

PHILIP
JOHNSON.
THE
CONSTANCY
OF
CHANGE.



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Page x: Philip Johnson hidden behind door lintel

Page 13: Philip Johnson, Doghouse, 1998

Cover: Johnson in the Glass House, 1998. © Richard Schulman,
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Working Out Johnson's Role in History

Mark Jarzombek

In 1977, Peter Eisenman wrote a remarkably clear and insightful article on Johnson ending with the words, "Johnson's writings, like a glass box, have the transparency of our time. It will remain for history to reveal their opacity."¹ I would like to dedicate my thoughts to the theme of that opacity, given for the moment the presumption that that is where history locates itself. I do not, however, intend to get entangled in Johnson's frustrating cleverness, much less revel in his opacity, which can only bring out the usual trying fluctuations of admiration or disgust. I am interested in addressing the relationship between ego and architecture as something that goes beyond Johnson. Is there something historical in Johnson that lies outside the overproductions of his ego and its associated seductions? Is there a history of ego that is bigger than Johnson's? Is there something clear in all the opacity?

In answering these questions, I would like to state at the outset that I see Johnson as a figure in the crisis of the post-Enlightenment, as someone who operated in the service of that crisis, unbeknownst to him, however, operating because of the cunning of history, and not because of his own cunning. And it hinges, I admit, on a perhaps all-too-delicate illusion. One illusion, if you will, meeting the other, one opacity meeting the other. Johnson's claim that he was a "Mies *Schüler*" needs no confirmation, but it could be an entry point into a philosophical problem that needs to be further unpacked.² What *Schüler* means philosophically is explained by Immanuel Kant in his *Critique of Judgment*, where he describes that at the heart of a "school," in the sense of a "school of Rembrandt," was the genius who furnished the "rich material" that others need to think over, discuss, and emulate.³ According to Kant, "Because a genius is a favorite of nature and must be regarded by us as a rare phenomenon, his example produces for other good heads a school, i.e., a system of teaching according to rules."⁴ These rules, he argues, are not set in stone and should not be aped; nor should we appeal to mannerism in studying them. Kant links the work of the *Schüler* with another type of work, the work of the genius, namely *opus*. An *opus* is a series of works produced over time in the cycling of experience and cognition. An *opus*, in the Kantian sense, was more than just a compilation of one's artistic efforts, but something with *Schwerkewicht* that enabled those in the "school" to condense these efforts into rules that can be studied, imitated, and learned. *Opus* is thus a form of history, and in reverse, history finds itself in *opus*. As a diagram, one can think of being and history as intersecting circles with *opus* the overlapping region. *Opus* was opacity that lent itself over time to clarity, and here you can see why I picked out Eisenman's clever phrase.

On the surface Johnson's turn away from Mies was the turn away from being a Schüler, from someone living in the "reflected glory" of Mies, as he writes, to a person with an opus all his own, someone with his own opacity. We also have to remember that in 1959 Mies had a one-man show of his work here at Yale. We also have to remember Le Corbusier's *oeuvre complète* came out in the mid-1950s and that Le Corbusier clearly stood in the long line of artists and musicians who were self-consciously opus-makers, the first being Beethoven, who already two years after the publication of *Critique of Judgment* began to identify his compositions with opus numbers. Le Corbusier, one could say, brought the Kantian imperative directly into the midst of the modernist project.

Johnson was well aware of the *oeuvre complète* series and even wrote a review of it in 1953.⁵ But there are hints that things are not going to work out as planned. In the review, Johnson wrote: "After being known for thirty years as the leader of the international school of design, . . . [Le Corbusier] now in full vigor steps out into space sculpture, breathtaking and unanalyzable."⁶ This says little about Le Corbusier, a lot about Johnson. How do we analyze Johnson against the grain of the desire for unanalyzability?

