Collage of the constant changing experience of representation of the CCTV building in its context
Beijing/Umeå, 2012, Katja Hogenboom

modulating contradictions - the central china television headquarters

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According to Jacques Rancière, images are operations between meaning and affect, between what you see and what you expect. The way the image operates between meaning and affect; I call 'modulating contradictions'. Contradictions meant not in the sense of in opposition, but in a permanent intended interplay, allowing for other possible readings. As Rancière explains, the images of art (and arguably architecture) are operations that produce a discrepancy, an alteration of resemblance, and that's where there is an opening for another reading. Serge Daney's distinction between the visual and the image is similar. According to him the image, in contrast to the visual, presents one way of seeing and challenges us to think differently, to open for possible other worlds. How the image operates and modulates contradictions is also highly relevant in the architectural example to be discussed in this article: The Central China Television Headquarters (CCTV) by Rem Koolhaas (OMA). From the conspiracy theories surrounding the design to the experience of the building in its urban context, I will argue that this building shows how the power of signification and affect associated with the image production around the building operates with the expectations of certain architecture and certain architects. By modulating contradictions and by taking apart the iconic readings of this building in the urban context, I will argue, the CCTV building not only makes power visible, but also "generates a profound insecurity that allows us to enter into a "beyond-good-and-evil" experience".[1]. Taking part in the partition of the perceptible (Rancière 2007) through its formal and programmatic organization, questioning the status quo and also attempting possible reframing.

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 "The possibility of future urban forms seems to release a vast array of both utopian and dystopian energies. The most interesting cases of this are those that manage to include both of these vectors, play them off against each other and thus generate a profound insecurity that allows us to enter into a "beyond-good-and-evil" experience"[2].

introduction

When Constantin Brancusi's sculpture *Bird in Space (L'Oiseau dans l'espace) 1923* was brought to the USA for a retrospective of Brancusi's work in New York, it was held by US customs. The authorities classified the sculpture as a kitchen utensil, and thus as "mass-produced and unoriginal, ready made"[3]. Therefore, instead of a work of art, which is duty-free, the object was subject to import duty taxes. The same happened a few weeks later when Marcel Duchamp brought a Brancusi sculpture to New York. The case was taken to court in 1927, where the Federal Customs' decision was overruled and the Brancusi sculptures were deemed eligible for duty-free status.

Another sculpture by Brancusi called the *Princesse X 1915-1916* was banned from an art show on grounds of obscenity: objectors to the sculpture claimed that it represented a phallus. According to Brancusi, the sculpture represented a female torso, breast and a head, but at the same time, he always chose a photographic point of view that underscored the sculpture's phallic likeness to depict the sculpture.

images are operations

In Brancusi's sculptural investigation of abstraction and formal purity, a formal research on semantics and syntax, ambiguity in the relation between the form and the image is played out. In the formal research of what an image can be, Brancusi's sculptures start to ask questions about what they are in relation to our sensory experience of them: kitchen utensil or art? pornography or the torso of a woman? Brancusi deliberately uses the popular notions of everyday objects –or pornography in the case of Princesse X. Through these familiar unfamiliarities, our idea of art is being reframed. Brancusi's sculptures are *estranging* and ambiguous, but they are not alien to us; we recognize them, they are familiar, even popular and enjoyable, but they also raise questions, without alienating us or disqualifying our *raison d'être*. While enjoyable and based on the cliché (quotations) of the convention of the everyday (the popular in all of us), liberating effects are enacted through new ways of connecting, framing, montage, sculptural formations, etc.

Commodification and liberation operate together, allowing the viewer to engage. In his essay *Art as Technique*[4] from 1925, the Russian Formalist Viktor Shklovsky coined the term 'ostranenie', a concept translated as defamiliarization or estrangement. *"By making things strange, the artist does not simply displace them from an everyday context into an artistic framework; he also helps to 'return sensation' to life itself, to reinvent the world, to allow the observer to experience anew. Estrangement is what makes art artistic; but by the same token, it makes life lively, or worth living"*, paraphrases Svetlana Boym in *Architecture of Off Modern*[5]. Similar to Brancusi's idea of reframing our concept of Art, Shklovsky's estrangement was never from the world itself, but rather an estrangement for the sake of the world's renewal. In that sense, estrangement is a method that operates from within. It does not negate reality or its conventions, but transforms them.

