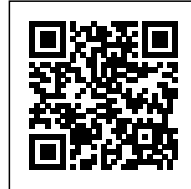


Mute Icons: Concept

Marcelo Spina &
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MUTE ICONS: CONCEPT

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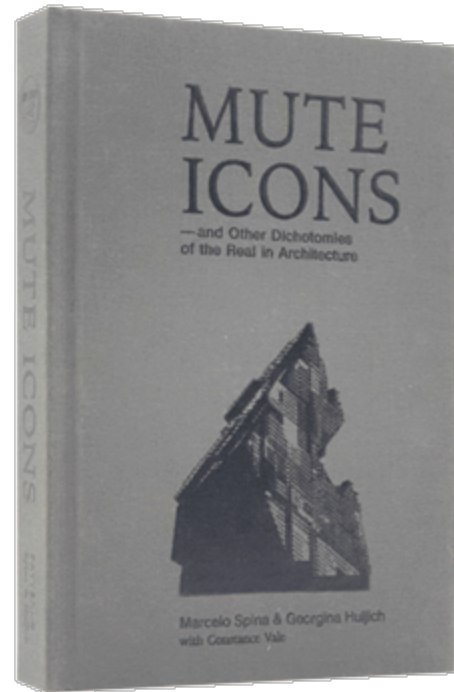
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Mute Icons is, at its core, a book that interrogates images: historical, contemporary, and — more importantly — speculative. This examination concentrates on the increasingly dichotomic state of architectural practice, discourse, and contemporary culture at large. Through the analysis of images that exist and some that we propose, we aim to develop a language and a sensibility for discovering simultaneous, contradictory, and even unexpected readings of images in architecture.

An Argument for the Mute Icon

The term mute icon is, in itself, a dichotomy: mute, referring to the inability to speak, express, or represent, and icon as a sign, symbol, or representation that speaks clearly. The mute icon neither deftly communicates, nor is it wholly inhibited and silenced. Mute Icons operates and finds significance within this dialectic. As architects, we have become accustomed to iconicity through various formal tropes and imageable features, many of which are now pervasive in our culture. This book offers an attempt to identify a progressive reaction to collective, established expectations of icons. Arguing for a redefinition of the project of the icon and therefore the image in architecture, Mute Icons aims to construct a viable alternative to the icon's simple cliché and exhausted form of communication, positing one that is decidedly introverted and withdrawn.

Furthermore, it aims to carve out a niche in contemporary culture and history by suggesting that architecture, far from being a crowdpleaser, can persist within society as a cultural and social irritant that can engender critical thinking via the multiple indeterminate readings of its image.

Placing so much emphasis on images seems almost imprudent at a time when images have questionable value due to their atomic distribution via social media, their dubious factuality, and their perceived banality in a world under so much social, political, and environmental turmoil. However, two critical arguments define the importance of addressing images today. First, we must learn how to look at images — architectural or otherwise — to challenge the truth of their content or the significance of their authenticity. Second, and more crucially, there is a new kind of architectural image, one that is not simply about legibility. Instead of banking on the "shock and awe" of an occupying force, these architectural images suggest introspection and muteness.

In 2013, when we started thinking about this book — even though its actual writing officially commenced and continued later — the discussion was very different from what it is today. At that time, if there was a straw man to beat down, it was the one representing the perceived excesses of the digital avant-garde, to which we once belonged. Now, only six or seven years in the future, the

situation could not be more different. After so much obsession with the new, the spectrum of reactionary historical revisionism that we see today, strongly present in American academia, in hindsight appears inevitable. As robust as it is confusing and with no clear end game in sight, its purveyors will soon find nothing else to oppose. This is precisely why the tradition of reactionary opposition and hostile antagonism in our field is as significant in its scope as it is futile in its agenda. In thinking about these particular issues of the present along with the atemporal problems of architecture, we believe it is crucial not only to contest problems and agendas but also to make arguments for the persistence of architectural culture by focusing on ideas and projects that both nurture and challenge it.

Contending with the Icon

The icon has obvious associations in art history. The word icon, or Greek eikōn, is defined as an "image, figure, or representation." The storied past of icons in history as gilded iconographic panel paintings is far more illustrious and less populist than their life in the present as icons riddle our digital devices. From Virgin Mother to Virgin Mobile, the icon's integrity has been tied to its immediacy of signification, establishing a static, symbolic realm in order to maintain its blunt legibility.