Being unanalyzable is Johnson's pretension and Johnson's ultimate discovery. It is the semicolon in the flow of historical development. It coincides not only with a disengagement of modernism but also with a disengagement from the modernist self, and it comes from that date forward in the form of the self put-down. My work, he reiterated, is "frankly derivative" in many ways. This is, as we know, not because Johnson discovered humility. On the contrary, Johnson became the first architect of note to resist the Nietzschean imperative and in the process discover a fracture in the modernist edifice that allowed the insertion of a psychoanalytical presence. It is an opus unmoored from Enlightenment ego, becoming both wounded and self-wounding. The lack of differentiation with Mies slides into hyper-differentiation, resulting in a type of postmodernized Oedipalesque tragedy in which the erstwhile teacher-husband turns out to be a father figure, creating perhaps a Lacanian "false being" (Seminar XV), the product of a reflection that interlocks for ever more mature production and pathological reenactment. "You have to thumb your nose [at your father]," Johnson writes in 1960, "in order to exert your own poor little ego." For this reason, "My stand is violently anti-Miesian. I think that is the most natural thing in the world just as I am not really very fond of my father."⁷

One could read the Munson-Williams-Proctor Institute (1960) as an enactment of this radical undoing of Mies (fig. 1). Everything that was once elegant and transparent has become mute and tomblike, frozen over in spiteful granite. It is a memorial/antimemorial to Mies, a purposeful misreading as well as a representation of Oedipal self-disgust. It is clearly one of the most preeminent psychoanalytically marked buildings of the twentieth century, so complete in its articulations that it outranks even the work of Adolf Loos.

It is irrelevant, to my argument, whether there is psychoanalytical veritas to this. Apart from his relationship with Mies one could mention the death of Johnson's parents and changes in his love life, but it is not my role to determine the "realness" of this sign, its potential causes, pathologies, or diagnosis. What is just as "real" is the presence that Johnson makes for it in making architecture, as a trope of unanalyzability, which we can match not by analyzing it, not by explaining it

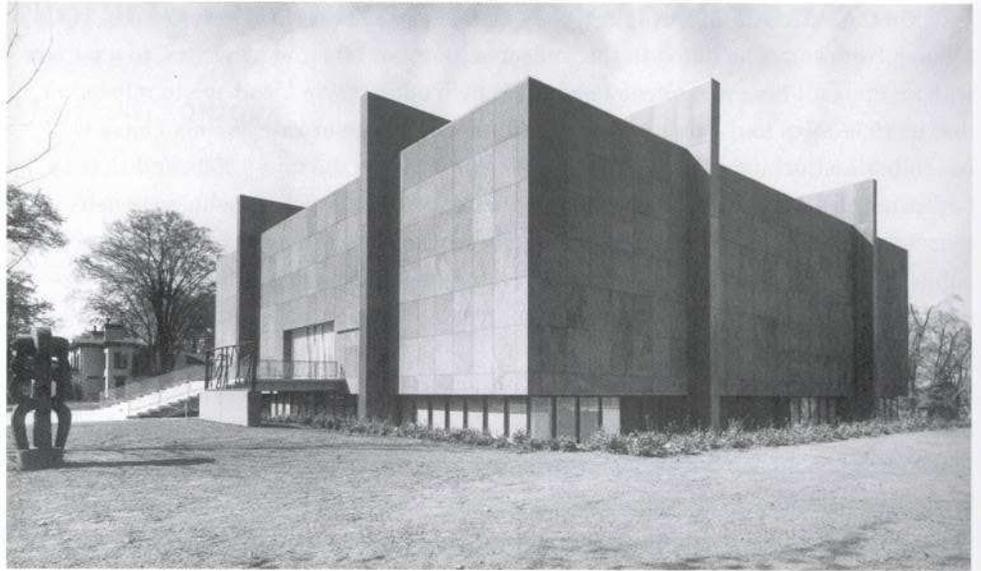


fig. 1 Philip Johnson Associates,
Munson-Williams-Proctor Arts
Institute, Museum of Art, Utica,
New York, 1960

away, but by accepting it as a sign that indicates the larger problem of architecture's missing signifier.

We thus find not the beginnings of a predictable opus, but a post-opus work, opus having been rendered impossible—except in the form of opus envy—by the eruption of a psychoanalytical subject. But if the special effect of *jouissance* has freed the subject from the strictures of the social code, freed it from the obligations of opacity, and destabilized the historical world, it has also magnified its tremblings. Johnson's work henceforth promises neither a discourse of progress nor one of modernist acceleration, nor can it rely on the conventions of eclecticism. His new particular historicism can be likened to a type of photographic overexposure to the historical referent, which means that we should refrain from trying to correct the exposure, to sharpen the image. We have to respect the contrived splitting of the I into Self and False Self.

