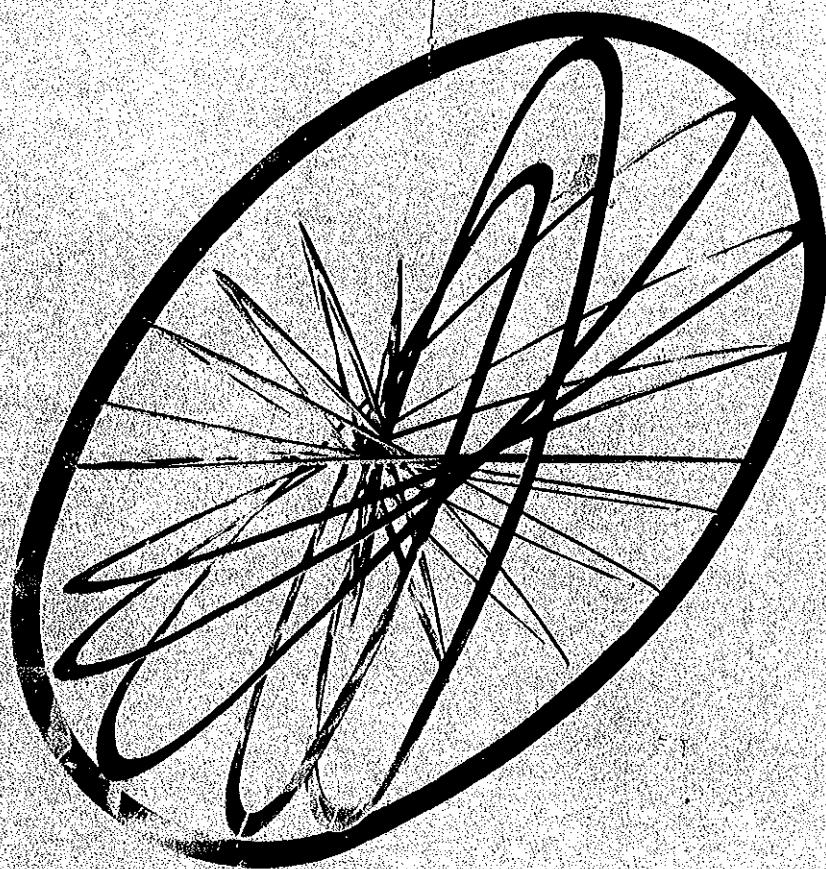
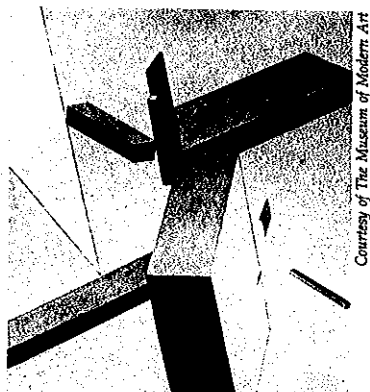




MILKING DECONSTRUCTION OR COW WAS THE SHOW?

By Catherine Ingraham



Courtesy of The Museum of Modern Art

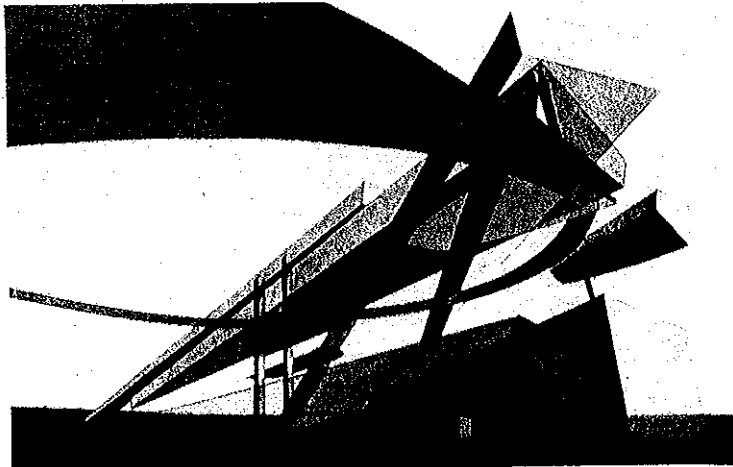
The problem with writing about the "Deconstructivist Architecture" exhibition that ran June 23-August 30 at the Museum of Modern Art in New York is that I feel compelled to argue for a distinction that would be better left alone (to rot)—mainly the distinction between deconstruction and deconstructivism. Deconstruction I take seriously, deconstructivism I find simplistic and dangerously naive, although I know that my proprietorship, my desire to control language, is itself doomed to failure.