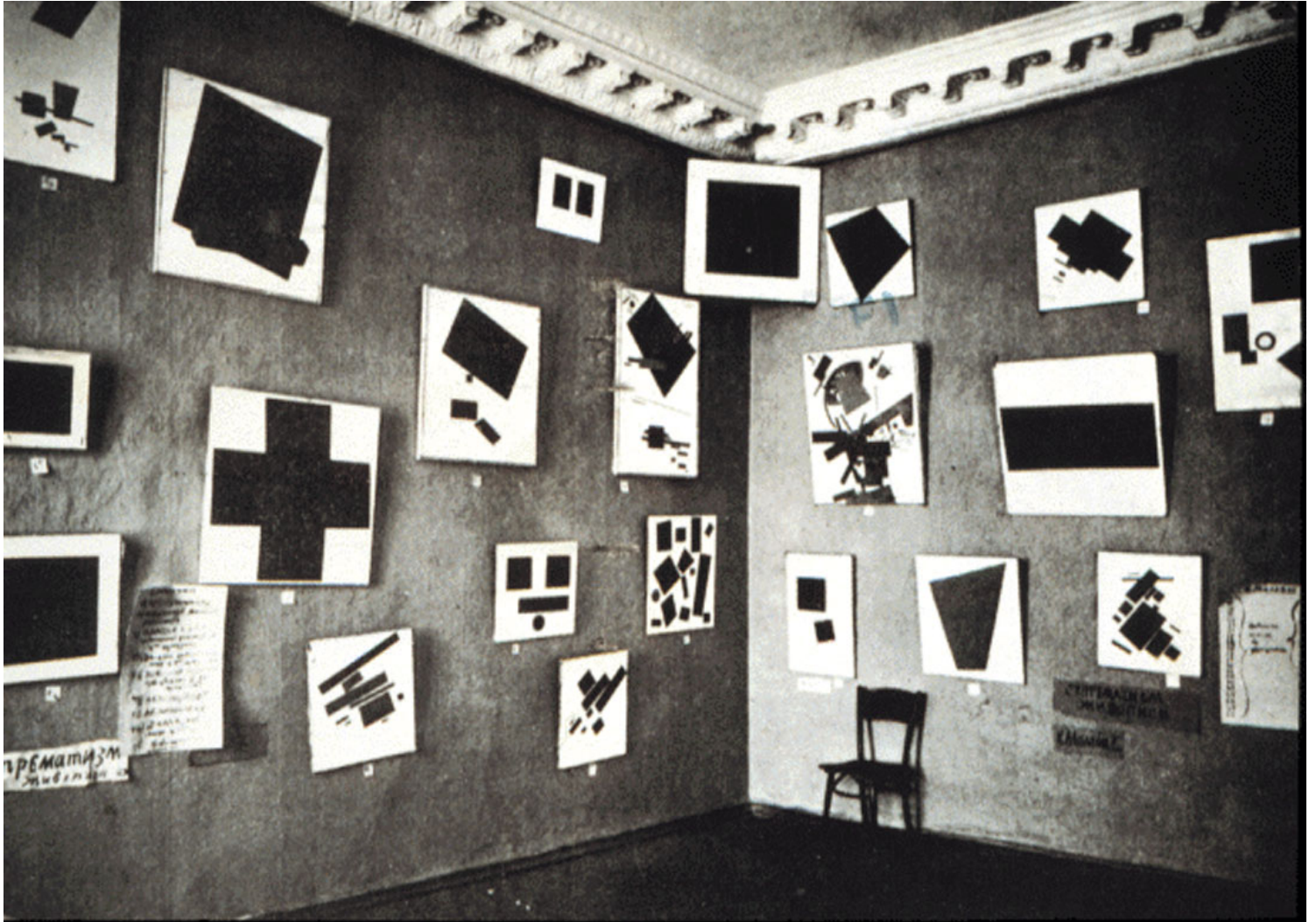
In stark contrast, muteness indicates an inescapable and absolute silence or a selective unwillingness to speak in a particular context. A mute silence is intellectually engaged but socially withdrawn. Sound, in the form of language or noise, activates the interior, but the interior remains unresponsive or hidden. Hovering near but not on the collective ground, muteness outlines the enigmatic realm between extroverted exteriority and introverted interiority.

