

Adam Kleinman
**Tempus Edax
Rerum?**

e-flux journal #13 — february 2010 Adam Kleinman
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“Politicians, ugly buildings, and whores all get respectable if they last long enough.”

– Noah Cross in Roman Polanski’s
Chinatown

Maybe you’ve heard it before at a dinner or over coffee: two or three colleagues, let’s say an artist, a critic, and a curator, are sitting around talking about the work of a peer. And all of a sudden, one of them announces that this work unfortunately won’t stand the “test of time” – or conversely, someone emphasizes that it will. And while this may be a rather common expression, its meaning is not often discussed. In fact, more often than not, this phrase is treated as an old dictum, a universal qualifier or dismissive. But rather than take this expression for granted, I would like to look at some of the various implications, allusions, and contradictions inherent in this figure of speech, especially when uttered with respect to contemporary cultural products or situations that are obviously too “young” to even be considered along such terms.

In the most banal sense, something that stands the “test of time” is simply an object that has endured. This could be as simple as a matter of fact. Take the Parthenon, which has stood the “test of time” to the extent that it still quite literally stands in its original place, not only because of its material durability, but also because it was not *torn down* (though of course it did suffer an explosion). And though its repurposing – from temple to church, to mosque, to armory, to storage dump, to museum – could be an argument for its adaptability, its ultimate use as an icon points to something greater. Namely, that the Parthenon never stopped meaning something to someone – it gained a kind of historic and thus political and social worth, with images of the building and its decay often used as propaganda in support of Greek independence and Philhellenism just as they are used today to promote tourism.

But for the sake of argument, let’s assume that the Parthenon *was* demolished several centuries ago after suffering a period of neglect following the explosion. If this had happened, the building would *not* have stood the “test of time.” The Parthenon *would* have stopped meaning something to someone, and as a result, its status as an icon would have been discarded. It is through this counterfactual that we can appreciate the full rhetorical power of the expression “standing the test of time”; when an object ceases to be present, to be in demand, then it no longer merits preservation or life. But since the object of our inquiry is an ancient artifact to which we have considerable hindsight,

