Avant-Garde & Architecture:  
Aldo van Eyck’s Playgrounds (1949-55) vs. The Smithsons’ Golden Lane Grid (1953)”

As you may have read in the abstract I departed from Lathouri’s questions on the city & space to the realm of art “What is it, then, that we are trying to name with the term city? “ is followed by: Would it be possible to think about the architecture of a city as a work of art? and: It is still possible today to talk about architecture as an art?

“The objective of architecture is works of art that are lived in. The city is the largest, and at present the worst of such works of art”
A & P Smithson 23.11.1964 “Typescript: “The Ordinary and the Banal” 1

“…The wonderful thing about architecture is that it’s an art – just that. The terrible thing about architects today is that they’re not artists. Worse, they’re semi-artists comfortably engaged in something super. But architecture, I tell you, is neither a semi or a super art – it’s an art.”
Aldo van Eyck, “The Child, the City and the Artist” 19622

Now the key question is to understand what they meant with the word “art”, and why did they think about architecture in those terms. I would answer both questions with the same argument: they were thinking about the definition of art given by the avant-garde movements of the early Twentieth century according to which architecture was a form of art, together with painting, sculpture and poetry, etc

Van Eyck & the Smithsons wrote these statements in the early 1960s. From 1947 to 1960 the criticism drafted by Aldo van Eyck & A&P Smithson to the rationalistic tendency of the late CIAM unveiled the fact that the artistic principles that grounded the Modern Movement were falling into oblivion.

Facing the overwhelming task of the European reconstruction, the CIAM architects were having difficulties defining the role of art in architecture. The mainstream of CIAM was considering only the satisfaction of the material needs, relying exclusively in analytical thinking and technical means to do so. From CIAM 6 (1947) to CIAM 9 (1953), Aldo van Eyck and the Smithsons criticized the approach of CIAM for overlooking the emotional aspects of the reconstruction. If architects focused exclusively in analytical thinking to solve the material aspects, overlooking the irrational nature of human behavior, cities would become inhuman. CIAM was obliterating the fact that modern art had grounded the Modern Movement in architecture, and made architects aware of the limitations of rational thinking in architectural design. Van Eyck’s and Smithsons’ understanding of the role of art and aesthetics made them aware of the limitations of a rationalistic approach in architecture. They shared a vision of modern architecture grounded in art; according to which, architecture should rely in technical and artistic means in order to fulfill

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1 See Claude Lichtenstein & Thomas Schregenberger Eds. “As Found: The discovery of the ordinary”. P-141
2 From Strauven, Francis and Vincent Ligtelijn eds. The child, the city and the artist: an essay on architecture : the in-between realm / Aldo van Eyck. Amsterdam: SUN, cop. 2008. p-58
both, material and emotional needs - two complementary aspects mixed in everyday life. The artistic principles that grounded Van Eyck’s and Smithsons’ conception of architecture can be traced back to the emergence of modern art: from Dadaism to ‘Art Brut’. They were present in their early work: from the exhibitions designs for Cobra and the Independent Group, to their projects on the city such as the Van Eyck’s playgrounds or the Smithson’s Golden Lane grid. Art nourished their work in terms of perception and design: The artists’ perception brought them to consider more the emotional aspects of human behavior and to consider architecture’s potential to give room to such behaviors. In order to do so they integrated the irrational means used by artists, such as sensual knowledge, imagination and intuition, in their design process in such a way that allow them to conceive the architectural space in complete new terms and to define architecture as the materialization of human relations (Van Eyck) or associations (Smithsons). Nowadays it is more or less accepted that they produced a small but significant effort to overcome the stagnation into which Modern Architecture had succumbed. They were able to do so because they re-conceived architecture as a pure form of art. The main argument of the modern movement: the conception of modern architecture as an avant-garde form.

