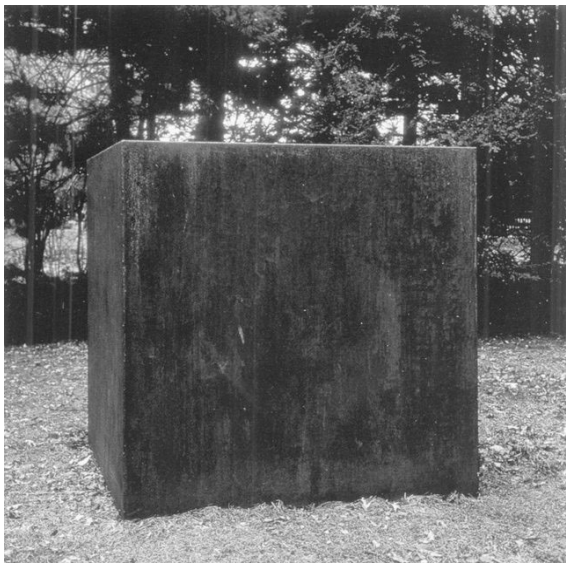
Muteness in Visual Practices

Theory Thesis



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Technische Universiteit Delft
2022/2023

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cover: Tony Smith, *Die*, 1962. source: Machado, el-Khoury, *Monolithic Architecture* (Munich: Prestel-Verlag, 1995).

INTRODUCTION

Muteness is a state of being unable or not willing to speak, express or represent in a particular context. Unwillingness to speak does not equal emptiness or lack of communication, quite the opposite: silence sometimes has more capacity than words as a medium for conveying emotions or views. One of many definitions describes the word mute as "felt or expressed without the use of words"[1] where words are just one of the codes used to deliver the message. Furthermore, silence can be very loud, even deafening, it can cause scandals and raise questions. Full of inner contradictions, it can emit tension that is created on the border of the unspoken.

Despite the fact that it is mainly associated with the sense of hearing, muteness infiltrated the sphere of visual arts at the beginning of the 20th century when Kazimierz Malewicz developed a style of severe geometric abstraction called Suprematism. The painter announced his breakthrough showcase in 1915, knowing that it would be one of the key moments in the art of the 20th century or a sign of a new era, bringing everything back to point zero. This is why he added "0.10" to the title of the exhibition, part of which was the *Black Square* (1913), placed in the upper corner of the room, a spot which, in Orthodox Russia, was intended for depictions of saints. That manoeuvre provocatively produced a new representation system, one that was strikingly mute. What increases the complexity and broadens the field of interpretation here is the fact that, although Malewicz declared the *Black Square* as the first suprematist painting, x-rays show a multi-coloured suprematist composition underneath. Together with the works featured in *Last Exhibition of Futurist Painting 0.10*, the later *Suprematist Composition: White on White* (1918) were definitely the most radical paintings of their day: a geometric abstraction without any reference to external reality.

What could be another reason why the *Black Square* left a permanent mark in the history of art was that the composition was slightly asymmetric with respect to the frame of the painting. One can easily see intentional disharmony in it, introducing the element of chaos into a raw, geometric whole. Here, the author initiated the reception of abstract art also as a carrier of emotions, which in this case were far from aesthetic pleasure. Aesthetics as a philosophical discipline was an invention of the Enlightenment, since when most of the historical discussion has focused on the beautiful and the sublime. However, a modern scholar Sianne Ngai has dedicated years of research to more marginal categories within aesthetics. Ngai coins the term "ugly feelings" to speak of "minor" negative emotions (animatedness, envy, irritation, anxiety, stuplimity—a mixture of boredom and shock—paranoia, and disgust), that she employs to discuss moments when characters' experience a loss of agency; moments in which these "ugly feelings" are often seen and felt[3]. Apart from Malewicz's intention, his painting at the time of its premiere could certainly have aroused them through visual indetermination, deliberate imperfection, provocativeness or overall impression of dullness. A similar impression may be evoked by the translation of Malewicz's gesture into spatial practice. By suppressing the now expected aesthetic teasers, mute architecture becomes intriguing in its ambivalence towards context and apathy towards the body. Its attitude is strange, absolutely bold and withdrawn. Elusive and alien, silence has recently become ostentatious, which delivers persistent irritation.

[1] 'Mute (Adj.)', in *The Britannica Dictionary*, accessed 19 November 2022, https://www.britannica.com/dictionary/mute.
[2] https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artists/kazimir-malevich-1561/five-ways-look-malevichs-black-square, accessed 19 November 2022.
[3] Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005).