In that they say one thing and show another, allowing for contradictory realities to exist in one and the same instance and playing with the obscene image the *Princesse X* also projects, Brancusi's form-image relations become a field of operations, of possible renewal –an opportunity to question what we consider Art. These kind of images produce, in an operative way, relations, or as Jacques Rancière says: *"[I]mages are operations; relations*

between a whole and parts; between a visibility and a power of signification and affect associated with it; between expectation and what happens to meet them"[6].

In this sense, the image operates between meaning and affect; modulating contradictions, not in opposition but in a permanent intended interplay, allowing for other possible readings. As Rancière explains, the images of art (and arguably architecture) are operations that produce a discrepancy, an alteration of resemblance. Serge Daney's distinction between the visual and the image is similar. The image presents one way of seeing and challenges us to think differently, to open for possible other worlds. "The visual is the optical verification of a procedure of power (technological, political, advertising or military power) [...] For me, the sine qua non of the image is alterity [...] The visual is the verification that something functions. In that sense, clichés and stereotypes are part of the visual [...] If the visual keeps us from seeing (because it prefers that we decode, that we decipher, that we 'read'), the image always challenges us to carry out montage with others, with some other. Because in the image, as in democracy, there is ,free play', unfinished pieces, gaps, openings"[7].

How the image operates and modulating contradictions are also highly relevant in the architectural example to be discussed in this article: *The Central China Television Headquarters (CCTV)* by Rem Koolhaas (OMA). From the conspiracy theories surrounding the design to the experience of the building in its urban context, this building shows how the power of signification and affect associated with the image production around the building operates with the expectations of certain architecture and certain architects.
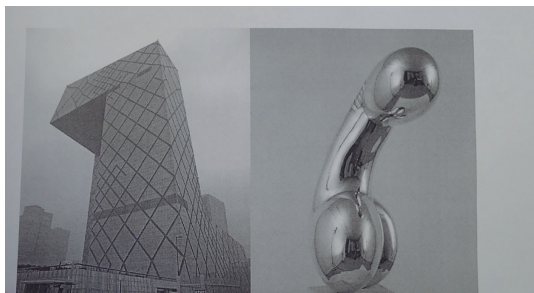

f1_Central China Television Headquarters (CCTV) by Rem Koolhaas (OMA) in Beijing
Beijing, 2012, Katja Hogenboom

cctv's conspiracy

When a Chinese critic[7] wrote that the CCTV's form was modeled on a pornographic image of a naked woman on her hands and knees and that the building located beside the CCTV, the TVCC, represented a phallus, the overwhelming negative response forced Koolhaas to appear on Chinese national television to deny the allegations. However, in OMA/Koolhaas' book *Content*[8], we find different book-cover proposals showing collages of this pornographic image of the woman and the phallus. Learning from Brancusi (*Princesse X*), an ambiguous reading of the building is deliberately left unresolved. The allegations were denied, but are at the same time underscored by the existing collages of the cover research made by OMA themselves. The absence of an obvious reading, in this case for the CCTV building, alludes to a conspiracy; the idea that this famous architect must have intended something with this shape is simply irresistible. But as Fredric Jameson so aptly put it: "Creativity lies in the response rather than in the initial givens and raw materials of the situation itself"[9].

f2_Snapshot of two pages from Content (2004) book by Rem Koolhaas
Umeå, 2014, Katja Hogenboom

f3_Snapshot of collage of CCTV building versus Brancusi's Princess X
Umeå, 2016, Katja Hogenboom

It would seem that neither the play with pornography nor the obvious response it provoked are of particular interest to Koolhaas. In the following, I attempt to show how ambiguity in the reading and representation of the building can be used to question, engage, explore and allow different readings of power in its full ambiguity and complexity, and that Koolhaas did precisely that in this case. What happens is what Rancière calls a *politics of aesthetics,* meaning that the forms of visibility and intelligibility of artistic practices, as well as of architecture, take part in "the 'partition of the perceptible' in so far as they suspend the ordinary coordinates of sensory experience and reframe the overall network of relationships between spaces and times, subjects and objects, the common and the singular. There is not always politics, though there always are forms of power"[10]. This questioning of the status quo allows for the possible to emerge – what Maurizio Lazzarato calls the paradigm of the event[11]. The event of the pornographic exposure undermines the power of this icon, its truth. Still more interesting is the instability generated by the building's specific loop-form and the organization of the program.

cctv's unstable representation

A building is not simply a reflection of its functions, but is in fact active. It constitutes information, behavior and actions and perception over time, expressed in the experience of the building (in its use) both through the materiality (aesthetics) of the building and the image it projects.