Both deconstruction and deconstructivism share the violence of the "de-." But the first is a critical project (going beyond architecture) that names this violence as that which has been subsisting all along beneath the idealisms (the metaphysics) of antiquity and modernity. The "de-" of deconstruction is not the destruction of construction, but the exposure of repressed constructions—and thus is productive. The "de-" of deconstructivism is a confused historical reference to Russian Constructivism, deconstruction, and, I'm sure unintentionally, the "d" of the "diagonals" that the exhibition curators Philip Johnson and Mark Wigley apparently identified as necessary to deconstructivist architecture. By means of diagonals—which, by the way, are a poor way of describing the compositions of the Russian Constructivists—deconstructivism aspires not to the violence of critique but to the violence of cutting and slicing, "slashing," as someone pointed out during the exhibition symposium held June 30. I believe it is this appeal to formalist virtuosity—the manipulation of form rather than an inquiry into assumptions about form—that makes the deconstructivist show at MOMA both reactionary and antithetical to the critical project that deconstruction spells out for architecture.

I should say at the outset that the work of the seven architects represented in the exhibition is, for me, among the most interesting work being done in architecture right now. But this work is interesting in ways that the exhibition seems to go out of its way to suppress. All of the projects ex-

Alexander Rodchenko. Oval Hanging Construction, Number 12, c. 1920 (above). Plywood, aluminum paint, and wire. 69.7 x 61.7 cm. (Acquisition made possible through the extraordinary efforts of George and Zinaida Costakis and through the Nate B. and Frances Spingold, Matthew H. and Erna Futter, and Enid A. Haupt Funds.)
El Lissitzky, Composition, 1922 (left). Oil and tempera on wood. 69.7 x 61.7 cm. (The Riklis Collection of McCrory Corporation, fractional gift.)

Zaha M. Hadid, "The Peak,"
Hong Kong, 1982. Perspective of
elements suspended in void.



Courtesy of The Museum of Modern Art

hibited have been around for some time—most of them have been, if anything, overpublicized (especially Zaha Hadid's "Peak" project in Hong Kong; Frank Gehry's house in Santa Monica; Daniel Libeskind's "City Edge" project for the International Building Exposition in Berlin; Bernard Tschumi's La Villette follies in Paris). If these architects—whose work is among the most interesting and provocative being done anywhere—are part of this bizarre, and I think failed, exhibition, then what has become of the critical voice of architecture? I suspect that the work of these architects is not really the point of the exhibition. Instead, it is a series of political yearnings—gathered under the vague rubric of deconstructivism—that is on display at MOMA. Almost any title would have worked.

Joseph Giovannini, one of the *New York Times*' architectural critics, claims to have invented this word "deconstructivism" and the Russian Constructivist/deconstruction genealogy to go with it. As he wrote in a recent review of the MOMA show (*The New York Times Magazine*, June 12, 1988):

It was the work of a core group—Frank Gehry, Peter Eisenman, Bernard Tschumi. . . Zaha Hadid, Coop Himmelblau [who, with the addition of Daniel Libeskind and Rem Koolhaas, are the architects represented in the exhibition]—that first called my attention to the new sensibility. Last year, in discussing with editors and architectural colleagues a book I was proposing on the work of these avant-garde architects, I devised the word "deconstructivism," a conflation of the words "deconstruction" and "constructivism" [as in Russian Constructivism]. The word has become the accepted name for the movement.