For this "project" to work from a philosophical point of view—in other words, for it to be "not architecture"—and yet for all practical and sociopolitical reasons have the appearance of architecture, one more, essential, step was required. In order to produce something that was not opus but only its ghostly over-illumination, Johnson had also to renounce Arbeit, not any old Arbeit, but Arbeit as understood by Kant, who, in the *Critique of Judgment*, set up a contrast not only between the work of the genius and the work of the Schüler, but also between opus and Arbeit. Opus is elevated, whereas Arbeit is mercenary; the one yields a civilizational possibility, the other is a necessary, often unpleasant, reality. That the dialectics of work resides at the heart of all post-Enlightenment discourses of architecture, I would say Johnson somnambulistically understood as the historical cunning set before him. Thus the insistence from the mid-1960s on the casualness of design, on "FUN." In 1975, Johnson wrote: "John Burgee and I have had fun in the last few years with shapes and funnels, plazas, 'gozintas,' indoor streets, sloped sides and/or roofs."⁸ The interesting thing about both Arbeit and opus is that both are definitely *not* fun. Asked why he chose the Caprarola plan for a model of one of his houses, he answered "Why not?"⁹

Now this part of the equation brings us to the question of class. I am not talking about Johnson's wealth or his privileged position, and not even about his late-in-life seemingly "honest" admission about being part of what he called, oddly enough, the "elect."¹⁰ I am more interested in his insistent self-representation as a person who does not need to appear to work in the sense that what he produces is work *ohne Arbeit*. This is a quasi-aristocratic pretense—with resonances back in the baroque—that is better understood as a cultural trope more by Europeans than by Americans, and brought into modernism by the likes of Wassily Kandinsky, who painted while dressed in his coat and tails. This is not the same as amateurism; it is not the same as being a "gentleman architect," but something altogether more powerful and more devious, its edges leaking out in curious statements like "Architecture helps me fight the interminable boredom of bourgeois culture."¹¹ In a strange way, one could take one of Johnson's earliest designs, the 1949 "House for Millionaire with no Servants" as a type of leitmotiv for his later attitude. There are, of course, servants, but they are rendered invisible in a politics of economic segregation. Once again, this is not a question of economic privilege but a question about the ongoing crisis of *Arbeit*, especially as it applies to architecture in the modern world, and *Arbeit* that was abjected from the Enlightenment system, and that haunts architecture to its core, making it easy to redeem authenticity in the name of doing "no work." The resultant false consciousness exerts its pretense toward legitimacy by sublimating work into fantasy where the irrepressible curse of *Arbeit* reidentifies itself in the form of play, sexuality, and disguise.

We should not, however, miss the fact that Karl Marx made a whole philosophy out of redeeming the legitimacy of *Arbeit*, a discourse that was carried forth into the 1970s by Christopher Lasch in *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations*, published, relevantly, in 1978, at a time when theory of a leftist sort was attracting the interest of young architects. A Laschian-styled critique of Johnson would point out that our culture of diminished expectations would celebrate Johnson's open-endedness in order to legitimate and disguise the falsity inherent in its false liberalism.

As attached as I am to Lasch's position, I have to admit that there is something more complex here in the discussion of Johnson, for labor can also mean civilizational labor, as in the difference between, for example, Philip Johnson and Louis Kahn, and Philip Johnson and Peter Eisenman, where both Kahn and Eisenman also undo Kant, but by emphasizing the difficulty—laborious difficulty, I should add—of getting to a design. Johnson undoes Kant by turning the dial not to a fantastical excess of *Arbeit*, but to an excess of ease. But we have to remember that he had to work hard at reminding us at how easy it all is. Johnson's critics long ago pointed to the "facileness" of Johnson's work and to its purported stylishness, but they failed to understand that this facileness was more than just a cultural trope, but philosophically legitimate in the deconstructions of the Enlightenment, even if it is a distasteful symptom of false consciousness. It works, however, only if it is contrived so as to not land us back in the realm of opus. Johnson has to work hard at not working and thus delivers the undeliverable.