While analyzing the CCTV building, I collected all kinds of paraphernalia related to it, from real estate brochures in hotel lobbies, Chinese television news presentations on the building and its construction, and samples from the endless production of CCTV souvenirs.

f4_Different representations in the media of the Central China Television Headquarters
Umeå, 2014, Katja Hogenboom

All of these images portray the CCTV from the same perspective: the two towers, the platform base and the cantilevered top face the viewer, framing the hole in the middle and rendering visible what OMA has called the loop – the continuous form of the physical building around the central opening. From this point of view, the building is depicted as a 'stable' building. Here, the image is a visual, affirming the icon as a representation of power in China. However, from street-level, the experience of the building is quite different; one is in fact confronted with a very unstable building. From every angle, it challenges viewers to re-evaluate it: its sculptural effect, the loop, whose appearance constantly changes from being a Z, an I, or an otherwise estranging formation in relation to its environment call upon the audience to participate in asking what it is doing.

f5_One of the many different ways the CCTV building presents itself in the city
Beijing, 2012

Both the strange form and the large scale of the building and its 'bigness' resist the building's being read; it becomes what Fredric Jameson calls *incommensurable*[12]. The geometrical form does not fall under any geometrical types or categories. Sometimes the building presents itself as brutally monumental; from a few blocks away it suddenly looks small, scale-less, almost cute in the skyline of Beijing's CBD, disappearing like a little sister to its high-rise surroundings. Returning to the building from another direction, its estranging unstable form surprises; it almost seems to be tipping over. It never becomes unambiguous, and this ambiguous strangeness invites viewers to discover and criticize its narrative qualities, as sculpture design can do so adeptly (Brancusi).

f6_Collage of the constant changing experience of representation of the CCTV building in its context
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A building like the CCTV is part of the spectacle world with its endless icons that compete with each other on a global scale beyond site-specificity. Architecture has become media and is related to consumption. It is almost impossible to escape, and why should one try? What matters is what kind of spectacle one produces, for whom and to what ends, and what can be liberated by it. I suggest that another kind of spectacle can be enacted, one as capable of liberating as theatre can be. Brancusi, by referring to the everyday object through the popular notion of the pornographic, aims to reframe our idea of Art. The CCTV building is the second largest office building in the world (the largest is the Pentagon). From a certain point of view, it is a big and spectacular building, but its stability collapses as soon as one shifts views; the representation of power becomes uncertain through its fragmentation. This is not the case with another building very similar in form to the CCTV, namely Peter Eisenman's *Max Reinhardt* loop building. The design of this building, based on a Möbius strip, is a formal research in which only the syntax of the architecture itself is investigated. It questions the notion of verticality from a self-centered point of view; it does not investigate what the form produces on the level of sensations, which narratives it enacts in people's lives, in society and beyond architecture itself. In this sculptural design, the program in the building is disconnected from the form; the section that is generated is an arbitrary outcome and bears no relation to the program. The attraction of the spectacle here is merely used for formal investigations within architectural morphology.

The CCTV building is not just a stable block with a hole in the middle. It is precisely the non-specifiable form, the cantilever, the angled sides and roof producing a constantly changing experience of this object within its urban surroundings that allows for and invites questioning. The image projected of the building both creates and frustrates expectations. This interplay of meaning and effect, which I have called modulating contradictions, operates on the level of the experience of the actual building. The image as operation produces a discrepancy between the 'sayable' and the visible. Anticipating an effect – the CCTV as a stable building – and then displacing or contradicting it with the CCTV as a strange and unstable constellation; the fragmentation of experience not only breaks the narrative sequence of power, but also allows ambivalence "in which the same procedures create and retract meaning, ensure and undo the link between perception, actions and affects"[13].

