that this view of an architect's work is the conceptual framework that unifies a body of Koolhaas's own work, specifically the Installation at the Milan Triennial, the Video Bus Stop, the Villa Dall'Ava and the Kunsthall. These works, it will be argued, are experiments in the application of Salvador Dali's Paranoid-Critical Method (referred to herein as PCM) to architectural works. PCM is a method of accessing the unconscious through intentional excursions into the paranoid: the madman's habits of mind. PCM figures prominently in Koolhaas's seminal text, *Delirious New York*, which he wrote "to construct...a terrain where [he] could eventually work as an architect."³ In *Delirious New York*, Koolhaas writes of Dali's paranoid travels through his (Dali's) subconscious vision of Francois Millet's famous painting *Angelus*. From these travels Dali produced a number of paintings. Koolhaas refers to these paintings as souvenirs, which were brought back for the excursion. This paper argues that Koolhaas's projects – the actual built work as well as drawings are such souvenirs and therefore constitute a travel log of sorts. Like Dali's paintings, Koolhaas's buildings are travel sketches from trips into the unconscious.

The Paranoid Critical Method

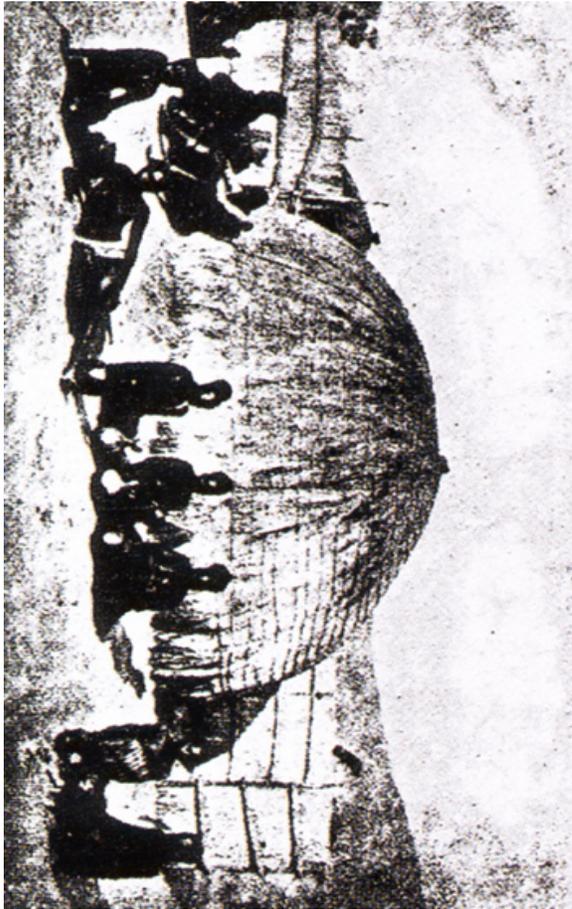


Fig. 1. The Paranoiac Face

While shuffling through a pile of papers, Dalí was surprised to find a reproduction of drawing that he took to be a face drawn by Picasso. (fig. 1) After a moment, the image faded and he realized that he was actually looking at a photograph of an African hut with seated villagers, which had been simply turned sideways. He describes the episode as being a result of a period of study “during which I have been obsessed by a long contemplation of Picasso’s faces, particularly those of his black period.”⁴ This episode outlines, with one significant exception, Dalí’s PCM. This outline demonstrates how the contours of obsession - in this case Dalí’s obsession with Picasso’s faces - is traced onto various things in the world, such as the photograph of the African hut, so that those things confirm, reinforce and align with the obsession. Missing from this example, however, is the intentionality of the PCM. Whereas Dalí’s discovery of the

Paranoiac Face was accidental, the PCM involves the deliberate triggering of obsession as a strategy to access the unconscious and thereby “contribute [as with other surrealist activities] to the total discredit the real world.”⁵

This purposefulness differentiates the PCM from more passive automatic surrealist activities. Koolhaas, who dedicates a chapter in *Delirious New York* to Dalí’s PCM, calls it a “second-phase Surrealism: a conscious exploitation of the unconscious.”⁶ It is a conscious exploitation in that it is a deliberate excursion into the realm of the delusional governed by a paranoiac obsession. Paranoia is a “delirium of interpretive association”⁷ that assembles otherwise unassociated facts, incidents and accidents under the auspices of and in support of the delusional obsession. As Koolhaas writes, “the paranoiac always hits the nail, no matter where the hammer falls”⁸ and “paranoia is the shock of recognition that never ends.”⁹ In simulating the inner workings of the paranoid process, Dalí seeks to “use the external world to realize the obsessive idea, with the troubling particularity of making the reality of this idea valid to others.”¹⁰