Let me give an example. In discussing the AT&T building in 1977 he writes that for the scale and human references of the base of the building he used Brunelleschi, but he added a question mark after the word, as in "Brunelleschi?" and surrounded

the word in parentheses. It is a punctum that expresses Johnson working to show the lack of effort.

The middle a shaft from the twenties (Raymond Hood?) and the top a broken pediment complete with cornice (late Roman?).

We see in this phraseology the very moment in which history is evoked in order to disappear, the very moment in which a discipline is acknowledged only to be transformed into semiotic play, the very moment in which intellectual work confronts the crisis of civilizational Arbeit. Johnson gives us the three question marks to make sure that we get the picture and to tease unsuspecting readers into thinking that the humanist subject has been retrieved, when in actuality it is being stripped of relevance. One could almost say that the work of architecture requires a type of *Überarbeit*.

My point is not a negative one, however. Johnson has accomplished something quite startling. In the name of architecture, almost everything that one would think important to its disciplinary formation, namely Being, History, along with Opus and Arbeit, is expelled in the name of architecture's survival. Being has been replaced by False Being, and History by Historicism; Opus and Arbeit are excluded from the site of production. Their dialectic has, in essence, been deconstructed.

As I tried to stress, Johnson's poison has its own chemical makeup and its own corrosive force, its own "science," if you will, its own consistency. It is not, one can say, meaningless and trivial, but a regime like any other, purposefully unrequited, saturated with relations to power, structuring the effects of pleasure, and generating an endless supply of possibilities—human relationships included—to disguise its profoundly constricted reflections. For this reason it fitted all too well with the corporate world of the 1970s; for this reason, intuited more than expressed, many younger architects in the 1970s found no inspiration in Johnson. For them he was the deadened afterlife of the implosion of modernism, floating weightlessly through time.

I am, however, trying to redeem a value in this by inverting the inversion and arguing, to say it bluntly, that architecture is wedded—even now, in a sad but true way—to the traumatic dislocation of work in the Enlightenment brought on by the splitting of Being from non-Being and opus from Arbeit. It needed the right man at the right time.

And so we stand before the uncertainty of what his architecture actually is. Once detached from philosophical representation, and then reattached by way of compensation to the reality of its failure, Johnson seems to show that architecture can exist only as a reflection against that which it thinks it is. All of this challenges the way we write Johnson into architectural history; his architecture evokes a possibility of history, but of what type of history we are not sure, except that it is decidedly impossible. My interest in these remarks is to state that architecture can never escape from the negativity that gave it the set of disciplinary rules by which it came to have its history. Johnson allows us to reestablish contact with the primacy of that negative history, which, having been detached from philosophy's higher aims, floats awkwardly away through modernist time, never measuring up and never wanting to measure up, never truly alive and yet not quite dead, either. It is in this context that we should seek Johnson, both as a theory and, just as important, as a practice of architecture.

Notes

1. Peter Eisenman, "Behind the Mirror: On the Writings of Philip Johnson," *Oppositions* 10 (1977): 12.
2. Philip Johnson, *Philip Johnson: Writings*, foreword by Vincent Scully, introduction by Peter Eisenman, commentary by Robert A. M. Stern (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 171.
3. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. J. H. Bernard (New York: Hafer, 1951), 152.
4. *Ibid.*, 162.
5. Johnson, "Correct and Magnificent Play," Review of *Le Corbusier, Complete Works V. 1946-1952*, ed. W. Boesiger; from *Art News* 52 (September 1953): 16-17, 52-53.
6. *Philip Johnson*, 201.
7. Johnson, Speech, Yale University, February 5, 1959, in *ibid.*, 227.
8. Johnson, "What Makes Me Tick," Lecture, Columbia University, September 24, 1975, in *ibid.*, 265.
9. Stover Jenkins and David Mohney, *The Houses of Philip Johnson* (New York: Abbeville, 2001), 175.
10. Johnson, "A Conversation Around the Avant-Garde," in Robert E. Somol, ed., *Autonomy and Ideology* (New York: Monacelli, 1997), 45.
11. *Ibid.*, 46.