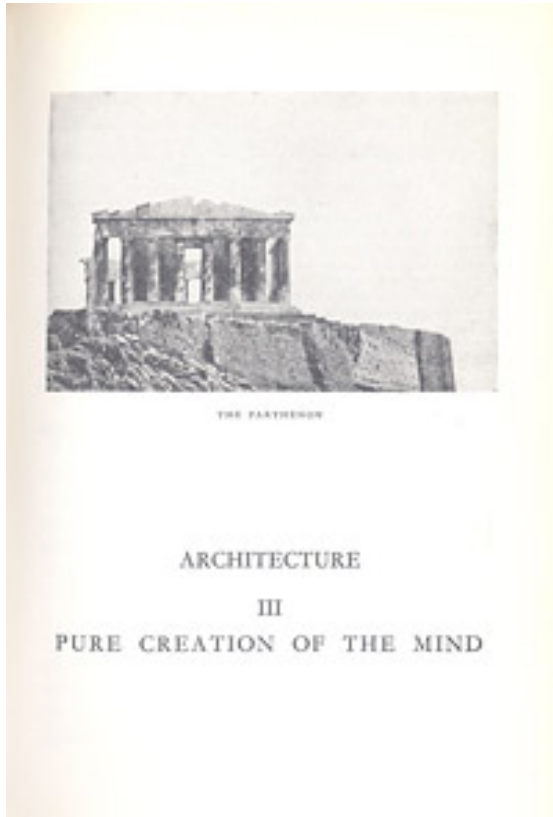


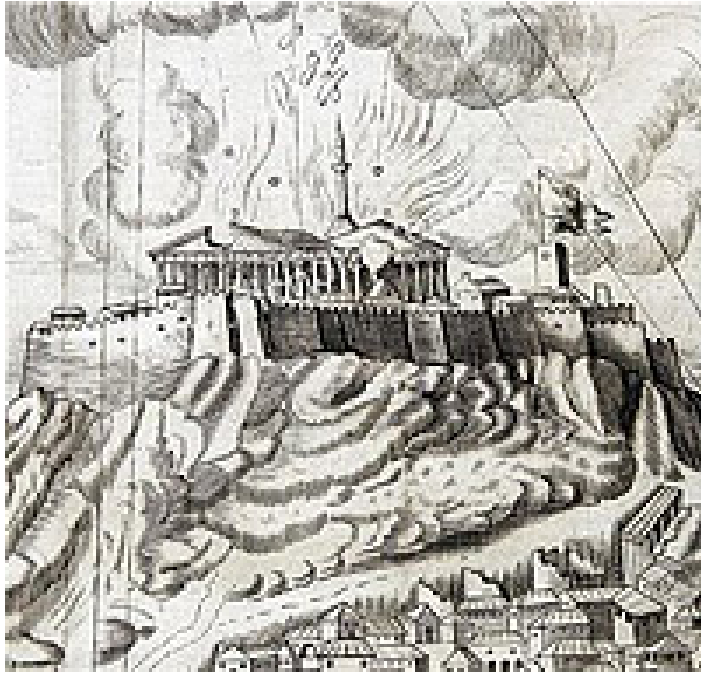
Fig.6 From Le Corbusier's *Towards a New Architecture*.



Bernard Tschumi, Advertisement for Architecture, 1977.

any proclamation of its existence would seem to be rather meaningless and self-evident – and yet it is still uttered. Following from the idea that the “test of time” has more to do with public interest, we can say that it is really a test of social history, a form of *idealized* history wherein various activities can be classified as exemplars or ideals.

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A drawing from the 1700s depicting the bombing of the Parthenon by Francesco Morosini in 1687. The picture shows the minaret as it stood in the SW corner.

Of course, history in general is just a collection of episodic observations and inferences; however, the *act of historicizing* is a means of classifying these events according to some kind of order, in such a way that the historian is actually thinking with history, not about it. Nevertheless, an agenda must fit into some greater logic for it to gain acceptance – as Karl Marx reminds us that men make their own history, but not in circumstances of their own choosing.¹ To invert this phrase, it stands to reason that although men cannot choose their circumstances, their judgments and readings of these circumstances inscribe what is to be persevered, and hence make history. Herein an ethical position starts to emerge, as an event’s inscription in accepted or established patterns creates its moral worth. So in this sense, the Parthenon not only “stands” in the physical sense, but *stands in* as a symbol of underlying uniformity in human culture through its continued use and popularity. The Parthenon *stands in* as deserving prolonged existence, prolonged life. So with this in mind, let’s return to the idea of a contemporary product being able to either stand or fail the “test of time.”

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Since contemporary objects are by definition still emerging, it would be difficult to say that they have stood the “test of time”; however, this doesn’t prevent many arbiters from predicting that they will or they won’t. Although a critic may be acting on “intuition,” any predictions in this vein would need to be referred to an ideal index of taste against which the object will need to *stand* – quite literally, if that object is acquired by a collection. Likewise, to say that it will not last would be to relegate that object to having little worth. As the object’s mortality, so to speak, is at stake, this is no small claim. However, beyond this, there is an even greater claim at stake.

Consider that the object itself is a *standing-in* for a society, a school of thought, or the culture that produced it, and represents that specific history against an ideal of that which is worth preserving. In elevating an object to this plane, one simultaneously elevates the people or organizations around that object, preserving them with it. Conversely, to dismiss something as a fad, for being of fleeting interest, is to downgrade not only that object, but also those who find it to be of interest. This substitution of object for class allows for a form of denigration without conscience, as the object of derision is abstracted and disembodied – of course, this also holds for the inverse as well. In other words, saying that something will or will not last is a guiltless attempt at spin, an attempt to sway public opinion and win favor. And here it might be important to draw a provisional distinction between value and worth, in this case letting “value” denote an object’s commercial influence, and letting “worth” denote that object’s potential cultural or intellectual “importance.” This division is of particular import today, as objects of fancy – that is to say, fads – are by definition highly sought after and expensive, whereas obscurities and objects on the fringe are often cheap – unless they can be turned into a rarity or a specialty item to be collected. In order to reassert some measure of dominance, to separate the elite from the parvenu, arbiters need to establish some abstract notion of worth and worthiness by which to place themselves outside this system of market justification. In this new industry of arbitration, “craft,” “relevance,” and “utility” are summoned as rationales with which to be in accord. The key fallacy in deferring to these rationales comes in neglecting how they have been variously assessed historically. In this sense, to invoke “craft,” “relevance,” and “utility” without historical grounding would be to prematurely apply some form of rational choice theory to human interaction. In any case, the validation of duration is often asked of even the newest of

things – but why?