Fig. 1 Kazimierz Malewicz, *Black Square*, 1915, Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow.

source: wikipedia.org

Literature Review

This paper examines the manifestations of muteness in architecture through the lens of minimal art, taking into account both examples of historical and contemporary buildings. One of the few studies devoted to describing the phenomenon of silence in spatial practices is a book titled *Mute Icons - and Other Dichotomies of the Real in Architecture*, which covers the dualistic image of the mute as follows: "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."[4] The aforementioned introversion or refraining from direct expression, usually considered as passive, in a certain context, can become truly subversive. This is evidenced by the emotions that accompanied the entry of abstract art into the galleries that until then had been only presenting attempts to reproduce an illusion of visible reality. In order to accurately and comprehensively compare the silence in art with certain architectural examples or to suggest a system of references between the two fields, it was necessary to analyse the works of leading representatives of minimalism in the second half of the 20th century, with aid of extensive studies like *Art Since 1900* by H. Foster, R. Krauss, Y.-A. Bois and B. Buchloh or *Movements in Modern Art: Minimalism* by David Batchelor. The notion of aesthetics and its changing perception is described in a collection of essays titled The Anti-Aesthetic edited by Hal Foster, featuring writings on sculpture, sociology or postmodern culture. Architectural analysis and aim to pin down some spatial manifestations of muteness is supported by Rodolfo Machado and Rodolphe el-Khoury's *Monolithic Architecture*, which gives a new meaning to solidity of form and dissects the abstraction of certain built objects. With assumption that muteness in architecture can also be performed through arrangement of buildings in space, their number and a degree of similarity, the paper would not be complete without looking at examples of mass and generic, which is interesting in particular for a Dutch architect, Rem Koolhaas. In *S, M, L, XL* written with Bruce Mau, Koolhaas announces a new urbanism for the Metropolis that is based on "ultimate excitement, creative forgetting, disconnection from history and unpredictability"[5] and he defines Generic City as a reflection of unconscious working response to metropolitan conditions.

[4] Marcelo Spina and Georgina Huljich, *Mute Icons - and Other Dichotomies of the Real in Architecture* (New York: Actar Publishers, 2021).
[5] Rem Koolhaas and Bruce Mau, *S, M, L, XL* (New York: Monacelli Press, 1995).

Through analysing the materiality, form and context in which the selected examples are embedded, the essay aims to capture what makes architecture silent and how it affects its reception and exploitation. The first chapter will look closer into characteristics of Minimal sculpture and the role of aesthetics in postmodern society which emerged shortly after. The second chapter will look at physical signs of muteness in architecture, with a closer look at Istanbul's peripheral spaces and an idea of a Generic City in the third chapter. Even though sameness, lack of visual stimulants and detachment are not widely promoted today, this argument intends to accept their inevitability and highlight their important role and potential. Could doubt become architecture's force?

CHAPTER I

1.1 Tracing the origins of muteness: Minimalist Art

Almost any approximately geometric, vaguely austere, more or less monochromatic, and generally abstract-looking work has been or is likely to get labelled Minimal. And, conversely, almost anything labelled Minimal will automatically be seen by some as starkly austere, monochromatic, abstract and so forth, irrespective of its actual appearance. The origins of this reach back to the 1960s, when a new art movement was growing together with the number of attempts to name it. In 1968 the Museum of Modern Art came up with "The Art of the Real" as a category that would highlight the unframed character of the work abandoning a usual sculptural pedestal in order to share the real space of its viewer [6]. By 1968, "Minimalism" came to widespread usage, winning with other names, such as "Systemic Painting", which the Guggenheim used to emphasise the impersonal quality of the works through their industrialised character [7]. Similar associations are evoked by slightly earlier sculptures by Carl Andre which alternated between readymades of Duchamp and constructivism, using given elements like bricks, wooden blocks or metal plates which he "combined to produce space"[8]. In terms of the broad periodisation of post-war art, Minimal Art has been held up by some commentators as the apotheosis of "modernist idealism", though not, by modernist critics themselves. As Ngai points out, "Art's identification with critical or theoretical discourse about art, in particular, seems to have become one of the most important problems informing the making, dissemination, and reception of art in our time—as important, perhaps, as the loss of the antithesis between the work of art and the commodity. The 'merely interesting' conceptual art of the 1960s and 1970s seems to have been a concerted effort to grapple with this."[9] Paradoxically or not, it is noted that this art movement is dependent on the viewer, and also condemned to words, as Michael Fried wrote, "criticism inextricably linked with modernist painting, has set itself the role of a close cousin, staying only few steps behind." [10] This is what three-dimensional, mute objects also demand.