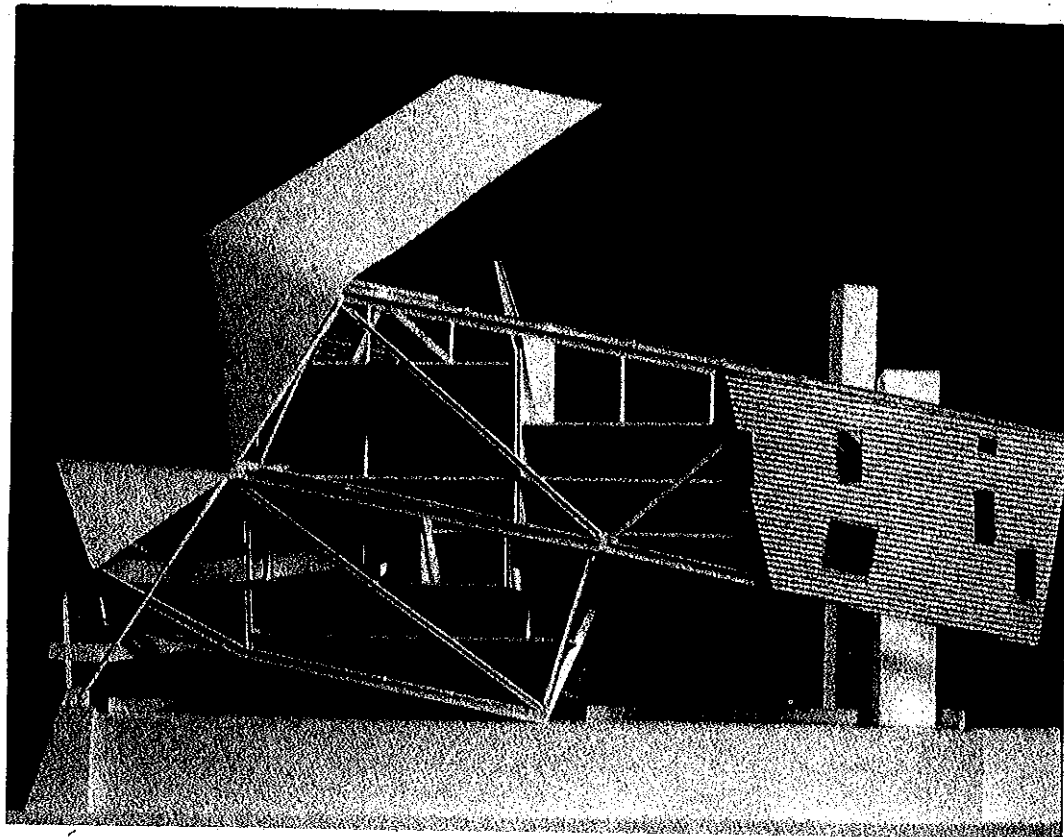
I would be amazed by Giovannini's claims here—his prescience regarding the "new sensibility," his crude word play on constructivism, his "devising" of the name of a movement—if I weren't so put off by the consequences of this way of thinking, mainly, the mounting of an exhibition to commemorate the "discovery" of a new movement, and, more or less simultaneously, the proliferation of embarrassing references to "deconstructivism" in every fashion magazine, cocktail party, and trendy gathering in the American world. Philip Johnson, who was the guest curator for the exhibition, no doubt made it politi-

cally tempting for Giovannini, and the associate curator of the exhibition Mark Wigley, to play the architectural exhibition game in the inner chambers of the Museum of Modern Art, while he, Johnson, loitered in the lobby (more or less just showing up for the event). But political temptation is precisely what architectural theorists are put in the city to overcome—not that Giovannini, in any case, qualifies as a theorist of any kind. But I am getting off track. Let me try to explain what I think is happening.

