

The *Otterlo Circles* by Aldo van Eyck. Collage as condensed theory

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A central figure of Postwar architecture, Dutch architect Aldo van Eyck (1918-1999) frequently employed collages of texts and images to synthetically formulate his complex thoughts and visions of architecture. This method of representation enabled him to construct sentences which were not definitive statements, but open-ended questions, which welcomed doubt and opened possibilities. Such a procedure corresponded directly to his specific way of conceiving and producing an architecture capable of absorbing opposites and containing apparently contradictory terms.

One specific collage, made in two slightly different versions and named the "*Otterlo Circles*", expresses theoretical stances which would not only guide van Eyck's own practice, but which also manifest themselves as possible paths to renew modern architecture in the Postwar context. In the construction of the *Otterlo Circles*, one can identify the influences of several artistic practices, which helped van Eyck establishing his design philosophy and production methods.

Furthermore, this specific collage may be considered as a materialisation of van Eyck's imaginative process, which takes place through the particular relationship established among collected images.

The Otterlo Circles, twice

In September 1959, on the occasion of the last CIAM (International Congress of Modern Architecture) in the city of Otterlo, the Netherlands, Aldo van Eyck produced what would become known as the *Otterlo Circles*: a collage of photographs, drawings, and texts which synthesised his views on the meaning of architecture and on the possibilities of the renewal of its language. He showed this collage close to a presentation of his own architectural projects. In the collage, two circles represent the relation-

ship he was proposing between architectural and social values, and between architectural features and the unfolding of human life. The first circle on the left, labelled *par nous* (by us), contained three smaller circles with a photograph of the Temple of Nike on Athens' Acropolis, a drawing of a *Contra-Construction* by Theo van Doesburg, the *maison particulière* (1923), and a photograph of Aoulef, a town in the Algerian sector of the Sahara desert. The question «Is architecture going to reconcile basic values?» appears at the bottom of this first circle. Following the architect's explanation, contained in his presentation speech in Otterlo, this circle represented how architecture could absorb the values of classical, modern and vernacular architecture.

In the second circle, labelled *pour nous*, (for us) he showed «a Sardinian statuette of a sitting woman with child, an Etruscan statuette of a standing man, and beneath these a Cypriot burial gift, a round dish decorated with a small community of people» as metaphors of a harmonious society.

The phrase «Man still breathes in and out. Is architecture going to do the same?», written in the lower part of the panel alongside a curved line, loosely connects the two circles.

The circle on the left presented van Eyck's will to produce an architecture capable of reconciling archaism, classicism and modernity. For this purpose, the architect would associate what he called "Euclidean thought", the static space connected to «man's fundamental desire for enclosure», and «non-euclidean thought», or the dynamic space introduced by modernity (Van Eyck 1959).

The images on the right would be about permanence in human history: in van Eyck's words, they are there «to remember that there have always been men, women and children, living in a kind of society. They represent constants in space and time, constants that constantly change» (Van Eyck 1959).

The collage thus investigates the possibility of overcoming the contradiction between the assimilation of historical values and the adherence to the project of modernity. At the same time, it warns on the necessity of relating the ever-changing approaches of architecture through time, to the permanent features of human societies.

According to Francis Strauven, in 1962, in the context of the development of the manuscript *The Child, the City, and the Artist*, van Eyck remade the collage modifying some of its features, but maintaining the original

meaning. This version of the *Otterlo Circles*, featuring all the texts in English, was published in "Forum 17", no. 4 (1963, published 1967). This time, in the left circle, instead of the photo of the Algerian town, the architect inserted a plan of the 11th-century Pueblo Arroyo in New Mexico, while he replaced the photographic reproduction of the Nike Temple with a representation in plan of the Parthenon. Also, the *Contra-Construction* by Van Doesburg, which is preserved in the second version of the collage, has a different appearance, since it is redrawn with black and white lines to uniform its aspect with the two other plans.

On the right of the diagram, a single image occupied the circle labelled "for us": a dancing group of Kayapo Indians from the Orinoco basin in Venezuela. The image is carefully cut from the original photograph to extract the figures and their shadows, providing a three-dimensional presence and a complete decontextualisation from the original environment. In this version of the collage, the text acquires a more prominent role, as the three images on the left circle are accompanied each one by a caption which makes explicit their symbolic meaning. The Parthenon is connected to the expression "immutability and rest", the *Contra-Construction* with "change and movement" and the Pueblo town with "vernacular of the heart." Also, the bottom line is new, and further underlines the tension between permanence and change through another statement: «We can discover ourselves everywhere - in all places and ages - doing the same thing in a different way, feeling the same differently, reacting differently to the same» (Van Eyck 1959).