The term "mute icons" implies different associations within an art historical realm than the word "icon" might alone. This combination of terms brings to mind Suprematism and later Minimalism but in particular Kazimir Malevich's Black Square. With its singular image occupying the room's corner — a position traditionally reserved in Russian Orthodox homes for the paintings of saints — Black Square displaced the religious icon and replaced it with an abstraction. This radically challenged the status of painting as a mimetic or representational system and produced a non-icon or, more provocatively, an icon that is unambiguously mute.

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Black Square, at the corner of the original exhibition by Kazimir Malevich

The didacticism and immediacy of icons have long been their virtue but in equal measure their fault. At one time they were propaganda of religious organizations and more recently have become the idols of online commerce, and as such, they carry the burden of precarious political associations. To invoke the word "icon" inspires a sense of dread that one may be attempting to summon the ghosts of the linguistic turn and revisit society's preoccupation with signification. Entrenched in its past, the icon offers a highly charged ground. To render an icon mute requires that it shed its static sensibility

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and become ambivalent toward meaning.

A Categorical Expansion: Misuse and Provocation

In architecture, the word “icon” suggests a categorical generalization of buildings and projects that appear iconic. In this book, our use of the word does not intend to continue its simple deadpan denotation that was prevalent in the late '90s, but rather to instill it with new meaning. Therefore, readers should dispatch any a priori notion of the icon as a straw man that can be quickly knocked down. We are not interested in the icon's abhorrent incarnations, neither the one-liners and the clichés, the generic — with or without its cynicism — nor the exuberantly iconic with all its social and cultural naiveté. Rather we are invested in architecture that has been able to produce a constructed tension between legibility and reticence.

“Iconic” here refers to a category of projects that are visually distinct and legible, whether by association or through levels of abstraction. Given the categorical expansion — not just an icon, but a mute icon — this book revisits and positions projects which are decidedly opposed to any traditional understanding of iconicity by detailing how they undermine it. In these examples, the icon and the mute are married in a perpetual dialectic. The two do not cancel each other out but produce a sense of perpetual irritation.

Antecedent 1: Charles Jencks and the Lineage of the Icon

An icon always has a trace of sanctity about it, the aura of a saint; by definition it is an object to be worshipped, however fitfully.

—Charles Jencks,

“The Iconic Building Is Here to Stay”

In arguing for the icon, postmodern theorist Charles Jencks suggests the importance of sublimating iconography through abstraction. Jencks refers to this move away from literal iconography as “calculated ambiguity” or creating “an icon without a clear iconography, an enigmatic signifier.” Jencks attempts to position and categorize icons with the understanding that not all built imagery is

productive. However, he goes on to point out that beneficial aspects will never allay the icon's detractors: "One should not underestimate the desire of the public for good iconic buildings. They still make people leave home to enjoy the expressive aspects of the public realm. The complaint about their very real problems — the simplified image, the stupid one-liner, the a-contextual building, the destruction of the city — has been made for many years."

In the contemporary and recent past, icons have exercised geopolitical power. That is, an act of architecture can be powerful enough to put a city, region, or country on the map. However, as we know well enough already, architects make buildings; only culture and time turn buildings into icons. Therefore, this issue is one of cultural absorption far more than it is about design speculation and has often forced unnecessary excesses into architecture.

While Jencks advises against the simplistic one-liners, he also has words for self-canceling messages. In all his celebration and exaltation of difference, Jencks recognizes the weight of irritation in iconic buildings. "The news lesson is clear: if an iconic building is not hated enough — like the Eiffel Tower was at its inception — it will never inspire enough negative energy to be noticed by the public or to go on to be debated and, perhaps, defended." Here he touches on one of the deep and complicated truths of the genre. The experience of iconic buildings, according to Jencks, is as diverse as it is paradoxical and even contradictory; icons are architecture in "the shape of something uncanny, fascinating, horrible, lovely." However, Charles Jencks' turn-of-the-century approach may seem now from a more contemporary, socially engaged, and culturally attuned perspective, his argumentation and defense of the icon is still a relevant one for architecture.



"Globalization and Its New Discontents" Occupy.com, August 12, 2016

Antecedent 2: Monolithic Architecture as a Form of Muteness

While not referring to the issue of iconicity in any direct way, Rodolfo Machado and Rodolphe el-Khoury's book *Monolithic Architecture*, including the introduction by the authors and Detlef Mertins' essay "Open Contours," is an essential predecessor to Mute Icons; its theoretical positions seeded our initial ideas.

