

# HIGH RISE

## High Rise / Down Fall

A project by Johannes Schwartz

Essay by Patrick Healy  
Graphic design by Experimental Jetset  
Printed by drukkerij robstolk

In the same series:

**High Noon** (2003), **High Nature** (2004),  
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An Alphabet of Space

The Dutch Pavilion, Hanover

October 2005

A pile of stones scattered on the ground, does not constitute a ruin. In the late 19th century, and particularly in the works of the Berlin philosopher Georg Simmel and the Viennese art-historian Alois Riegl, the theme of monument and ruin was explored in a detail that echoes through all the discussions of modernism and its relation to history, to the present day. The discussion by Riegl points to the difficulty within modernism of preserving something which was not useful, whose newness had become outworn, and deserved only to be knocked down; or, something which viewed as having artistic value ought to be preserved, and which even as a ruin indicated that it was the shadow history of an epoch.

Thus the ruin and the problem of what is discarded or treated as useless was kept apart in the aesthetic valuing of one over the other. Even restoration of a monument might only add to its destruction. The ruin contained, in Simmel, the constant play between nature and culture and pointed to a tragic aspect of the cultural, and indeed of all material existents, that they would be erased by time, and that as matter they could not survive indefinitely.

All works of man are a struggle with nature, and will one day perish. The ruin is not just something of the past, but the most efficacious lesson of material existence.

At an international conference on the restoration of the Parthenon one hundred years ago, Anthony Vidler has shown, that a dominant view in the

debate was that the ruins should be left to die, that any conservation proposed for the Parthenon would be a parody, and any restoration a form of vandalism. Love of the ruin however was also criticised by the French art-historian Elie Faure, as 'a dangerous symbolism, ... the blind cult of immobility'. In one extreme view the irretrievable deadness of the past gave it classical authority, in another, the clearing of the junk of history could lead to a replacement by glass and crystals, that would mark a utopia. In the latter view there was a way out of the cul-de-sac of history, largely through a gesture of profanation and destruction. There could only be fragments and no monuments. The search of the past would result in evocative filigree traces, tiny punctuations of time, that would shimmer and twinkle and like a star report a long ago event in the twinkle of an eye. The past at best belongs to a glance. One can only look as in the famous painting of Friedrich, resolutely to the future, like a solitary wander standing on the hexagonal basalt rocks, standing literally on the ruins of geology, swept by the spray of the sea, facing fixedly towards the horizon. A truly active history cherishes the illusion, and faces the future.

For the moderns the Entzauberung, or disenchantment of the world, is not anything other than the abolition of magic, the elimination of enchantment, that belongs to the childhood stories and to story telling in general. Calculation and technology offers the world as eminently knowable. But the very modernism that called for the junk of the past to be discarded had also in the concept of the modern invoked another sense of time, and a commitment that opened up a more complex destiny. In the photographic works of Johannes Schwartz around the Dutch pavilion in Hanover from the Expo 2000, we have a cumulative document of response, which capture the entire problematic but reversed as it were, the anticipation of decay which challenges both the provisional nature of the structure, the pavilion, and anticipates a future history. Even the systems of pavilion architecture as developed in the modern period, especially in the work of Ledoux, re-inscribes the argument of the relation of part to whole, it stresses that in the pavilion there is an independence and autonomy, away from the just being the part in the whole, rather it exists as a statement of independence.

This independence is also the site of the maximum experimentation, and so at Hanover, both experiment and exemplary display. But the pavilion as something new and immediate by definition it is also as Benjamin noted of fashion, tied to a corpse, or the exploration of forms at the interstitial of the organic and inorganic. It is to this site that the journey of Schwartz is conducted, to the site where tensions of decay are already at work; the forces of time, of gravity, of wear and tear, which humbles the proud independence and display of the pavilion and

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forces it into the terrain of the mutable and the finite.

The photographs of Schwartz begin as a moment of documentary, a train running into the inky blue of the night, evoking the oldest, most reassuring image of light from a hut in the distance observed by weary travellers. The journey to Hanover also repeats the pilgrimage to the great display centres of merchandise, which was first canonised in the Crystal Palace exhibition, of 1851, that not only inaugurates globalisation as a theme, but as shown in the photographs of Talbot Fox, binds and fastens the relation of photography to the industrial technical world of which it becomes an effective and template and record. There is also something in the diagonal point of the train which will cut across the developed image, it suggests movement into the unknown, and a phantom appearance, the journey itself is both phantasmagoria, a ghost of travel, and perfectly without topography.

The visitor arrives at twilight. Even in the fading light a photograph is captured of a forking tree against the evening sky. Its texture and bark is viewed closely, and the silhouette is heavy with its form. These first photographs have already seen what is later to appear in the work.

Schwartz has observed a natural element which looms in the shape of a large y-post like some tribal mark of belonging and genealogy, that creates a single stereometric forms against the blur of the receding space, and the formlessness of the darkened evening. It is precisely in those inky shapeless spaces that forms emerge, often unheimlich, and when added to the silence of a remnant forest, evokes an old fear of the murmur and rustle pitched against the silence of the self when alone and



without familiar pointers. The photographer risks invisibility in the very subject of his seeing. The pavilion will appear in a curious echo to mimic this most natural observation, and its stereometric forms, like large alphabets of shape, a's and h's, echoes uncannily something that in the independence of pavilion architecture was noted, namely the experiments with forms themselves, as commented on by Kaufmann in his 1933 *Von Ledoux bis Le Corbusier*, 'Experiments with forms themselves, count among the most astonishing initiatives of the epoch. The preference for the simplest stereometric configurations is indicative of the spirit of the age.'

