

# RE: *This Thing Called Theory*

## Commentary

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### *Abstract*

Focusing on *This Thing Called Theory*, and last of a series of itinerant events and publications, the seminar ‘Double Crossing’ in which the author acted as respondent gathers five different points of view about the possibility of producing theory as an act of betrayal against a previous ‘thing’, be it a theoretical discourse or a fact. A theory does not simply construct something new but undertakes an aggression towards the ‘old’ in order to produce the ‘new’. Several suggestions come out about how such an overturning of architectural theory can be undertaken. Among these, different theoretical branches ranging from critical thinking to computational criticism are involved. In general, the seminar outlines two main tendencies or attitudes to portray theoretical betrayals in architecture: those who consider theory as a possibility of betraying intentions and others who intend betrayal as a continuous process of exit and re-entry from the domain of architecture.

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Last of a series of itinerant events and publications (Ponzo, G., Stoppani, T., Themistokleous, G., 2016), organized as a follow-up to the 2015 AHRA conference *This Thing Called Theory*, ‘Double crossing’ took place on May 30th at the Architectural Association in London as part of a PhD symposium, organized by Doreen Bernath (AA & Leeds Beckett University) and Teresa Stoppani (AHRA) with other four guest speakers: Mark Cousins (AA), Sergio Figueiredo (TU Eindhoven), Ivonne Santoyo Orozco (Iowa State University), Douglas Spencer (AA & University of Westminster), and two respondents: Will Orr (AA PhD programme) and me. This time, the relationship between architectural theory and practice was faced by focusing on those theoretical deviations, or invasions of field, in other disciplines and fields of knowledge that do not conventionally correspond with that of architecture though end up being embedded into architecture. The seminar unfolds from a specific theoretical hypothesis: theory and practice display a tormented sentimental relationship marked by unfaithfulness, untruthfulness, and a suspicious tendency to betray. This hypothesis finds direct continuity with several issues that emerged during previous meetings and that the reader might find well enucleated in Giorgio Ponzo’s article published on “Ardeth” #01 (2017). Among these, I’d like to shortly speculate about two crucial issues among those mentioned by Ponzo. First: the impossibility of defining the field of architectural theory as a ‘corpus’, such as a delimited basin of positions, nor as a canon or a meta-theory. Conversely, theory should be thought of as a way of ‘thinking about’ and ‘operating on’ architecture. Second: theoretical thinking obeys to rules that do not necessarily coincide with a specific practice but rather, and sometimes simultaneously, pertain to a multiplicity of productive domains, such as the school, the museum alongside the office. To these two issues, the last seminar suggests the introduction of a third stance: theory implies a transitive and transgressive behavior, it crosses spaces and disciplines by leaving lacerations, ruptures behind itself. Theory betrays.

### *On betrayal*

The issue of ‘betrayal’ was anticipated by Mark Cousins at the previous TTCT conference. Cousins states his thesis in quite an explicit way: the intellectual appears to ruin the good ideas of others who preceded him. So, if there is a purpose in theory, even though implicit, this is to betray what precedes: to betray that on which the discourse is, however inevitably, grounded. Theory always comes halfway to a previous theory though this previous one also works as legitimizing agent of the new one. An example: Louis Althusser and his epistemological ‘new wave’ of Marxism; presenting itself as upholder of the ‘true scientific Marx’, thus legitimizing itself as true Marx readers, Althusser’s theory does not even concern itself with over half of Marx’s ‘Capital’. From the relationship between Althusser and Marx, towards other disciplinary domains, such as the relationship between Derrida and the deconstructivist architects,

Cousins can well ironize... However, does he simply see in such relationship an act of banalization? Well, not only. Seemingly, for Cousins, it is not simply a matter of ignorance or superficiality but rather of intentional acts: calculated betrayals. If the contradiction is rooted in theory then all that remains to do is to take note of it: to practice betrayal as an act of faith. From here, Cousins' urgent warning to architecture theoreticians: would you please get philosophy off the back of architecture?

Drawing on Mark Cousins' arguments, I would like to distribute what follows on two fronts, two ways of stating theoretical betrayals. On the one hand, those that evoke a kind of 'betrayals of intentions' like Ivonne Santoyo-Orozco and Douglas Spencer, who adopt theory in order to attack values that lie ahead of architectural theory. On the other hand, others who like Sergio Figueiredo and Teresa Stoppani use betrayal as a sort of 'transfiguration of facts', namely a process they entirely bound within the domain of documents and drawings.