On a formal level, the CCTV building resists the celebration of the media house as just another icon (brand), instead favoring a much more dynamic understanding of its representation. As an icon, the CCTV building represents power and media in China, but its morphing loop-form simultaneously deflates that image. It does not provide power in China with an easy icon. Both on a content– and on a formal level, the conflation of different media, the formal and programmatic loop, the construction, tectonics, scale and its 'bigness' produce a fundamental dissymmetry between media, provoking a distortion or destabilization of identification and representation. The program layout in the building follows the formal loop, and a behavioral effect on the employees is expected through this deliberate mixing/looping of the program. OMA purposely refrained from controlling all of the confrontations of the structure with its spaces of use; the solutions had to be found in the confrontation between a specific office and how the structure would invade its space. These 'errors' (accidents) generated spaces of another kind, produced by the collision of structure and spaces. The construction diagonally pierces through and collides with an office space, sometimes filling up more than 80 percent of the façade in a brutal intrusion of the space. The strange omnipresence of the structure and tectonics prevent the space from becoming just a normal office space.

By modulating contradictions and by taking apart the iconic readings of the building in the urban context, the CCTV building not only makes power visible, but also "*generates a profound insecurity that allows us to enter into a "beyond-good-and-evil" experience*"[14]. I maintain that it takes part in the *partition of the perceptible* through its formal and programmatic

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organization, questioning the status quo and also attempting possible reframing. "Form is no longer an instrument used to analytically relate to or comment on the urban syntax of the immediate physical context, but rather given the new task of staging a space of convergence and the connective tissue in a global, inter-urban network"[15]. It is already an admirable attempt as an idea. What can one do as an architect when a client requests an affirming image of power? What other spectacle, beyond one-dimensional truth, could be enacted as a public sphere? I would suggest that with the estranging form of the CCTV, Rem Koolhaas pointed in the right direction, at least in presenting the idea to open up and question what the status quo stands for.

f7_CCTV building in its context
Beijing, 2012, Katja Hogenboom

endnotes

1. Sven-Olov Wallenstein, "Looping Ideology: The CCTV Centre in Beijing", in *Media Houses: Architecture, Media, and the Production of Centrality* (Peter Lang, 2010) 166.

2. Wallenstein. "Looping Ideology: The CCTV Centre in Beijing", op. cit.

3. Hal Foster, Rosalind Krauss, et al. *Art since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism* (UK: Thames Hudson, 2004), 218.

4. Viktor Shklovsky, "Art as Technique" (1925), in *The Critical Tradition: Classic Texts and Contemporary Trends*, ed. David H. Richter (Boston, New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 1997), 774-784.

5. Svetlana Boym, *Architecture of Off-Modern* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2008), 19.

6. Jacques Rancière, *The Future of the Image* (London New York: Verso, 2007), 3.

7. Serge Daney. "Before and After the Image". In *Politics-Poetics Documenta X - The Book* (Cantz Verlag Ostfield-Ruit, 1997), 610.

8. Xiao Mo, a retired architecture professor, wrote an essay insinuating the pornographic image; local newspapers later reported these pornographic connections as facts.

9. Rem Koolhaas, *Content* (London: Taschen,2004), 542.

10. Fredric Jameson, *The Seeds of Time* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994) xv.

11. Jacques Rancière talk. "Aesthetics and Politics: Rethinking the Link". (Berkeley: September 2002).

12. Maurizio Lazzarato, Struggle, Event, Media on http://eipcp.net/transversal/1003/lazzarato/en (05. 2003) Signs, images, and statements play a strategic role [...] they contribute to allowing the possible to emerge and they contribute to its realization. The mode of the event is the problematical. The event is not the solution to a problem, but rather opens up what is possible.

13. Jameson. *The Seeds of Time*, op. cit.

14. Rancière, *The Future of the Image,* op. cit.

15. Wallenstein. "Looping Ideology: The CCTV Centre in Beijing", op. cit.

16. Emmanuel Petit, "Involution, Ambience, and Architecture", *Log 29* (Fall, 2013): 32.

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CV

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