After this Introduction I will present some aesthetic concepts that determined the notion of art –of Modern Art that Van Eyck & the Smithsons had in mind. While presenting the projects I will introduce together with them four notions of form that I consider formative means in architecture: FORM conceived in terms of OBJECT…which I wont discuss too much since its common conception:

FORM conceived in terms of PROCESS – Smithsons GOLDEN LANE GRID (1953)
FORM conceived in terms of LOGIC, Van Eyck’s Playgrounds (1947-55)
And FORM as EPISTEME

While doing so I’ll introduce elements-devices from avant-garde art present in the architects design: Enstrangement, Imagination & intuition, New Consciousness, and The Elementary

0. ART: A DEFINITION

When the Smithsons & Van Eyck talked about architecture as an art they were talking about a notion of Modern Art that emerged in the early Twentieth Century strongly determined by the definition of Art provided by the Art Historians of the Vienna school of thought in art history - Alöis Riegl and his followers; I will point out three aesthetic concepts important for the emergence of Modern Art and present in Van Eyck & the Smithsons

1. Alöis Riegl seminal concept of Kunstwollen and his analysis of art in terms of purpose
2. Wölfflin main thesis « Principles of Art History » (1915) according to which changes in the form of beholding produced paradigmatic shifts in artistic production
3. Willhem Worringer whose thesis Abstraction & Empathy (1907) developed a definition of abstract art that resulted very influential in the development of Modern Art.

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4 Kunstgeschichtliche Grundbegriffe (Munich, 1915). The main ideas of this work were also present in Wölfflin’s Renaissance und Barock (Munich, …)
Riegl had influenced architects like Gropius and Peter Behrens. Worringer’s thesis became popular thanks to artists like Kandinsky. Van Eyck came to know about the Vienna school ideas through Sigfried Giedion’s wife C.W. Giedion; both had studied under Worringer in Bonn and Sigfried had developed his thesis under Wölfflin.

The Smithsons did not get into a deep study of history but their fellow members of the Independent Group did it-like Reyner Banham- who had been educated in the lineage of the Vienna School. Banham developed his PhD “Theory & Design in the First Machine Age” under Nicolaus Pevsner who, like the Giedion’s, had studied under Wölfflin in Munich. …and of course Wittkover!!!!

Derived from post-Kantian philosophy, from Schopenhauer and Nietszche to K. Fiedler & Hildebrant the Vienna School enlarged the study of art in terms of functions to an analysis in terms of purpose: a reaction against the followers of Gotfried Semper whose materialist conception of Art History had reduced it to a mere analysis of functions, materials, and techniques. Art was historized not only according to a materialist notion of function, but also through very specific terms that theorized conceptual and decorative purposes according to pleasure, desire and beliefs.

Riegl conceived and analyzed art as a product of the « artistic volition » (Kunstwollen) that driven an individual or a society to manipulate nature according to a specific purpose.

«...in every period there is only one orientation of the kunstwollen governing all four types of plastic art in the same measure, turning to its own ends every conceivable practical purpose and raw material»

A concept that identified and merged: desire, pleasure and knowledge (thinking) as a way to understand the world, to picture the world

« The plastic kunstwollen regulates man’s relationship to the sensorily perceptible appearance of things. Art expresses the way man wants to see things shaped or colored, just as the poetic Kunstwollen expresses the way man wants to imagine them. Man is not only a passive, sensorily recipient being, but also a desiring, active being who wishes to interpret the world in such a way...that it most clearly and obligingly meets his desires... the character of this will is contained in that which we call the worldview »

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10 See explanation of Late Roman Art kunstwollen in relation to Sant Augustine’s philisophy, C. Wood ed. P-95
Analyzing Purpose as one of the elements of the work of art he differentiated decorative & practical purposes that satisfied bodily functions & conceptual purpose that satisfied Spiritual-intellectual needs. Nevertheless he never subordinated art entirely to the spirit and always considered the practical purposes, and the techniques that governed the artistic production. A definition of art as a contest with nature in these terms had two main implications:

First, true art was never conceived as a replication of nature but a form of thought\textsuperscript{11}: « the creation of art can never be- and does not seek to be- a direct imitation of nature but rather is a contest with nature; that is, it aims for a certain idea or conception of nature. In art, man re-creates nature as he would like it to be and as it indeed exists in his mind »\textsuperscript{12}

THERE IS A NOTION OF SPACE!!!