For Koolhaas, PCM’s (re)use of the external world is both the “product and remedy” to a problematic condition of the 20th century.¹¹ “that all facts, ingredients, phenomena, etc., of the world have been categorized and cataloged, that the definitive stock of the world has been taken.”¹² PCM, as tonic for this condition, takes the “worn, consumed contents of the world” and grafts on to them new meanings. The contents of the world are thereby “recharged and enriched...simply through the act of interpretation.”¹³ But this act of interpretation is also subversive in that the contents of the world, though inscribed with new meanings, retain a familiarity in form. This continued familiarity, when juxtaposed with a new meaning, creates a disturbing tension and places the viewer in an uncertain situation, faced with something that is at once familiar but radically different. In this way, Koolhaas joins Dalí when he states that the PCM discredits reality because it, “upset[s] the definitive catalogue [and] short-circuits all existing categorizations.”¹⁴

Dali's *Angelus* / Koolhaas's *Pavilion*



Fig. 2. Millet's *Angelus*



Fig. 3. Dali's delusional travel sketch

Each evening the skyscrapers of New York assumes the anthropomorphic shapes of multiple gigantic Millet's Angeluses... motionless and ready to perform the sexual act and to devour one another...

-Salvador Dali as quoted by Koolhaas

"Architecture is inevitably a form of PC activity." - Rem Koolhaas

In *Delirious New York*, Koolhaas uses Dali's application of the PCM to François Millet's *Angelus* (fig 2) to illustrate PCM's rejuvenating capacity. According to Koolhaas, Dali has given it a "new lease on life [to *Angelus*] through the simple act of interpretation."¹⁵ Dali's use of *Angelus* also reveals – more so than the African hut - the complexity of the PCM. This complexity resides in the conceptual shift of the souvenirs within the PCM's sequence of steps. For example, first, after a long obsession with Millet's painting, Dali "discovers" its true meaning while traveling his subconscious; namely that it depicts a man and a woman "petrified in a moment of sexual desire."¹⁶ Second, Dali creates a series of paintings based upon this paranoiac interpretation. These paintings are souvenirs, specifically travel sketches, for this excursion into his subconscious (fig 3). Third, these travel sketches conceptually shift position in the sequence such that they come before the first step. In this new position they transformed from being the product of a paranoiac delusion into 'evidence' that proves the delusion to be truth. The travel sketches make "the reality of this idea [the delusion] valid to others." In other words, Dali depicts his discovery, and then he uses those depictions to prove the discovery.

Koolhaas's designs for the Installation at the Milan Triennial and the Video Bus Stop are travel sketches from excursions into the unconscious, as well. These excursions follow a similar itinerary to Salvador Dali's trips, yet while Dali was obsessed by the meaning of François Millet's famous painting *Angelus*, Koolhaas seems obsessed by the meaning of the Barcelona Pavilion. Each of his projects bears a striking resemblance to the Pavilion, which stands to Koolhaas's buildings as *Angelus* stands to Dali's paintings.

The Milan Triennial Installation (fig. 4) and the Video Bus Stop (fig. 5) bears the greatest

similarity to their *Angelus*, the Pavilion. They also bear the greatest resemblance to the architectural example of the PCM given by Koolhaas in *Delirious New York*: the London Bridge at Lake Havasu, Arizona, which the community purchased in 1968.¹⁷ The bridge was simply transported and reconstructed stone by stone such that it crossed the lake. Koolhaas writes that it is perhaps the most blatant example of PCM. The Installation at Milan is similar to the bridge in that the Installation is a reconstruction, though partial, of the Barcelona Pavilion. Koolhaas and his partners collected fragments of the original Pavilion, and then constructed an incomplete version of the Pavilion. This reconstruction, however, had a significant difference to the original: it was curved. The site for the installation was a curved room, so "the Pavilion had to be bent."¹⁸

The Video Bus Stop follows suit. Koolhaas refer to this projects as "Mies van der Rohe meets Douax-Could"¹⁹ (a European bus stop manufacturer). Koolhaas's drawings serve as evidence that the Bus Stop's connection to the Pavilion is more than image. Kobe's sculpture from the Barcelona Pavilion, *Dawn*, is collaged into the drawing. The Pavilion is transformed yet *Dawn* remains an inhabitant.

Diagnosing Koolhaas: Exercising the Pavilion

If Dali's travels via the PCM revealed that *Angelus* depicts a man and a woman in a state of sexual tension, what has Koolhaas's travels reveal? Aside from the PCM's rejuvenating effects, why has Koolhaas brought the Pavilion back on these two occasions? For what reason does he allow *it* to return?