1.2 Anti Form

In the second half of the 20th century, the term sculpture began to be more and more obscure. Together with other artists of his generation, Robert Morris took on the journalistic task of mapping out the theory and describing new artistic attitudes. His Notes on Sculpture, four essays laying down the conditions for Minimalism, were published between 1966 and 1969 in Artforum, American magazine with its distinctive square format. Just before publishing the fourth part, entitled Beyond Objects, Morris published a short text entitled Anti Form, which, although not belonging to the Notes series, seems to have formulated the essence of the art theory debates in the clearest possible way. The concept of anti form expressed an attitude against formalism and criticised the "presentness"[11] of a work of art.

[6] [7] [8] Hal Foster et al., *Art Since 1900* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2011).
[9] Sianne Ngai, "OUR AESTHETIC CATEGORIES: AN INTERVIEW WITH SIANNE NGAI
The cute, the interesting, and the zany" interview by Adam Jasper, *Cabinet Magazine*, Fall 2011, https://www.cabinetmagazine.org/issues/43/jasper_ngai.php.
[10] Fried, Michael, *Three American Painters: Kenneth Noland, Jules Olitski, Frank Stella* (New York: Garland, 1965.
[11] Robert Morris, *Uwagi o rzezbie. Teksty*. (Muzeum Sztuki w Lodzi, 2010).

Essays and numerous statements by the artists indicate that the search for the most universal language of art, in which there would be no room for individual expression of the work, was accompanied by the conviction that there was a need to revise the habits related to the reception of the work. "Forms without expression" were to show how real experience is related to aesthetic experience, how stereotypes related to the reception of art weaken the strength of this reception. The *Anti Form*, presented by Morris in 1968, seems to have closed the stage of minimal art. From then on, the critics would follow the steps of the above-mentioned artists under the banner of conceptual art.

CHAPTER II

2.1 Monolith or the mystery of the unseen

The term "monolithic architecture" applies to objects made from a single piece of material, historically stone, so buildings that are carved, cast or excavated. Being one of the first noted building methods, history of these practices reaches back more than thousand years BC. One of the most astounding examples can be found in Lalibela, Ethiopia, where the Church of Saint George was carved downwards from a type of volcanic tuff in the late 12th or early 13th century AD. On first approach the site appears wholly inaccessible, with sheer drops on every side and no access bridge. It is accessed via a very narrow man-made canyon, spiralling downwards, which changes to a tunnel close to the church, to further conceal its presence. Its cross-shaped plan is visible from a closer distance, together with modest, but detailed ornamentation and a monumental base. What makes the church in Lalibela stand out is the fact that all its external walls are visible, revealing the geometric form. Another temple which was carved out, however, in a different manner is Al-Khazneh in Petra, Jordan. The structure is believed to be built in a solid sandstone cliff during the 1st century AD, where the only externally visible element is the elaborate facade. Even though many of the building's architectural details have eroded away during the two thousand years since it was carved and sculpted, the conspicuous symbolic layer of the object is dominating the experience of a visitor, which is contrasted with its plain and simple interior. Representational sculptures, columns with detailed capitals and tympans seem not to remain silent, on the contrary, they intend to tell the whole story immediately. Such a comparison poses a question if all monoliths can be perceived mute? Maybe due to a well-protected and inaccessible location at the edge of a deep desert canyon, the temple in Petra could "allow itself" to such directness?

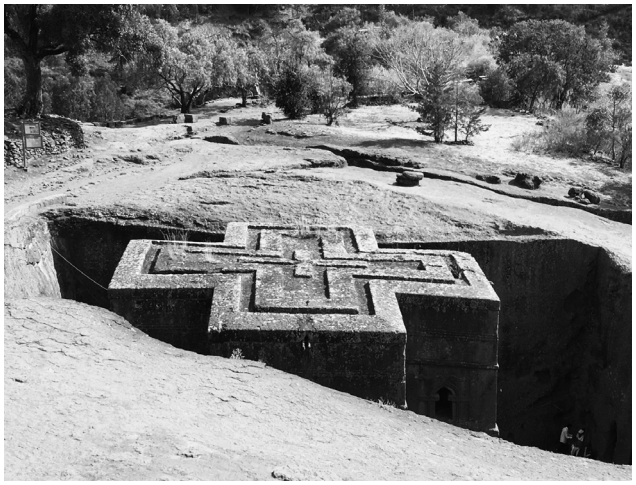

Fig. 2 Church of Saint George, Lalibela, Ethiopia.