Second, art was always bounded to models of organic or inorganic nature: « man cannot transcend nature and world, because he is an integral component of both »\textsuperscript{13} In 1909 Worringer’s thesis departed from these ideas and developed Riegl’s analysis of organic & inorganic motifs into an analysis of art as a product of empathy (organic) or Abstraction (Inorganic). A empathic relation with nature produced Naturalist art; but the inner wrest inspired in man by the phenomena of outside world, would produce an “urge to abstraction”-to redeem the individual object from the outer world to render it absolute. The result would be Style in art, pure abstraction as the only possibility of repose within the confusion of the world. Following Riegl’s argument Worrringer concluded that this was the primary impulse in art

Abstraction was the primitive impulse “before cognition”, before men developed ways of understanding nature and the most elevated impulse “above cognition”. In the very early stages was driven by instinct and in the more evolved stages of civilization was a form of understanding,

Worringer’s ends his thesis by pointing at the higher capacity of scientific knowledge to provide the feeling of assurance that transcendental art had provided before, from the Renaissance onwards, understanding broke away from instinct and trusted merely to itself “Science emerged, and transcendental art lost ground. For the world picture set out by science… now offered man who put his faith in the cognitive capacity of the understanding the same feeling of assurance that the transcendentally predisposed man had reached” with abstract art.\textsuperscript{14}

But the war came and the faith putted by western civilization in the world-picture set out by science, together with its idea of progress felt into a big crisis

Modern art movements gave form to abstract art.

\textsuperscript{13} Alois Riegl, Historical Grammar of the Visual Arts. p-298
\textsuperscript{14} See Worringer P-134. It follows “The old art had been a joyless impulse to self-preservation; now, after this transcendental volition had been taken over and calmed by the scientific striving after knowledge, the realm of art seceded from the realm of science. And the new art, which now springs to life, is Classical art. Its colouring is no longer joyless like the old. For it has become a luxury activity of the psyche, an activation of previously inhibited inner energies, freed from all compulsion and purpose, and the bestower of happiness. Its delight is no longer the rigid regularity of the abstract, but the mild harmony of the organic being” p-135
The world-picture set out by Modern Science grounded in rational-logic was complemented with a world picture set out by abstract art grounded in what I would call intuitive transcendental logic: a new notion of Space, a new notion of Form.

The notion of art-conceived as a natural product of man in a contest with nature—was illustrated in Merz’s issue 8/9 (1924) entitled « Nasci » (Nature in Latin). Launched by the Hannover dadaist Kurt Schwitters, together with the constructivist artists Lissitzky, included paintings, sculptures, and architecture from different artistic movements: Neoplasticism, cubism, dadaism, suprematism, etc. Schwitters depicted Malevitch’s black square: “Nature doesn’t seek for eternal beauty, by continuously changing its forms it gives birth constantly anew the creation. The Modern World is the other half of nature, the one that comes out of men.”

As for Riegl, for the Merz artists’, art was not a matter of beauty but an evolving contest with nature. Like Arp who exerted great influence on Van Eyck and defined abstract art as « a fruit growing out of man like the fruit out of a plant » who does not resemble anything. For the De Stijl, Dada, and Constructivist artists, architecture should not only be an answer to the more tangible functions but a manifestation of how man relates to nature. Riegl had defined Art as a contest with nature whose main purpose was not just the satisfaction of practical needs, but a way to picture the world man’s relation with nature. Van Eyck’s revolt at CIAM 6 (1947) reminded the importance of conceptual purposes in architecture: « Although architecture answers more tangible functions, its ultimate function differs in no way from that of painting and sculpture, nor from poetry, music and religion; its object is to reveal the grace of nature through and for men.”