The "invention" of the so-called "deconstructivist movement" in architecture is a trivialization/stylization of the far more amorphous, complex, powerful, and radical—the far more brilliant—critical movement called "deconstruction" (or, more appropriately, poststructuralism). Both Wigley and Giovannini claim that deconstructivism is "sort of related" to deconstruction. The relationship, from my point of view, is a parasitic and predatory one—in orthographic (deconstruct-) as well as ideological ways. Deconstructivism evokes all the power of the "deconstructing consciousness"—the challenge to harmony, unity, stability—at the same moment that it decides (with perplexing nicety) that it is more "architectural," more related to "form," more "buildable." As Wigley writes in the exhibition catalogue, this movement (deconstructivism) is meant to "disturb our thinking about form" very much in the same way as deconstruction disturbs our thinking about structure, but that apparently doesn't mean that it is *derived* from deconstruction. Wigley's tacit division between form and theory (and form and structure) is only one problematic assumption among many. If I were reviewing this exhibition for an audience as obsessed as I am with the relationship between language and architectural form, I would spend the rest of this essay trying to expose more precisely what the architectural *vism-ing* of deconstruction means—although it would be a gruesome account. However, I should go on.

I know that Mark Wigley is interested, as am I, in the specifically architectural im-

plications of deconstruction and, along with this, in the challenge that architecture offers to the philosophical movement of deconstruction/poststructuralism. But the exhibition catalogue, as well as the exhibition itself, seems explicitly to avoid articulating contemporary critical questions facing architecture—questions having to do with formalist repression, historical reformulation, nostalgia, architectural meaning, intentionality, and so on. Because these critical questions are left unposed, the so-called challenge of architecture to critical theory is also left unposed. Instead, the style of the catalogue and exhibition wanders aimlessly between a loose form of constructivism and a loose form of poststructural theory as if it were trying to conceal the tensions between these two positions. Indeed, the catalogue as a whole feels like a barely concealed argument between people (Johnson and Wigley?) who hold radically different views but are afraid, for political reasons, to present a picture of disunity. For example, in the preface Johnson takes care to deny that the exhibition has any aims toward summing up contemporary architecture. But in almost the same breath he reminds us that he, Henry-Russell Hitchcock, and Alfred Barr were the ones who summed up the architecture of the 1920s—this, I assume, so that we know with whom we are dealing. In the final four paragraphs Johnson thanks the people from whom he essentially stole the idea for the deconstructivist show—which Michael Sorkin documented last December in *The Village Voice* as a scandal of appropriation—and then, in an equally disarming manner, he thanks Giovannini as a "valuable source of preliminary information." There is clearly someone—an editor, a voice—speaking in this preface who is neither Johnson nor Giovannini, but an editorial voice that



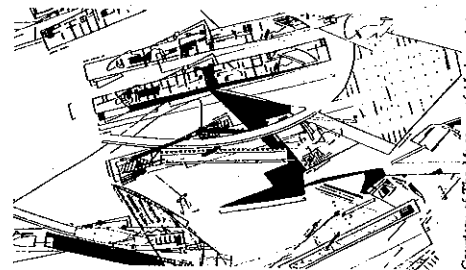
Courtesy of The Museum of Modern Art

knows that neither Philip Johnson nor Joseph Giovanni knows what he is talking about. The telling phrase, of course, came up in Sorkin's review of the exhibition in which he cites Johnson as requesting from MOMA, for the exhibit, any Constructivist paintings that had "diagonals in them." Deconstructivism for Giovanni and Johnson is essentially a matter of form and style—the thinnest kind of formal architectural description.

It is odd, but not surprising, that writers (or architects, or anyone) always betray themselves when they are building an argument, or a building, out of political convenience rather than political passion (intellectual or artistic obsessions, for example). Discourse/art cannot betray its intentions but it does seem to betray an "aura of production." For the deconstructivist exhibition the aura of production was a melange of pretty distasteful political desires—none of which qualify as radical or even interesting. This aura swallowed up the opportunity for commenting on the more remarkable moments of play and intelligence in some of the architectural projects—such as Hadid's free-floating geological/architectural beams, or Tschumi's explosions. The few very penetrating observations—such as Wigley's discussion of architectural ornament as a kind of *pharmakon*, that is, both a cure for and a poisoning of architecture's love of geometric purity—were also subordinated to displays of Johnson's and Giovanni's desires to be "founders of a movement"; the Mu-

seum of Modern Art's desire to update its image in the contemporary art/architecture world; New York's desire to be the place where the "new" is perpetually named and performed first; the architects' desires to be legitimized and so on.