Collecting images: a personal *musée imaginaire*

In the mind and words of Aldo van Eyck, the images enclosed in the circles are able to tell a shared story, complementing each other despite referring to extremely different contexts in time and space.

Van Eyck aimed at producing a theoretical stance through the technique of the collage.

In his own words, «The three little images united in the first circle hide no real conflict, nor are their properties incompatible. They complement each other, belong together, and reflect different, equally valid aspects of our human make up» (Van Eyck 1962).

The different traditions mentioned in the collage are symbolised by images taken from the vast collection of the architect and currently preserved in the private collection of the Hannie and Aldo van Eyck Foundation in their former house in Loenen aan de Vecht. The collection includes found images, mostly featuring modern art examples (works by Brancusi, Arp, Klee among others), and photographs he took during his trips in Africa, Europe and North America. Currently contained in a series of binders, organised by his wife Hannie, the pictures have never been classified and still show a varied collection of photos, slides, and some drawings, alternated with scraps of texts, quotes and small handwritten notes. They are kept separated from the rest of the archives of the office as a specific project, parallel to the actual design production.

Through the different versions of the *Otterlo Circles*, and the talks and texts which accompanied them, van Eyck implicitly suggested how the images he collected throughout his life should interact and produce a new discourse. Van Eyck consciously quoted the expression "*musée imaginaire*", originally coined by French art historian, writer and politician André Malraux, to describe his own collection of images and objects taken from different architectural traditions and spanning through various disciplines.

The reference to Malraux is explicitly present in the speech given by the architect at Otterlo, «I would like to introduce the term by Malraux, the *Museum without Walls*. We ... have far more great works available to refresh our memories than those which even the greatest of museums could bring together. For a 'Museum without Walls' is coming into being, and ... it will carry infinitely farther that revelation of art, limited perforce, which the 'real' museums offer us within their walls»¹.

In continuity with the *musée imaginaire* concept, van Eyck also filled his house in Loenen aan de Vecht with the objects retrieved through his travels to produce a display of vernacular and modern artworks, books, drawings, sculptures and records from different parts of the world.

In the same year of the first Otterlo collage, architect Dick Apon asked van Eyck to join the new editorial staff of the magazine "Forum", where he would work together with Gert Boon, Jacob Bakema, Herman

Hertzberger, graphic designer Jurriaan Schrofer and painter, and self-taught art historian Joop Hardy. Throughout the issues of "Forum", van Eyck and the rest of the group would construct narratives based on the combination of different images taken from disparate contexts to illustrate architectural concepts in relation to societal ones.

Van Eyck also worked on defining and making explicit the way images (and the meanings they carry) can act as agents in the elaboration of the architect's imagination and the development of architectural thinking. The architect kept questioning their role in several writings and through the pages of the Dutch architecture magazine "Forum"².

In the path which leads from his collection of images to the construction of architectural imagination and the production of a discourse around architecture, images become agents capable of guiding the architect toward the development of a new practice capable of harmoniously synthesising different traditions. The *Otterlo Circles* are a visual statement embodying the coming together of different architectural cultures to encounter the human values of collectivity and harmony. They also represent a connecting moment between the accumulation and recollection of images through the method of the *musée imaginaire* and their *mise en oeuvre* in the architectural projects. This collage symbolises the moment in which the images acquired by the architect are not only collected as a way to materialise his memory, but start to act together to construct his imagination and become a vehicle for the development of the formal and theoretical aspects of the project. At the same time, the collage becomes a document capable of synthesising several principles and researches developed by van Eyck throughout his career.

Associating images: methods from Avant-garde movements

Van Eyck employed the collage and the juxtaposition of images from different sources as visual and textual devices to produce a new discourse. The choice of these media connects the architect to a series of artistic movements which he studied in-depth, and whose intellectual strategies he progressively absorbed.