The autonomous means of architecture become a speech of space, a simplified rhetoric of shape that can be seen as stereometric blocks, like the role of alphabet letters, which must join other to accomplish living re-presentation.

The documentary function of the photograph becomes arrested before this talking architecture, and the camera shows the deep resonance of a lurking silence that allows any speech to be heard. The pavilion gathers its space from its own interiors, and holds its relation in the photographs through the complex of what is viewed.

The anticipation of time, the actual forlorn sense of this independent work that is abandoned even from its context of display, restores another dialogue, but this time in three different directions. So the photographs capture and inflect both the speech of the building, in another medium, and point it towards its own potential as ruin and so a history. The photography becomes intricately involved in another kind of re-organisation. Where

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originally one can speak in pavilion architecture of a search for re-organisation both of the body of building and of even large complexes of building, breaking away from the central massing of the Baroque, or the absolute subservience of part to whole in the classical distribution of members, it is now in the re-organisation of seeing through the photographic image that the tragic underlying of the architectures spaces is effected. These pavilions become abandoned and their insistent isolation, at first an aesthetic insistence, now is their only destiny, but abandoned to their own destruction and decay, and animated in a moment of capture which allows no looking back. There is no Ruckblick for the photographer, not in the sense of evoking a lost world of meaning, or defiant symbolisation of the autonomy of architecture. Instead the organising of viewpoints, the oblique shots from difficult twisted positions, even from looking behind, orchestrate the inner historical decision of the autonomy, soaring off into disassociation, and diverse juxtapositions. So the photographs do not recite the pious steps of a pilgrim, providing hallowed image, or relics, rather enacts perspectives in which the pavilion gains in independence and isolation, to criss-cross a terrain that in its initial assertion of autonomy was at first considered to be a no-man's land; namely the relation to nature and natural forms.

It is the emotional communication of the stereometric which galvanises the same fear as the walk in the forest, where the fear of space and its own isolation meet. The looking back that is so much the nostalgia of the ruin which parallels the desire and longing to return, to reverse the



journey, is now a looking of the moment, in which the edges of night and appearance, the edges of the organic and in-organic are rendered in the visible of photography. This gesture belongs to the deep unconsciousness of the architecture, whose own organisation was an impulse to the future of revolution.

This also involved a loosening of the centre, a movement away from the social, and has been viewed by one critic, as the very decadence and death carried in the architecture itself. Ledoux's modernism spreads its claims of autonomy and utopia even here, and this is also the place which in the conservative critique of Hans Sedlmayr, which drives culture into an instinct of the museum, a gathering in a mausoleum, the inner catastrophe of the architectural, which is not simply its tensions as structure and load potentially reduced to oblivion.

The pavilion will be condemned to become a museum of itself. Its cultural inscription, already precludes its own ephemeral and fragmentary aims, its independence really an alienation and isolation of the loss of integrative communal and social myths, which cannot be filled by aesthetic values alone.

The independent punctuation of Schwartz's works now belongs to a more complex dialectic than simply recording the poignant theme of decay and loss, the crossing of substance and substance, different media, coalesce in a more layered imagery, where the ambition of the project, is also shown, and also its negations and denials, much more is gathered here than any plan could generate. The response to the products of the cultural industry also releases, as with the earliest industrial

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*"Believe in the ruins..." - Jamie Reid*



revolution, a desire for the picturesque, which is in the contemporary case a need to simplify the complex inter-visual of virtual image culture. It is as if a message is placed in a bottle and thrown to the waters, in some slight hope of being read somewhere. Only in the intense and precise seeing of the photographer is the potential blitz of image upon image, held in a place where something can be crystalised as energy and medium. The proliferation of images makes it almost impossible to see anything, and creates a numbing and increasing lack of feeling and capacity for differentiation, so that one must speak of blindness.

In this gift of seeing then the private realm is protected by a particular strategy. This goes also to the technique of the artist's work, where he makes available in discrete and insistent views the release of perspectives. The infrastructural elements of the space are shifted away from a single view-point, and the work involves complex bodily dispositions, thus one shot has a viewpoint of the photographer lying on the ground, and looking over his own shoulder. What is seen also opens up criteria that could never have been visible before, the appearance of a large piece of cloth unfurled in the air, not only dramatises fragile material against bulky structure, which provides a paradoxical bulwark for an ephemeral construction, but punctuates the image into surprise. It also underlines the conflicting aims of the pavilion, independent, ephemeral, and yet with its solid internal structures gesturing to a monumentality. It seeks unconsciously the preservation of its own trace, whatever the signature of time that will mark it.

The photographer side-steps that ambition, and shows through the fragile appearance of the dangling cloth, the delicate tissue of the event, which belongs only to the moment of its movement and manifestation. It actually erupts out of nothing. There is a pure interval where disclosure releases the specific marks of things. Instead of the problem of part and whole, exterior and interior, the traces suggest that even the tiniest punctuation of the visible is a whole, that it is always sheltered in its own finite appearance, it retains its power of evocation by returning the viewer to literally a profound release, that is a return to oneself, seeing and seen in a singular act. In this return, one can think of the dynamical sublime. There is a reminder of a phrase of Heine, that we do not comprehend ruins, until we become ruins ourselves. What veils things becomes revealing. The artist encounters the finite and proposes eternity. The journey of Schwartz has only begun.

Patrick Healy

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