One powerful indication of this overdrive of political ambition is that, first, the organization of the exhibition itself was terribly weak. Nobody appeared to have *curated* the show, in spite of the presence of at least two nominal curators (Johnson and Wigley). The exhibition marked a time, date, and place, but no particular sensibility. Two small rooms were filled with architectural models, with accompanying floor plans mounted on the wall behind them. A third room/entry salon was devoted to works by Russian Constructivists that belong to MOMA's permanent collection. This entry room—its painterly character, its dusty and old revolutionary patina, the shapes and compositions made so familiar to us vis a vis modernism—was so radically different from the exhibition of architectural models that it was hard, under *any* circumstances, to imagine that these two bodies of work are formally linked. The presence of diagonals as a compositional element in both paintings and models did nothing to help the drift of these two collections away

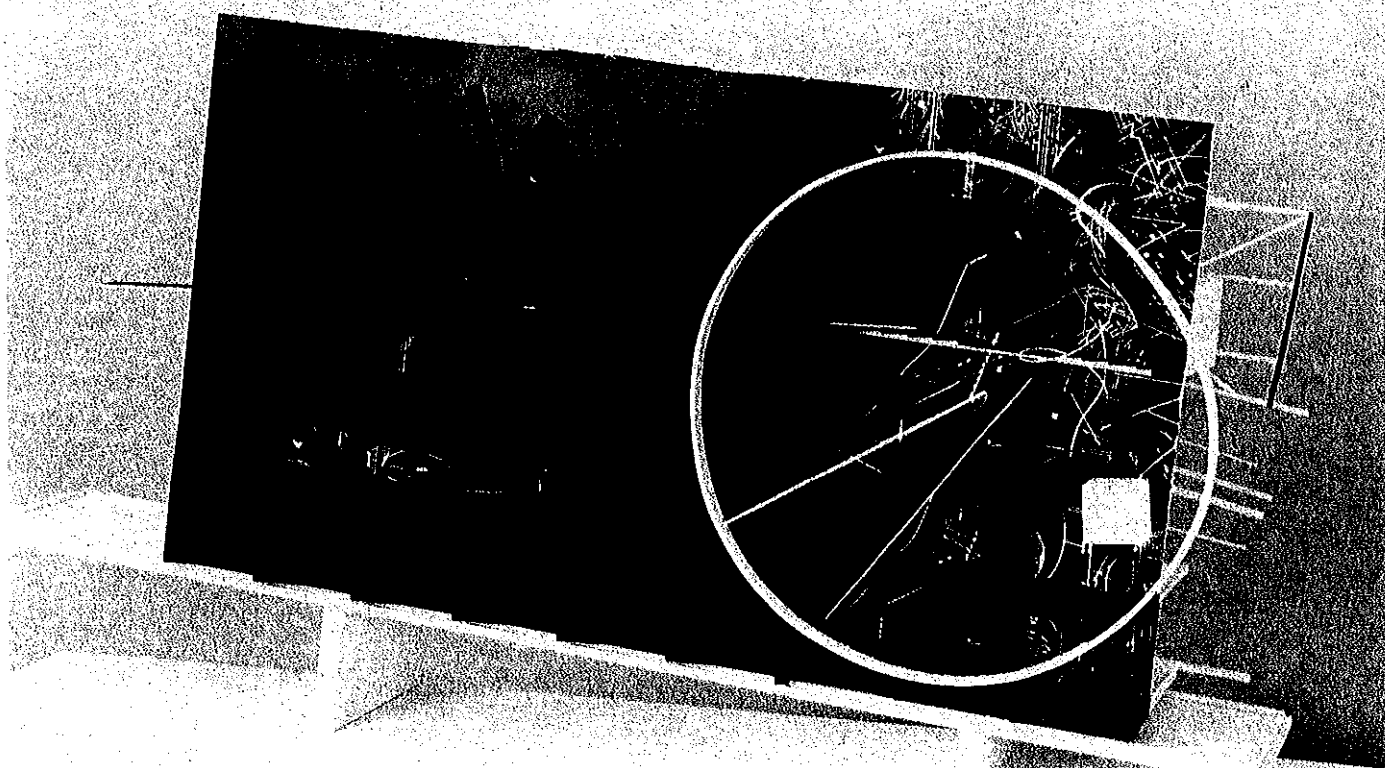


Courtesy of The Museum of Modern Art

Zaha M. Hadid. "The Peak," Hong Kong, 1982. Floor Plans.

from each other—in any event, diagonals share nothing automatically with other diagonals. There is no such thing as a generic diagonal.