For example, the use of images connected together on the pages of *Forum*, or juxtaposed to generate the collage in Otterlo, is deeply connected with the techniques and meanings which these procedures acquired for the Surrealist movement. Van Eyck had a profound interest in Surrealist culture and stated that it was through Surrealism that he started his interest in 20th-century Avant-garde. It was precisely through Carola Giedion Welker, known as C.W., wife of Sigfried Giedion and the first classically trained art historian to give recognition to Modernist art, that van Eyck first encountered the work of Max Ernst, Kurt Schwitters, Tristan Tzara, André Breton, while still living in Zürich right after graduating at the ETH School.

He became an avid reader of the poet André Breton and his later interest in the Dogon culture began from reading the Surrealist magazine "Minotaure", that he also found in Zurich (McCarter 2015).

More generally, his fascination for archaic cultures and their architectural and figurative production came from the gaze upon archaic art provided by Surrealist and Avant-garde painters, who identified a continuity between modernity and antiquity.

Not unlike the Surrealists, van Eyck implied that knowledge could be constructed through the use of the image and that the combination of images could shape an open discourse.

Among the Surrealists who experimented with the technique of the collage, it was undoubtedly Max Ernst who was involved the most with this medium. The artist even employed the terms "collage thinking" and "collage idea" to imply the possibility that ideas themselves could be "glued", transfiguring a creation technique into a mode of thought. Ernst's concept of "collage idea" implied the construction of pluralism and coexistence putting together opposed terms, (trivial and serious, beautiful and ugly, unusual and meaningful), to produce works in which contradictions could be expressed freely (Harriet and Blesh 1969).

For both van Eyck and the Surrealists, combining different images taken from far away cultures did not imply the construction of a specific statement. Still, the aim was to develop a thought which was variable and open-ended, allowing the continuous interplay of opposites.

In the same way, the images in the *musée imaginaire* influence the imagination by opening a process of multiple connections and open-ended

associations: surpassing strict categorisations, eliding irreconcilable differences, and avoiding any hierarchical organisation among concepts. The collage becomes an effective system to provide this possibility of co-existence and to smooth out differences among collected images, while opening multiple paths and opportunities of recombination.

This process is clearly identified by van Eyck in his own reading of the *Otterlo Circles*: «The three images in the first circle do not exclude others equally essential. No limitation is implied. Add San Carlo alle Quattro [sic] Fontane or Vierzehnheiligen and we can start reconciling them – the essence, not the form – in a wonderful sequence of possibilities that would really fit man» (Van Eyck 1962).

Another artistic movement which employed collage as a favourite medium was the Dutch group CoBra, with which the architect became involved from 1948 to 1951. Van Eyck became close to Karel Appel, Constant and Corneille, and produced the design for two of the CoBra exhibitions, in Amsterdam (1949) and Liège (1951). CoBra artists would use words as an artistic material, combining them with painting. Considering the graphic sign as an image or a form as such, CoBra members also developed the *peintures-mots*³, works created simultaneously by a painter and a poet. In the same fashion, the questions and words which are included in the *Otterlo Circles* become a graphic feature, working as visual elements for the diagrammatic part of the collage.

The collage as word-image

Van Eyck's theoretical body is not a linear production expressed explicitly in texts. Conversely, it is a fragmented system of multiple associations of ideas, synthesised through "poetic images" and images *tout court*. These should not be read literally, but interpreted as dynamic contents: «The illustrations should be regarded as tentative illuminations, personally chosen, and not as static examples» (Van Eyck 1962).

Historian Dirk van den Heuvel considers the *Otterlo Circles* as an example of "word-images," instruments to express a thought, employed by van Eyck to give form to an idea. The "word-images" are specific combinations of text and images where text is employed as an image and the im-

age itself acquires the status of a concept. The collage becomes the most suitable technique to produce this kind of condensed composition capable of synthesising in themselves an open-ended concept.

For van den Heuvel, the recurrence of this kind of images, which he also names “poetic riddles,” is connected to the “ludic-poetic” attitude that was adopted by the Post-war architects of the Team 10, and by the artists of the CoBra movement, - Constant in particular -, in reference to Johan Huizinga’s essay *Homo Ludens*.

According to Huizinga, who considers play as a central element in the development of culture, every question can be expressed through metaphors and analogies, and the replies can only turn into further metaphors, to expand an imaginative discourse.