### *On liquids*

Ivonne Santoyo-Orozco believes that the so-called death of theory, or end of theory, is due to an ideological custom according to which theory would stand for a coherent corpus. To free itself from this doctrinal condition, which Santoyo-Orozco accuses – not too implicitly – of being ineffective, architectural theory should state its commitment to the present. Thus, it should turn from being seen as a 'thing' towards being acknowledged as a process, namely: "a process of interrogation of the present!". The reference goes to Foucault and his way of attributing to theory the role of critique of what we are instead of a critique of what architecture is supposed to be. This kind of rediscovery of theoretical commitment would imply a series of theoretical stances on the present rather than a coherent set of formal observations on architectural objects. Therefore, the task of the theorist would become that of making legible different tendencies and phenomena that cross one another, or rather: to portray 'intersectionality' as an attitude. Santoyo-Orozco adopts the metaphor of the liquid in order to propose this way of making theory as a container from which theoretical propositions can be contained or dispersed, contaminated, but never reduced to a solid corpus. Such metaphor of the liquid, also introduces an operative possibility for theory: to become a polluting agent.

### *On OOO*

Not a theorist of architecture but a critical theorist of architecture theorists (as he proudly defines himself), Douglas Spencer addresses the question of how, today, architectural theory is betrayed through Object-Oriented-Ontology (OOO). The starting point is Log issue 33 titled 'The object turn' and dedicated to OOO with contributions by Graham Harman, Tom Wiscombe and Mark Foster Gage, who Spencer considers as representative authors of a neoliberal 'false consciousness'. Spencer's

critique is dispensed with the best dialectical-materialism orthodoxy: though OOO believes it can disregard the subject it actually does nothing but confirm capitalist attitudes. Thesis: OOO is correlated to Capitalism. Spencer proposes three arguments to support it. First, OOO is a marketing device: it embodies the very old fetishist exaltation of the new or something that pretends to be the very new; as such it is a matter of architectural magazines rather than a matter of architecture. Secondly, OOO abolishes whatever hierarchy of values between human and non-human objects. Third, OOO tends to produce 'general equivalence' that is exactly how capitalism works. This happens precisely in the way in which OOO applies an indifferent "mystical allure" to both subjects and objects, which, by re-proposing an image of Simmel, Spencer sees legitimated by neoliberal theories to "float in the metropolis as generic goods".

### *On algorithms*

Sergio Figueiredo shifts the focus from the object of theory towards its more instrumental side, looking at how architectural exhibitions can change through the innovative implementation of big data technologies. In particular, he questions the possibilities offered by information technology in communicating data from different disciplines so that it is possible to establish fields of thematic coherence and coordinated operational techniques. More precisely, according to him: "we must appropriate the algorithms developed within the framework of data sciences". The main methodological reference is the book by Franco Moretti, 'Graphs, Maps, Trees: Abstract Models for a Literary History' (2007) according to which "literary scholars should stop reading books and start counting and mapping, thus replacing close reading with distant reading". Applied to the broader domain of knowledge production, and taking up the analytical model of Manfredo Tafuri, Figueiredo proposes to consider 'computational criticism' as a form of theoretical production based on remote reading of processes as an antidote to myopic analyses of singularities.

### *On erasure*

Teresa Stoppani discusses the issue of 'double crossing', by which she means the way in which theoretical elaboration requires a preliminary exit from the discipline followed by a re-entry in which the initial object of the elaboration is no longer the same: it is transfigured. The intentional act of 'going out' implies the partial removal of some of the qualities of the starting determination. Erasure and construction are two actions through which theory operates, calling into question both conventions (i.e. drawing symbols and graphic layouts, for instance) and critical categories. To support her thesis, Stoppani offers two examples. The first concerns the issue of 'typology' through the work of the artist Lieven De Boeck on Neufert's handbook 'Bauentwurfslehre' in which the editorial layout displays the unconscious relationship that stands among

three very different functional typologies such as ‘museums’, ‘churches’ and ‘cemeteries’. At stake is an act of betrayal of the figure itself. This act allows the figure to become newly productive by turning itself into a museum, for instance, whatever it was before. The second example concerns the very famous drawing by Aldo Rossi entitled ‘Architecture assassinée’, in which Rossi’s critical architecture meets the critical project of Manfredo Tafuri. Here the former seemingly responds to the latter by means of a drawing that does not represent an architectural fact, as it seems, but rather represents the critique to which the architectural fact is submitted. It reveals how Tafuri’s critique of architecture is already fully incorporated into Rossi’s criticism of the city, and vice versa.

A possibility for a theoretical discourse based on mistrust and discontinuity, with respect to previous theories or facts, is the overall attempt this seminar points to. As continuity is unproductive or, at the very least, subject to an inevitable betrayal of intentions or a partialization of its original meaning, it is better to consciously undertake discontinuity. In this sense, we, as architectural theorists, must no longer worry about inventing a new theory, but rather deciding who or what must be necessarily betrayed.

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