While *Monolithic Architecture* went relatively unnoticed when published in the late-'80s as the

catalog of an eponymous exhibition, it has since become an extremely relevant source for those interested in the tradition of solidity in architecture. Arguing for a paradoxical understanding of architectural form — one that could be as much about representation as about physicality — Monolithic Architecture proposed a radical new lens through which to look at and conceive of architectural projects and objects. Not just the idea that architecture could be constructed with a single material or carved out from a solid rock, but the notion that its legibility could somehow represent issues such as solidity and impenetrability. It is precisely in the paradoxical aspect of architecture, more than in the possible literality of its idea, where Machado and El-Khoury's Monolithic Architecture gains traction.

In a conversation with Rodolfo Machado in our class "Whole Dichotomy: Monolithicity in Architecture" that we taught at Yale School of Architecture in 2013, Rodolfo recalled the cultural context of the time and described his positioning of the exhibition and its catalog as a reaction to the rise of extreme fragmentation and collage that was being promoted by Deconstructivism. Although far from becoming mainstream, Decon was certainly the predominant discourse in academia in its time. Interestingly enough, thirty years plus later, Mute Icons could be positioned as an alternative to both, the remains of the positivist morphology-driven, excess-producing, digital avant-garde and the often-negative, ironypropelled neo-postmodernism.

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PATTERNS' League of Shadows with wildfires in the background @Paco1227

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PATTERNS' League of Shadows, as seen within a dystopian fictional sight of DTLA, *The Walking Dead*, AMC

The Mute Icon

Haunted by vast processes taking place outside itself, architecture, like culture, appears to be at a significant crossroads. The past two decades have been shaped by events like 9/11, the financial collapse, the continued effects of climate change, and by sociopolitical movements, including the Arab Spring, Occupy Wall Street, the climate movement, Black Lives Matter, and the #MeToo movement, as well as Brexit, MAGA, ongoing refugee crises, and the rise of authoritarianism and populism worldwide.

Meanwhile, each new epoch of economic austerity is followed by yet another economic bubble. In this era, the oft-proclaimed "death of the icon" and the specific declaration "no more weird buildings" are naïve responses to the impulse for increased social responsibility and the search for common

sense and common ground in architecture as well as culture. While sociopolitical context can-not be the only driver for architectural production nor any other cultural practice, it is a significant factor with which to reckon. In light of these societal shifts, the status and role of the architectural icon is under scrutiny, and its cultural relevance is under stress. While culture at large will always identify and promote new icons, the question here is: what constitutes a contemporary icon?

The mute icon — a kind of anti-monument — may provide an answer as architecture's most challenging and provocative response to the cultural tensions of our time. Unconcerned with either narrative excesses of meaning and communication, or with the shock and awe of sensation-making, the mute icon in architecture must do what it does best: express its virtues through volume, mass, surface, and aesthetics with all its social and cultural implications.

By suppressing the now expected aesthetic teasers, the mute icon becomes intriguing in its ambivalence towards context and apathy towards the body. Balanced between object and building, the mute icon is defined by a dialectic legibility; strange silhouettes, strong postures, constructive brutality, uncommunicative nature, and apparent autonomy from the surrounding ground and context in spite of being partially embedded within either or both. Its attitude is absolute and unstable, anticipated and strange, manifest and withdrawn. Elusive and fleeting, mute icons entice enduring attention by delivering persistent irritation.

Theoretical defenses for these illegible architectural irritants can be found in the work of author and scholar Timothy Hyde, who argues for their legitimacy, stating, "The passive manner of irritation, or any ugly feeling, can only be overcome by a complete transformation of the situation from which that feeling emerges. In the absence of that transformation, irritation persists as a simultaneous pulling-together and pushing a part of person and architecture." Along similar lines, Reyner Banham insisted that a Brutalist building should produce an affecting "image," defined as "something which is visually valuable" and "'quod visum perturbat'— that which seen, affects the emotions with pleasure, displeasure, or, pointedly, an admixture of the two." By limiting legibility and visual pleasure, the mute icon demands closer scrutiny. Its resistance conveys resilience, and its introversion stimulates communication.

Both Hyde and Banham's arguments tie to the problem of estrangement, as pioneered by Russian literary theorist Viktor Shklovsky and his essay "Art as Technique." Shklovsky famously argues, "Art exists so that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone stoney." To make the stone stony is to carve away the inscription already imprinted on it; it is to turn signs back into things, form into abstraction, and building into object. To make the stone stony,

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architecture must now appear "strange and wonderful."

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