As Huizinga would state, this way of thinking embodied by play can also be expressed through images (poetic or figurative). «The word-bound concept is always inadequate to the torrent of life. Hence it is only the image-making or figurative word that can invest things with expression and at the same time bathe them in the luminosity of ideas: idea and thing are united in the image» (Huizinga 1949).

In this sense, the *Otterlo Circles* represent the most famous word-image by van Eyck, and an embodiment of the figurative word as expressed by Huizinga, because the aphorisms and the images in the collage play an open riddle, not a concluded sentence or an affirmative statement.

The collage as condensed theory

The double discourse of the *Otterlo Circles*, symbolised by the two circles containing different images, embodies van Eyck’s theory of “twin phenomenon”, (formerly called “dual phenomenon”), an original concept that is crucial in his philosophy.

For van Eyck, every relation is reciprocal, and any entity acquires meaning only in relationship with other ones, since their qualities can only be manifested and understood when confronted with different ones. In the twin phenomenon, polarities do not bear conflicts but become complementary parts of a single entity, while every entity is manifested through a dual nature. Twin phenomena relate between each other in a network and unfold in continuous, multiple textures, which eventually comprise

the whole reality, as «all twin phenomena should be inextricably interwoven» (Van Eyck 1962b).

In this sense, we can read the circles in the collage as the reciprocal parts of twin phenomena, where architecture and humanity are two interconnected realities, and the static qualities of architecture are complemented by the continuous movement of individuals in societies. Further twin phenomena contained in the circles are the tension between the spatial-formal nature of architecture and the relational nature of society, and the nature of a single unity or building, with the multiplicity of individuals in a community. In the twin phenomena the oppositions are not meant to be resolved, but to cohabit in reciprocity.

Transposing the twin phenomena in his work, van Eyck aimed at producing architecture able to synthesise opposite polarities, like the dialectic of past and present, unity and multiplicity, permanence and variability, simplicity and complexity, organic and geometric.

Therefore, the technique of the collage becomes a method for letting the twin phenomenon express itself, as it implies the possibility for different kinds of images to live in proximity, but not to be completely blended in the space of the sheet of paper. Plans, axonometric projections and photographs can all be included and maintain their formal autonomy, while being woven into the fabric of a broader discourse.

For van Eyck, the presence of twin phenomena implied a non-hierarchical approach to every question, a method which also reflects in his compositional approach. In this sense, during his lifelong research and production, the architect aimed continuously at introducing compositional techniques which were non-hierarchical and which did not imply an organisation based on centrality, symmetry or equivalence, as he expressed in some diagrams or, better, “words-images” on the subject.

In his diagram *Until You Notice the Intervals* (published in his 1997 text *The Radiant and the Grim*) for example, van Eyck analyses the capacity of three visual elements arranged horizontally to embrace two different shapes (circles) and thus to produce a composition which is not static, but rather expands dynamically along a horizontal line. Following this observation and applying it to the reading of the *Otterlo Circles*, we can recognise the dynamic qualities of a composition which only apparently

relies on symmetry, but in reality might expand horizontally, including further parts, "the intervals". The curved lines of text which embrace the two circles also underline this approach, as they do not strictly follow the shape of the two circles, but open up as to include the void between them and in the rest of the paper.

The ways with which van Eyck related to compositional problems are connected to the research of Richard Paul Lohse, designer and painter, whom he met in Zurich and with whom he maintained a lifelong friendship and a constant exchange of ideas. Lohse's methods of organising content became of significant influence for the structuring compositional rules which van Eyck included in his projects, drawings and collages. For Lohse, spaces (intervals) and relationships among visual elements in composition were more important than the elements themselves, while the search for a dynamic harmony among the components became the ultimate goal of his artistic journey. Lohse's paintings are among the images collected by Aldo van Eyck in his *musée imaginaire*, and regularly re-appeared in his lectures.

Constructing imagination

In his early texts, Aldo van Eyck referred specifically to the importance of the cognitive faculty of imagination: «Imagination is and remains the only faculty capable of registering the qualities of a changing worldview simultaneously. It is the eye for reality, the eye behind the eye» (Van Eyck 1949).

As reported by Harm Lammer, the architect also employed the term "association" in addition to the term "imagination", as a possible way to relate apparently distant concepts. «Analogies compare directly instead of identifying indirectly through what one may call poetic association,» suggesting another procedure which can be connected to Surrealist ones (Van Eyck 1962d).