The Russian Constructivist movement (1913-1933) was, among other things, politically radical and devotedly formalist. "Radical formalism" turned out to present a kind of paradox for subsequent architectural movements which picked up the formal and compositional character of work by Malevich, Lissitzky, Chastnik, Klutis, Tatlin, and Rodchenko but not the political



Daniel Libeskind. "City Edge," Berlin, Federal Republic of Germany, 1987. Sectional model.

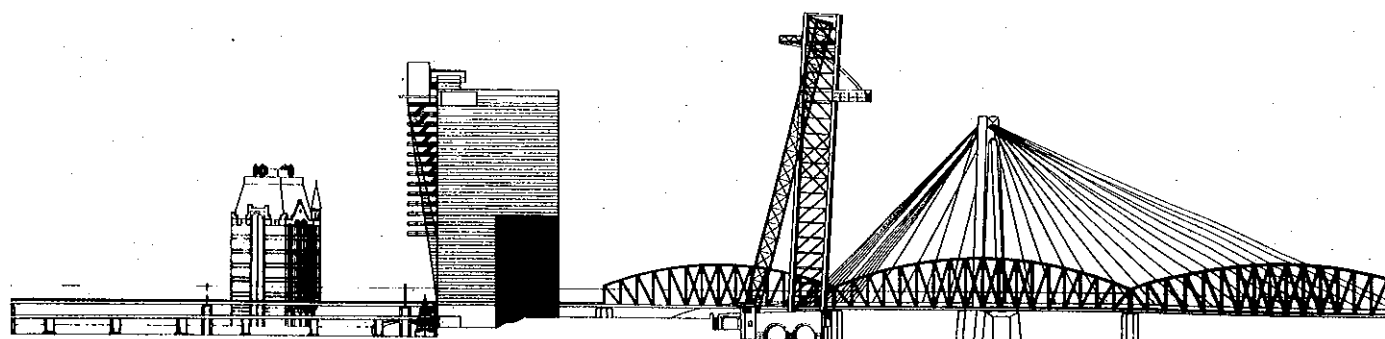
radicalism. It was precisely depoliticized formalism that made the oppressive structures of modernism possible (the false purities, idealities, white-on-white totalities). Wigley, trying to redeem the connection, suggests in his catalogue essay that the "wound" in form opened up by the Constructivists—and subsequently glossed over or badly stitched up by the modernists—is precisely what has now been reopened and "de'ed" (as in deconstructed) in this show. But it is again the formal character, and not the political radicalism, of the Constructivists' work that—however poorly—this deconstruc-

tivist/constructivism connection relies upon. Deconstructive formalism is no less totalitarian than modernist formalism—both attempt to restrain radical inquiry.

Let's just say for a moment that the architects in this show *had* been influenced by deconstruction on the one hand and Russian Constructivism on the other. I know that some of the architects in the exhibit were influenced by deconstruction—Peter Eisenman, for example—and others by Russian Constructivism, but I don't think any of the architects were influenced by the combination of the two. However, I would expect such a critical position to focus on the multiple ironies of exhibiting such a show in the Museum of Modern Art: the problem of historical periodization in architecture, the modernity/postmodernity debate, the im-

possibility of a unified architectural project, the conflict of Constructivist formalism with poststructural critiques of formalism, problems of form and textuality in architecture, problems of ideology, and so on. But none of these questions came up anywhere, unless you count the two-hour evening symposium held a week after the exhibit opened, to which most of the architects in the exhibition did not come.

It would be charitable to say that the exhibition as a whole didn't seem well thought through. It fell into virtually every trap that modernism laid for architecture. The trap, for example, of trying to settle what a radical architectural movement would be by resorting to whether a project is buildable or not. To quote Wigley, "The projects are radical precisely because they do not play in the sanctuaries of drawing, or theory, or sculpture. They inhabit the realm of building." It would take too long to undo all the assumptions at work here, but the main one is the assumption that building is less of a sanctuary than theory—that is, building is more direct, more real, than theory or drawing. The



Courtesy of The Museum of Modern Art

Rem Koolhaas. Rotterdam Building and Tower, Rotterdam, 1981. West elevation.