One possible reason is that through the act of qualifying something as a representative of an order, the object and that order must not only conform, but must also confirm each other in suit. That is to say, this form of agreement produces an apparatus, which validates selfsameness and eschews deviation as an externality. In this setup, once something is deemed important due to the fact that it has persevered, this fact trumps all other aesthetic theories or value judgments, which are external to that order by definition. In other words, something that has persevered and remains popular becomes beyond reproach, beyond criticism. George Orwell sums up this specific context in his attack on Leo Tolstoy, an attack aimed at Tolstoy's own polemic against Shakespeare as a terrible and immoral dramatist propped up only by the "epidemic suggestion" of a few German scholars:

In reality there is no kind of evidence or argument by which one can show that Shakespeare, or any other writer, is "good." Nor is there any way of definitely proving that – for instance – Warwick Beeping is "bad." Ultimately there is no test of literary

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merit except survival, which is itself an index to majority opinion. Artistic theories such as Tolstoy's are quite worthless, because they not only start out with arbitrary assumptions, but depend on vague terms ("sincere," "important" and so forth) which can be interpreted in any way one chooses.²

And here, with Orwell, we are exposed to a "crisis of criticism": no matter how strong an argument might be for or against a work of art, the fact of a work of art's popularity, and the continuity of this popularity, supersedes any and all claims of substance. That is not to say that criticism has no import, but rather that its only import may be found in its ability to sway public opinion – which is in any event only secondary to sustained acceptance. This could be one of the ways in which men write history; however, this mode is still bound to the exigencies of chance, contingency, and context, which is to say that there is no super-agency to guarantee outcomes. One possible way to reject this system would be to quite literally break it, attacking the object's physical substance itself. Here though, instead of literary criticism, we would have the violence of iconoclasm. On the other hand, if it were



Saiho-Ji Garden, Kyoto.

possible to break time, then the idea of an object standing up to time's test would be much more complex.

In "What is the Contemporary?" the philosopher Giorgio Agamben delineates a position similar to this: the true contemporary is able to occupy a position against the grain of his or her time, a position constituting a vantage point that allows for an investigation into how those accepted topics came to be commonly regarded.³ This state, which he calls "being out of joint," lends itself to revelations concerning the "nature" of the epoch we find ourselves in. One of the ways to achieve this position is by looking back at precedents – other philosophers, writers, artists, and so on – who through their own distance from our time, as well as their own times, can act as a lens through which to view the world around us, and, in a sense, speak to us. Beyond proving perseverance, this setup encourages an ethic, because the act of preservation is a way to self-reflexively contemplate our own place. If this holds true, this self-reflection provides the "meaning something to someone" that would constitute the reason for an object to continue existing.

As intimated above, something that stands against or tests time, while also being able to stand with us in time, is an object that becomes, in a sense, not only contemporary, but also immortal. Take for instance the first book known to exist, *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, wherein the great King finds his ultimate glory not in achieving actual immortality but in attempting to do so, in the story created and, most importantly, recorded. However, instead of proposing cultural production to be a way of creating postmortem longevity for the author, let's suppose that an object's developing character as it is shaped by various generations creates a form of empathy, one that is not only emotive, but rational.

In closing, I would like to leave you with an image of the gardens at Koke-dera, or "Moss Temple," in Kyoto, Japan. Although moss is a common element in landscape design, it is often used sparingly to promote a sense of softness, set dialectically against hard and cold elements such as stones. This was probably the case here; however, over time, and due to the monastery's inability to maintain the garden, moss began to overrun and ultimately blanket the area. Instead of rehabilitating the garden to its original state, the monks found pleasure in this more primitive landscape and continued allowing the moss to grow. Now, instead of simple visual delight, this test of time – the centuries needed to grow this moss – presents a kind of evocative temporal compression. More than mere nostalgia, this compression acts as a trigger not unlike Marcel Proust's involuntary memories, wherein

recollection of the past surfaces without conscious effort. Like in Proust, these feelings lead to a reflection of oneself in relation to nature's inevitable cycles of growth and decay, producing the clarity of selflessness.

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1
Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr & Co., 1907), 5.

2
George Orwell, “Lear, Tolstoy, and the Fool” (1947), in *The Collected Essays, Journalism, and Letters*, vol. 4, *In Front of Your Nose, 1945–1950*, ed. Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus (Boston: David R. Godine, Inc., 2000), 290.

3
Giorgio Agamben, “What Is the Contemporary,” in *What is an Apparatus? and Other Essays*, trans. David Kishik and Stefan Pedatella (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2009).

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