In his text *The Kaleidoscope of Mind*, the architect referred again to the process of imagination, stating that «all things are recreated continuously in the mind through the power of imagination» (Van Eyck 1962c), and choose an image and a quote by Pablo Picasso to accompany the short essay. The quote is reported in French by van Eyck and reads: «the artist

is a receptacle of emotions from anywhere in the sky, the earth, a piece of paper, a spider web. That's why you don't have to distinguish between things. For them there is no quarter of nobility»⁴. The sentence refers to the ability of the artist to not distinguish between the different natures of the things which will enter his process of creation. The image chosen to accompany it is Picasso's *Still Life with Chair Caning*, a 1912 collage in oil, oilcloth, paper and rope on canvas, which literally illustrates the capacity of any object to "enter" the work of art.

For van Eyck, the production of a collage able to provide an encounter of different images is a way to visualise the images populating his mind, and thus to externalise and construct his imagination. In the *Otterlo Circles*, the diagrammatic structure which relates the images together, the two circles and the curved lines drawn by the texts, becomes the system which determines the way content should interact in order to construct a new proposition.

We can analyse the nature of the diagrammatic part of the collage while referring to some traits of cognitive semantics, which makes explicit how mental structures are formed and translated.

In his seminal work on embodied cognition, *The Body in the Mind* (1987), cognitive scientist Mark Johnson explores the role of imagination in the construction of meaning. In his book, the author introduces the notion of image-schema (or image-schemata) to describe pre-linguistic structures capable of organising thoughts and images. Image-schematas emerge from perceptual and bodily experiences, through the multiple ways we interact with the reality around us. They are dynamic patterns endowed with spatial characteristics, which describe the possibility of interaction of images or thoughts acquired through perception and stored through memory.

Mark Johnson represents the image-schemata visually as simple geometrical shapes related to each other through lines. The representation of "containment", for example, is a simple circle which enclose something, the schema of the path is a line which connects different elements.

The diagrammatic part of the *Otterlo Circles*, where the first circle contains three images and the second contains one, recalls an externalised image-schemata able to provide the key to connect the different contents. The circles are joined through texts which trace lines, yet the lines

do not have a specific direction, and the two circles are connected through them infinitely. The schema can connect in a non-univocal way the images collected and selected by van Eyck, which act as sources in the construction of his imagination.

Externalising memory and imagination

Through his collection of images in the *musée imaginaire*, van Eyck externalised his memory, but moved from a purely autobiographical procedure to a more objective collection, which could be communicated through the pages of "Forum", and through his own lessons and conferences. The memories selected were not his private ones, but those moments in the history of art and architecture van Eyck wished to isolate in order to renovate and expand the scope of modern architecture.

Through the collage of the *Otterlo Circles*, van Eyck externalised his own process of imagination, representing the image-schemata which could open connections among the same images he previously collected. Although van Eyck's theoretical and build production is extensive, a single collage looks capable of embodying his own compositional research, his theoretical stances and synthesising the path towards the construction of his imagination, his philosophy and architecture. The technique of representation adapts itself to absorb diversity, while avoiding frictions among the elements at play.

Endnotes

1. "Recordings of 10th CIAM Meeting at Otterlo", Archive Jacob Bakema (NAI, Rotterdam), BAKE, n.p., 20a, Friday morning. Van Eyck spoke in French in this part of his talk. Quoted in: Jaschke K. (2012), *Mythical Journeys: Ethnography, Archaeology, and the Attraction of Tribal Cultures in the Work of Aldo van Eyck and Herman Haan*, vol.1, (PhD diss.), Princeton University.

2. A further exploration of this subject is developed in: Jaschke K. (2012), *Mythical Journeys: Ethnography, Archaeology, and the Attraction of Tribal Cultures in the Work of Aldo van Eyck and Herman Haan*, vol. 1, (PhD diss.), Princeton University.

3. The *peinture-mots* were mostly developed by CoBra member Christian Dotremont (1922-1979).

4. The original quote by Pablo Picasso as transcribed by Aldo van Eyck in French: "*l'artiste est un réceptacle d'émotions venues de n'importe où du ciel, de la terre, d'un morceau de papier, d'une toile d'araignée. C'est pourquoi il ne faut pas distinguer entre les choses. Pour elles il n'y a pas de quartier de noblesse*".

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