During the Doorn Meetings 1954 Van Eyck and the Smithsons conceived Architecture as the materialization of human relations-associations, the city as a material form out of man’s relation-contest with the environment-nature. If Riegl had analyzed the bodily and conceptual purposes in art, Van Eyck & the Smithsons noticed that architecture should satisfy the bodily functions and also the spiritual needs of the reconstruction. Architecture was a form of art as painting or sculpture in so far as it had the capacity to be transcendental. In the diagram an arrow links 1947 with the early avant-gardes: cubism, dada…Trying to overcome the urbanism of the 4 functions, and architectural form as a matter of function the architects unveiled the fact that “Lack of relationship between man & things ask for FORMS stimulating man’s spiritual growth…FORM STIMULATES RELATIONSHIP”

1. FORM & OBJECT
If we conceive Form merely in terms of object we might feel satisfied with Riegl’s simplistic definition of it: “All things in nature posses form; that is extend themselves in the three dimensions of height, width, and depth”

15 Footnote to Malevitch’s Black square in Merz nº8 /9 ed. by K. Schwitters & Lissitzky (1924)
16 by Hans Arp
17 See Aldo van Eyck, “Report concerning the interrelation of the plastic arts and the importance of cooperation” written in Dutch and English by van Eyck for CIAM 6, Bridgwater 1947. It was not published but printed copies were sent to Sigfried Giedion and distributed among CIAM members. From Francis Strauven and Vincent Ligtelijn eds. Collected articles and other writings 1947-1998 / Aldo van Eyck. Amsterdam: SUN, c2008. p.34
In architectural terms such a narrow minded notion of form brought to Louis Sullivan’s empty jingle “form follows function”. As simplistic as if we unveil the resemblance between Van Eyck’s plan of a Playground a Mondrian’s Composition

2. FORM & PROCESS

But we ay conceive FORM as a result of PROCESS like the Dadaist use of chance or paul klee’s exploration of his “own uncorrupted imagery” that brought him to a return to “devices of pre-logical expression” that are created by us and not inherited…

In order to do so, the subject himself, the artist, must also perform the process of enstrangement of oneself in the creative process, like Hugo Ball did in the reading of Karawane poem. The device of enstrangement in modern art evolved from the enstrangement of the object in the Dadaist ready-made to the enstrangement of the subject in the surrealist drift and found-object, or the enstrangement of oneself that brought Dubuffet to draw like a kid or a fool...A process that PAolozzi and Henderson came to know personally from Giacometti and Duchamp repsectively. Paolozzi was very much inspired by Giacometti and attracted by his personality when he came to met him at his studio in paris. Henderson owned one of Duchamp's Green Box, containing notes for the painting of the bride with statements like “To put aside is an operation”. The Dadaist collage enstranged objects of the every-day life in Shklovsky terms: “By enstranging objects…the device of art makes perception long and “laborious”. The perceptual process in art has a purpose all its own and ought to be extended to the fullest. Art is a means of experiencing the process of creativity. The artifact itself is quite unimportant”

Something Henderson, Paolozzi & the Smithsons experienced in the design for the PARALLEL OF LIFE & Art (ICA 1953). Among the books that had special impact on the artists: D’Arcy Thomson’s “On Growth & Form”, Gyorgi Kepe’s Language of vision (1944), and L. Moholy-Nagy’s Vision in Motion (1947) defined as: “…Simultaneous grasp is creative performance- seeing, feeling, and thinking in relationship and not as a series of isolated phenomena. It instantaneously integrates and transmutes single elements into a coherent whole”

The exhibit challenged the viewer’s relation to the images spatially but also conceptually: First because it created a sort of Malraux’s imaginary museum in which the photograph is shown instead of the original for it has the same visual-value, questioning the value of the image as a work of art and its function in society. Wölflin had argued that changes in the nature of artistic vision - in the way of beholding- determined stylistic changes. Such an argument was used by Banham in relation to this exhibition in order to define New Brutalism. But more important: the artist departed from principles of modern aesthetics and re-interpreted the Surrealist’s exhibitions performing a dadaist three-dimensional collage using the device of enstrangement, establishing visual relations between the forms of nature and the forms created by man without providing any logical argument (very Dadaist)

It could be said that the Smithson’s witnessed the definition of art given by the artists of the IG not as a mere production of objects, but as the establishment of relations between the objects (IMAGES) and the real World.