Modernists would certainly agree with this position—it was, in a way, their main point. But there have been a number of good reasons to rethink this position in recent years. This comment about buildability seems meant to soothe the conscience of architects who are terrified by “paper architecture”—terrified because paper architecture seems so facile, so informal, so promiscuous, so without that apotheosis to which all architecture aspires. But, as we know, it is precisely the (failed) aspiration for totality, completion, and objecthood that has given way to the contemporary era in architecture—in some way the *unbuildability* of all architecture, the “paperiness” of all architecture. In fact, Libeskind’s “City Edge” piece is precisely about this issue. All in all a strange sort of curatorial naiveté prevailed (the kind that political ambition nurtures) about how architecture, exhibitions, architectural models, text, and theory work.

In the same issue of *The New York Times Magazine* in which Joseph Giovannini reviewed the deconstructivist show, there was an article on a new hormone that chemical companies are developing in order to make dairy cows produce more milk than we currently need or want. Now it so happens that among the most popular items in New York these days are cows—ceramic cow salt and pepper shakers, black-and-white cow milk jugs, cow hides, cow shirts. These cow-things are kitsch but they are also, no doubt, some kind of icon for the irrepara-

ble loss of innocence, the loss of the country, the loss of “pure white goodness” that milk has always stood for—in short, the loss of things so long gone in New York that these cow-things can only be some kind of sentimental joke.

The *New York Times* article presents two opposing viewpoints: the agribusiness corporate view, which maintains that more milk is better no matter what, and the farmer’s view, which maintains that milk, like everything else, should be understood in relation to other things, like supply and demand, the quality of life for the average farmer, and so on. This is an argument between the formalisms of the chemical corporation, which thinks of itself as doing the right thing for American agriculture, and the more emotional (and frequently more conservative) character of the dairy farmer, who basically sees himself being put out of business. The government has been subsidizing the dairy industry in the United States for a number of years by paying farmers to slaughter unneeded cows, storing and stockpiling surplus cheese and milk, and so on. So why, one might well ask, would anyone want to develop a chemical hormone the probable biological and economic effects of which are harmful?

The corporation develops the hormone because it loves the parameters—the fact that it is cheap to use and increases production a hundredfold. The fact that the increased size of the cow udder needed to handle the additional milk being produced in the cow’s body means that a terrible strain is put on the conventional structure of the cow—as one farmer put it, the cow “milks her flesh off”—simply adds to the zeal of invention. Thus, in addition to de-

veloping the hormone, the chemical company, in league with a genetic engineering firm, is going to have to revise the cow that gets injected with the hormone, making it “wider so that it can carry the weight of the increased milk production.” In the midst of these discussions about what the cow of the future needs to look like, the farmer is saying, “This whole fight is about what we want American agriculture to be and what we want rural America to look like. We’re talking about where we want our people to live, and we’re talking about forces transforming all society.”

Now this cow/milk situation seems to have allegorical significance for the architectural situation spelled out by the “Deconstructivist Architecture” exhibition at MOMA. The philosophical movement of deconstruction, and the artistic movement of Constructivism, like the cow, are being squeezed by architecture to give more of a certain kind of milk. But the structure of these extraordinarily complex critical events, unfortunately, is not quite the right shape for the new image that architecture has in mind. Enter Giovannini with his lexical alchemy; enter diagonals and the literalism of surgical procedures. The idea of the cow as a *thing*—like the cow-thing we fill with milk and set on our dinner table—is what makes the crude tampering with its bone structure possible but ludicrous. Equally, the idea of deconstruction as a thing that can be built results in the crude surgeries of deconstructivism. It will ultimately be the shift in the *idea* of architectural structure—its dematerialization—that will interfere most substantially with the material surfaces of architecture, not so many jugs and pitchers cast in the shape of something called deconstructivism. ♦

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