Incredibly, he may allow its return for the same reason that Zizek, in his book *Looking Awry*, ascribes to the return of the living dead: 'because [it was] not properly buried.'²⁰ Zizek writes that the living dead, like those in Steven King's *Pet Cemetery*, return to collect some unpaid symbolic debt because their funeral rites went wrong and therefore their death was not integrated into the symbolic network. The dead return to settle this account and be 'inscribed into the symbolic tradition.'²¹ According to Zizek, the dead are analogous to the Lacanian real: that which cannot be accounted for by the symbolic network but always returns to disrupt this network.²² The

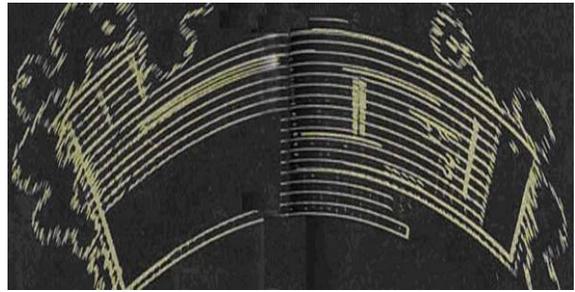


Fig. 4. Bent Pavilion



Fig. 5. Pavilion meets Bus Stop

real always returns to upset the symbolized word of reality until some aspect of the real is not included in that reality.

Even prior to Koolhaas's travels into the PCM, the Pavilion seemed ghostly. Robin Evans, in his article "Mies Van Der Rohe's Paradoxical Symmetries," described the Pavilion as a "phantom"²³ because of its momentary, almost ineffable, existence. The Pavilion stood for a mere six months. During the building's short existence, it received little of the attention and acclaim that it has since its demise. As Juan Pablo Bonta notes, the Pavilion went unnoticed by many architectural critics attending the Exposition. Most historians were also slow to recognize the Pavilion's significance.²⁴ Still, despite its short unnoticed existence the Pavilion is now considered one of the masterpieces of modern architecture.

Both Evans and Bonta note that this opinion was initially derived almost entirely from photographs taken of the building while it stood, of which there are only a handful. These photographs were ambiguous, grainy black-and-whites. Also, the floor plan that most critics and historian based their opinion was done specifically for publication prior to the building's construction, and did not include many last-minute changes made prior to completion. As such, this drawing did not represent the actual built work. In fact, it was uncertain if a definitive final plan was ever completed due to a compressed design and construction schedule. The Barcelona Pavilion's authority and reputation, then, were attributable to qualities thought to exist in "an inaccurate plan and several [grain black and white] photographs."²⁵

After the Exposition the Pavilion was temporarily used as the home of the Anarchist Party and then abandon. Left alone, it was badly damaged; becoming, as Koolhaas writes, "the first modern ruin."²⁶ Finally, the Pavilion was dismantled and shipped to Berlin where its marble was used for other projects.²⁷

This un-ceremonial demise and dismemberment of an unnoticed temporary pavilion follows Zizek's pattern of misbegotten obsequies. Even the Pavilion's eventual popularity adds to the defilement because this popularity was based on qualities that the Pavilion may never have had, or, if those qualities did exist, were not noticed until some twenty years later.²⁸

To say, then, that Koolhaas has returned the Pavilion because it has not been properly buried is to say that Koolhaas has seen, in his PCM travels, that the Pavilion must reconcile its place within the symbolic network. He returns the Pavilion to exercise the symbolic debt.

This debt is similar to that of Millet's *Angelus*. Via the PCM Dali recognized that un-symbolized but present in Millet's painting was the subject of sex. This subject was (and, in many ways, still is) a portion of the real: a subject that could not be represented within the symbolic (art) world. Still the real is present in the subject matter even as it is being denied representation: unable to depict sex, Millet depicts an alternate setting for fertilization. The subconscious is present in the

subject matter of Millet's painting just as it is in the slip-of-the-tongue. Dali's travel log from this PCM excursion includes numerous images of the man and woman coupling, some even with the unwanted consequences of that coupling. Dali's paintings gives representation to that which was previously denied and, in doing so, remits the symbolic debt of *Angelus*.

Similarly, Koolhaas's discovered, during is PCM travels, the repressed real within the original Pavilion. This portion of the real which is present but un-symbolized is the sheer, random contingent quality of things in the world. This aspect of the real is repressed by the Pavilion's starched probity and essentialism that regulate its abstract, ascetic forms. Such forms stand against the messy unpredictable quality of the material world, and exclude as quality unpredictable and messy, the human subject. They stand as autonomous, complete objects unto themselves. Kolbe's sculpture *Dawn* stands isolated in a reflecting pool. The figure's arms are raised upward to allegedly shade the morning sun but the statue is not even facing east. In fact, Kolbe's figure's arms are raised in a gesture of protection to shield herself from the indifference of the Pavilion's asceticism.