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Visiting the poor neighbourhoods of Bethnal Green the Smithson found the kids playing in the street and re-discovered the street. They saw kids playing/drawing on the street and Paolozzi child-like drawings that brought them to draw like kids over the existing fabric of the city an endless building and their vision of the city. The Smithsons’ understanding of art in terms of an intuitive logic that establishes relations brought them to explore the idea of the “found object”, the kids playing in the street brought them to rediscover the street. The “As found” element of the city that was considered in relation to the other elements of the city: house, street, district, city. They thought about the architecture of the city as the materialization of the relations between these elements in terms of human associations, instead of the city as a gathering of monuments. As Mondrian said “The culture of particular forms is approaching its end, the culture of determined relations has begun” this was Van Eyck’s favorite quote of Mondrian

There were no objects to look at in Mondrian paintings, the relations established between “elementary expressional means” were the form, the thing to look at – not the solid, but also the void, the relation between solid & void for they were one and the same thing – Hence the “house – street – relationship” conceived by the Smithsons as a solid-void relationship was extended to the formation of the city “house – street – district – city”. It could be simply argued that after a nice walk with Nigel Henderson around Bethnal Green the “architects discovered the value of the street”. But the most important thing to say is that they saw it because they already had in mind a deep notion of form, rich and complex in its simplicity:

“...Why is it we cannot find for each place the form of our generation?...a form must be found for the house which is capable of being put together with others of a similar sort so as to form bigger and equally comprehensible elements which can be added to existing villages and towns in such a way as to revitalize the traditional hierarchies and not destroy them. The relationship of the country and the town, the bank and the house, the school and the pub, is conveyed by the form they take. Form is an active force, it creates the community, it is life itself made manifest...”19 Urban Re-identification 1955

Indeed a comparison with Le Corbusier’s Unite unveils how the Smithsons Golden Lane is not an isolated object, but establishes a relation with the existing fabric of the city. The street inside of L’Unite is brought outside and has enough width to be called a street placed not to high in order to establish a relation with the traditional street

3. FORM & LOGIC

Van Eyck understood that a true Neoplasticist architecture was not a matter of emulating OBJECTS such as the figures and shapes of Mondrian paintings. Van Eyck used Van Doesburg’s “counter-compositions” drawings in his Otterlo Circles (CIAM 1959) not to illustrate a specific “modern project” in fact it was a representation of a “formless” architecture. Van Doesburg’s and Van Eesteren’s manifesto Towards a plastic architecture (1924) had as a first

19 See A & P Smithson “The Built World: Urban re-identification” published in Architectural Design June 1955, p-185. All the quotes from the Smithsons are from this text; I refer mainly to this text for it was the earliest and most complete depiction of the project. See also a later though interesting text on the project in Uppercase 3 : [Alison & Peter Smithson] / designed & edited by Theo Crosby. London : Whitefriars, [1959]
purpose to eliminate “all concept of form in the sense of a fixed type”. Form was conceived not just in terms of “object” but as a “logic” derived from the perception of space-time relationships. All the aspects outlined in the manifesto pointed out a perception of space as a continuous solid-void:

“5…space is strictly divided into rectangular surfaces…the surfaces have a direct connexion with infinite space”, “6…the concept of monumental independent of large and small…everything exists on the basis of interrelationships”, “7…the elements that architecture consists of (surface, line and mass) are placed without constrain in a three-dimensional relationship”, “8… away with the separation of inside and outside…open ground-plan…”. “9. The new architecture is open…the two-dimensional spatial composition fixed in a ground-plan will be replaced…Euclidean mathematics will be of no further use…”