source: bbc.co.uk

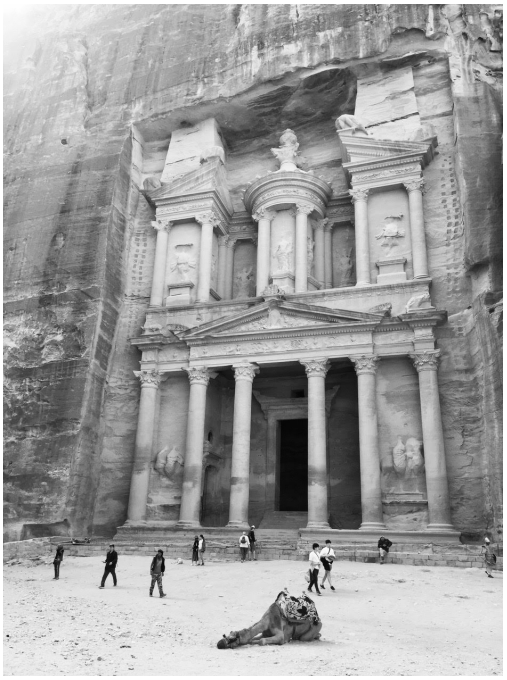

Fig. 3 Al-Khazneh, Petra, Jordan.

Photograph taken by the author (2018).

Moving significantly forward to the middle of the 20th century, an example of a cast monolith will be evoked. During the times when defensive properties of mute architecture were most desired, concrete, casted in place objects had been scattered widely in Europe, in particular on the Atlantic coasts, which delineated fronts of the II World War. In the late 1930s, German engineers improved the Siegfried Line, fortifications facing the French Maginot Line. Special focus was directed to the Channel Islands, where a small island Guernsey got massively supplied with cement and steel. The most visible elements of the so-called Atlantic Wall were observation towers, among which was MP3 Pleinmont, built in 1943, based on a project by Fritz Todt and Albert Speer. Thick reinforced concrete, constructed using a continuous-pour method, is pierced by narrow horizontal openings facing the sea. Raw material and the simplicity of the tower's form give an aura of uncompromising resistance, hostility and fraughting anticipation. All the details, traces of the building process and openings revealing the inner spatial layout had been concealed. Observed today, the adamancy of MP3 Pleinmont is even more striking in the context of the horrendous events it was part of, standing in the middle of a blossomy meadow as a tourist attraction.

In *Monolithic Architecture* by el-Khoury and Machado, we read that "(…) we understand monolithic to signify monolith-like, and hence to confer a sense of solidity and homogeneity on objects that are not and could not be integrally solid and homogenous."[12] Contemporary architecture can rarely afford conceiving a true, textbook example of a monolith in that sense, today however such visual effect can be achieved through skillful detailed design and construction work which withhold the complexity of structure and joints. Paradoxically, remaining silent can at times require the biggest effort. Like the case of a musical instrument, the membrane of an organ, or the protective shell of a machine, solidity can be hollow but not empty.

2.2 Formal measures

Having a general outline of what distinguishes mute buildings from the others, it is now time to look more precisely into details of their forms which create or give an impression of an impenetrable shield. That demands asking through which physical features can a building communicate anything to the external world, and consequently, how can architecture remain quiet. "Ornament is the language through which architecture communicates with a broader public - each remove puts another degree of separation between the profession and the public."[13] The first and very obvious feature of the architecture parlante is a decorated surface, telling a story about its purpose through appearance. The term was first used to refer to architecture created around the time of the French Revolution, by architects like Claude-Nicolas Ledoux, it reached its height of popularity in the late 19th century and early 20th in styles like Beaux Arts and Art Deco (not to mention the postmodernist Chiat/Day Building, 1991, by Gehry and Oldenburg) when a Viennese architect stood in its way in 1908, presenting a lecture titled Ornament and Crime. At times moralising, a definitely controversial text claimed that stripping-off of ornament suddenly became an ethical duty: "The terrible damage and the devastation wrought by the awakening of ornament in aesthetic development can be easily gotten over, (...) But it is a crime that human labour, money and material are thus wrecked in economic terms."[14] Loos however distinguishes ornament, being an additive, secondary or illogical with the structure and material properties element, from style which is a result of bare, honest craftsmanship essential in construction and following the physical properties of used materials. His theory was put into practice with the Looshaus (1912) in Vienna, where an unprepared public found out what a building without ornament or a completely nude structure looked like. At first the street level seems conventional enough, with its four Tuscan or Roman Doric columns suggesting an entrance.