Yet, within this asceticism, the real is present in the richness of the onyx veins, the softness of the velvet curtains and even in the naked figure of *Dawn*, which, while isolated, is embraced by the Pavilions outer walls. These aspects of the pavilion are analogues to the subject matter of Millet's painting: they indicate the workings of the subconscious just like a slip-of-the-tongue. They also indicate the symbolic debt that Koolhaas's travel sketches – his two projects - remedy.

Both the Installation and Bus Stop may be seen as Koolhaas's attempt to give the Pavilion a proper burial. Each projects depicts the Pavilion giving representation to these repressed elements. The Installation does so with its curved, fragmented form. This form responds to the eccentricities of its site and accepts the incompleteness of its parts. The Bus Stop depicts the Pavilion as a utilitarian object that, though "impossibly dignified,"²⁹ is engaged in the messiness of urban life. It also includes a video monitor, a "sign of vulgarity," according to Koolhaas.³⁰ Finally, Koolhaas depicts Kolbe's sculpture, *Dawn*, in the Bus

Stop as an active subject inhabiting the Pavilion in an eccentric manner.

Conclusion

Dali does not confine the PCM to a single body of work. Rather, he sees it as the prevailing method for making art. In works of art "everything hinges on the paranoid capacity of the author."³¹ There is, then, a fourth step to the PCM that must be added to the three previously mentioned: the travel sketches from the delusional excursion become, in turn, the starting point of another artist's delusion. This final step creates a vast PCM network; one so vast that the history of art must be reconsidered as "such apparently dissimilar paintings as Leonardo's Mona Lisa, Millet's Angelus, Watteau's Embankment of Cythera actually depict the very same subject matter...."³² The history of art and architecture, in light of the PCM, is an ongoing wide-spread travel log of delusional excursions. Each log proving, in succession, the very delusion that created it.

Endnotes

¹ Koolhaas, Rem. Delirious New York. New York, Monacelli Press. 1998. p237.

² *ibid.*

³ Koolhaas, Rem. 1993. 'Why I Wrote Delirious New York and other Textual Strategies'. ANY: Writing in Architecture. p.42

⁴ Gaillemin, Jean-Louis. Dali Master of Fantasies. New York. Abrams Press. 2004 .p63

⁵ Salvador Dali, "L'Ane pourri," Le Surrealisme au service de la Revolution, Paris 1930, p.9.

⁶ Koolhaas, Rem. Delirious New York. New York, Monacelli Press. 1998. p237.

⁷ Dali, Salvador; "The Conquest of the Irrational," Appendix of Conversations with Dali; Dutton Press, New York, NY 1969.

⁸ Koolhaas, Rem. Delirious New York. New York, Monacelli Press. 1998. p238.

⁹ *ibid.*

¹⁰ Salvador Dali, "L'Ane pourri," Le Surrealisme au service de la Revolution, Paris 1930, p.10.

¹¹ Koolhaas, Rem. Delirious New York. New York, Monacelli Press. 1998. p241. Would Koolhaas now add the 21st century? I think so given that the condition he describes has hardly abated.

¹² *ibid.* p.241

¹³ *ibid.*

¹⁴ *ibid.*

¹⁵ *ibid.*

¹⁶ *ibid.*

¹⁷ *ibid.* p. 240

¹⁸ Koolhaas, Rem. SMLXL. New York, Monacelli Press. 1997. p.49

¹⁹ Koolhaas, Rem. 1991. 'Video Bus Stop', Architectural Design. V61. p.71

²⁰ Zizek, Slavoj. Looking Awry. Cambridge, MIT Press. 1992. p23.

²¹ *ibid.*

²² *ibid.*

²³ Evans, Robin. Translation of Drawing to Building. Cambridge, MIT Press. 1997. p234.

²⁴ Bonta, Juan Pablo. Architecture and its Interpretation. New York, Rizzoli. 1976. p. 134

²⁵ Evans, Robin. Translation of Drawing to Building. Cambridge, MIT Press. 1997. p234.

²⁶ Koolhaas, Rem. SMLXL. New York, Monacelli Press. 1997. p.53

²⁷ *ibid.*

²⁸ Bonta, Juan Pablo. Architecture and its Interpretation. New York, Rizzoli. 1976. p. 137

²⁹ Koolhaas, Rem. SMLXL. New York, Monacelli Press. 1997. p.49

³⁰ *ibid.*

³¹ Dali, Salvador; "The Conquest of the Irrational," Appendix of Conversations with Dali; Dutton Press, New York, NY 1969. p.241.

³² *ibid.* p.242