Van Eyck understood deeply modern art as a transcendental intuitive logic. He was aware of the criticism to the rationalistic approach drafed by art. Such a criticism was performed by Van Doesburg’s idea of merging Dadaists and the Constructivists that rejected the idea of pure utilitarian purpose in art. Van doesburg gathered at the doors of the Bauhaus Tzara, Schwitters, Moholy-Nagy, Lissitzky, arp, and Van Eesteren to warn Gropius about the limitations of a mere rationalistic approach in architectural education

It was Van Eesteren, who in 1947 recruited the young Van Eyck for the Dutch group at CIAM 6. Where his criticism to the rationalistic tendency of the late CIAM unveiled the fact that the artistic principles that grounded the architecture of the Modern Movement were falling into oblivion

“The old struggle between imagination and common sense ended tragically in favor of the later…Imagination remains the only common denominator of man and nature. The prime detector of change…”

Referring to the work of Brancusi, Klee or Mondrian Van Eyck “a new consciousness is already transforming man’s mind…they have turned our senses to a new dimension…CIAM is first and foremost an affirmation of this new consciousness…one in which grace is expressed in life as it is in art”

LE CORBUSIER “Finally the imagination among the CIAM!”

At that time Van Eyck enjoyed the Dadaist spirit of revolt his COBRA friends, their fight against conventions, their praise of primitive and popular art of communist inspiration and art-brut aura; and the experimentation with devices of “pre-logical” expression in childlike drawings, while he analyzed child behavior for the design of the playgrounds. Van Eyck understood the logic of abstract art so well that he was able to materialize it in some of his projects, the playgrounds and the orphanage. A logic whose final stage was what he called the ELEMENTARY, when the object produced approaches the real sense of things…A common goal for all the Arts

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20 Towards a plastic architecture Theo van Doesburg (1924) from Ulrich Conrads, Programs and manifestos from 20th century architecture. MIT pres, Cambridge, Mass. 1971. p-78-80. See also the text Vers une Construction collective from Van Doesburg and Van Eesteren (Paris 1923). First published in De Stijl n° 6-7, 6th year (serie XII, 1924)
A clear example of it was his design for the playgrounds from 1949. Departing from a close understanding of kids behavior, playing, Van Eyck developed a series of forms, of archetypes, that he happened to find in his trip to Sahara in 1951. According to Brancusi abstract art arrived at the elementary by approaching the real sense of things. Van eyck argued that architecture should approach to the real sense of things; architecture would reach elementary forms if it looked after the elementary in terms of behavior. He worked with the elementary in terms of behavior and reached archetypes that were elementary in terms of its primitive-geometric forms. As he had learned from Arp’s and Brancusi’s work, Van Eyck developed iterations of the same forms, the same archetypes-abstract forms. He organized them in every site according to what I would call a logic of determined relations. The object itself is quite unimportant, what is important is the relation, horizontal vertical, color-proportion, etc. He placed a main first element adapted to the specific conditions of the site, usually the sand-pit, and according to it he placed the next element, and so on, no linear logic can be found in the design of the hundreds of playgrounds. A logic of determined relations that like Brancusi’s carving and polishing of the stones lasted for years. How come Brancusi spent 10 years to finish a sculpture? Certainly because not just SPACE but the notion of TIME is different he developed his own INTERNAL TIME CONSCIOUSNESS…

Van Eyck met personally Brancusi’s friend the Dadaist Tzara claimed that Dada was not a modern school, Dada said yes equals no, past equals future, negating evolution or change. Van Eyck argued that the Parthenon is not a thing from the past it co-exists with us, together with vernacular & modern architecture. Van Eyck used the same logic of determined relations to materialize the rich variety of kids’ elementary behavior, the kids that lived in the Orphanage. The elementary forms are placed according to a logic of determined relations departing from the patios related with the play areas, the play areas related with the learning areas, and so on…Van Eyck drafted a beautiful analysis of contemporary cities in terms of behavior, Forum’s issue nº10 devoted to Night & Day illustrated the elementary common behavior of citizens from villages and metropolis according to nature, the city was conceived as the ultimate manifestation of man’s contest with nature, in some way, at least potentially, a work of Art

**FORM & EPISTEME**

The misinterpretation of the principles of the Modern Movement, the superficial emulation of Abstract painting/sculpture brought architects to reduce the notion of architectural space to the negative of the volume; time was conceived linearly regardless the discovery of relativity with a blind fascination in technological progress, form was a narrow minded consequence of function. Van Eyck & the Smithsons talked about architectural space in terms of place, instead of space/place instead of linear time saying the Parthenon and the vernacular is past we want future, Van Eyck & the Smithsons praised the every-day life, present where all: classical, vernacular, modern co-exist. In fact Modernity itself had always criticized any rationalistic tendency, that is how Humanism was born:
“the conviction of the dignity of man based on both, the insistence on human values (rationality & freedom) and the acceptance of human limitations (fallibility and fraility) from this two postulates resulting responsibility and tolerance”

Abstract art, transcendental art, approached man to the real sense of things fulfilling man’s emotional needs. Therefore if architecture operated under the same logic the object that it would produce would have the same attributes. This induction grounded Van Eyck’s & Smithsons’ notion of the relation art & Architecture. But I find it a relatively inconsistent induction. From the fact that A (logic) produces B (painting) that produces C (spiritual relief) in a determined condition-artistic production of painting or sculpture- we cannot infer that A (logic) produces B’( architecture) that produces C (spiritual relief) in a very different condition which is the production of architecture. Riegl’s statement that visual arts had practical, decorative and conceptual purposes, together with Worringer’s definition of abstraction in history provided the intellectual background to the emergence of Modern abstract art as a transcendental intuitive logic, and the philosophical background to the criticism of functionalist architecture- for it only considered the satisfaction of practical needs. If architecture had to be considered a form of art, the satisfaction of practical, decorative and conceptual purposes had to be considered as much as the satisfaction of the material needs.

Nowadays it is more or less accepted that Van Eyck & the Smithsons produced a small but significant effort to overcome the stagnation into which Modern Architecture had succumbed. I would argue that they were able to produce this step forward because they redefined architecture’s own LOGIC as an art in itself – thinking about FORM in terms of LOGIC. They were able to come up with new ideas, to design projects, and buildings because they re-conceived architecture as a form of art according to the definition given by Modern Artists: a transcendental intuitive logic that had the capacity to satisfy conceptual & bodily needs merging rational & non-rational means.

But they did not challenge the definition of Modern art as a transcendental intuitive logic provided by modern painting or sculpture. They took it for granted. Van Eyck & the Smithsons redefine architecture’s own logic according to an artistic logic mainly determined by modern painting and sculpture. But did not conceive the architectural form in epistemological terms, saying its architecture’s own logic that is going to define now what art is. And such a definition might be shared adopted by other arts. Architecture would be a true avant-garde in so far as it is able to re-define itself as a form of art. In fact artists like Duchamp started to consider this notion outdated when he witnessed how modern art like later on modern architecture was reproduced for mass consumption and turned into a commodity. He stopped painting leaving the bride unfinished in 1923, and devoted secretly to build his last masterpiece in his apartment in New York from 1946 to 1966. Departing from his ideas a new definition of art was born materialized in nor sculptural neither architectural terms by Neo-avant-garde artists such as Robert Morris, Robert Rauschenberg and John Cage

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21 E. Panofsky “The history of art as humanistic discipline” 1939-40
Art was turned into a commodity. Indeed, intellectuals like Benjamin had warned us how “Mechanical reproduction of art changes the reaction of the masses toward art.” The definition of art was changing. Transcendental art was being turned into a commodity as Adorno and Horkheimer denounced in their book Dialectic of Enlightenment, 1947: “Today works of art, suitable packaged like political slogans, are pressed on a reluctant public at reduced prices by the culture industry; they are opened up for popular enjoyment like parks.”