[12] Rodolfo Machado and Rodolphe el-Khoury, *Monolithic Architecture* (Munich: Prestel-Verlag, 1995).
[13] Edwin Heathcote, "Ornament", *The Architectural Review*, 3 September 2015, https://www.architectural-review.com/essays/ornament/ornament-is-the-language-through-which-architecture-communicates-with-a-broader-public.
[14] Adolf Loos, *Ornament and Crime* (Penguin Classics, 2019).

Fig. 4 Atlantic Wall, MP3 Pleinmont, 1943, Guernsey Island.

Photograph taken by the author (2020).

However, it was the upper sections, strikingly white, with three floors marked by plain unadorned windows, starkly outlined in black trim, that displeased the public to such an extent that Loos was forced to compromise and add bronze boxes placed below the windows that would be filled with flowers to soften the naked facade.[15] In fact, what he set up was the demarcation between the past and the future, igniting an intense, still ongoing dialogue.

Openings in a building are considered as a "breathing" element for the building. The more fenestrations a building has, the more it is connected with the outside environment. Muteness in architecture, however, does not completely exclude any perforation of the outer "shell", because what influences the perception of the whole body of a building are the proportions and rhythm in which the piercings were made. A very developed study of a proportional system was created by Dutch Benedictine monk and architect, Dom Hans van der Laan (1904-1991), who understood a volume (of a wall, for instance) not as a mass but as a set of lines, which intervals are crucial in its expression, in other words, our perception translates volumes into lines that we count[16]. An example of a building maintaining its rigid form despite a large number of openings, is Aldo Rossi's Ossuary in San Cataldo Cemetery, Modena (1971). Within the wall-enclosed space, a cubic shape or a seemingly abandoned house emerges. A structure designed as a collective or nondenominational temple to be used for funeral, religious, or civil ceremonies is given a bright terracotta hue. A thick, monochromatic frame's expression is amplified through dark shadows resulting from extreme depth of the windows. Their obsessive repetition and aesthetic monotony "articulates the bureaucratic aspects of death"[17], which certainly is not a pleasant realisation, what is generally confirmed : "This solid terracotta cube is a shipping container for souls, impermanent as a spell in purgatory"[18]. According to Rossi, this concept aimed not for incompleteness from lack of response, but a perceivable state of completeness that remains open-ended.[19] Where others see irritating introversion and formality, "Rossi saw the possibility of stimulating individual identity and, therefore, true difference"[20], what mute architecture could strive for.

[15] Jeanne Willette, "Adolf Loos (1870-1933)", *Art History Unstuffed*, 18 January 2019, https://arthistoryunstuffed.com/adolf-loos-1870-1933-part-two/.
[16] https://domhansvanderlaan.nl/theory-practice/theory/scale-iii-on-the-wall/.
[17 19 20] Spina and Huljich, *Mute Icons - and Other Dichotomies of the Real in Architecture*.
[18] https://failedarchitecture.com/graveyard-of-postmodern-architecture/

Silence of form can compel not only unrest or anxiety, but also a sense of calm and relief. One of the buildings that achieved it can be found in Hasselt, Belgium. Z33 House for Contemporary Art (2019) designed by Francesca Torzo completes a historical urban block in a very restrained, but elegant manner. In the architect's description we read that "The new building form responds to the context: towards the city it folds to accompany the street walkway; towards the garden it folds to welcome the garden in a niche, echoing the facade of the XIX century neighbouring Gin factory. (...) Walking along the street people experience the quietness of a long solid brick wall and a few openings from which one is overlooked by leaves and branches."[21] Here muteness serves as a nod to the historical context, which is given primacy, instead of being challenged. The building *chooses* to be silent towards the street, keeping its intricacy and technical prowess to itself. Torzo's design proves that muteness is not always obliged to contend against the context.

CHAPTER III

One of the most significant and largest metropolitan cities in the world is located on the intersection of Asia and Europe. Istanbul is a city, which has hosted many different civilizations throughout history, has a cosmopolitan structure where people from various backgrounds live together. It can feel counterintuitive to seek silence in such a multilayered, rich and seemingly chaotic area, although, in these conditions, mute buildings can really thrive and display potential. Contemporarily, Istanbul's urban spatial structure has been dominated by three phenomena: informal housing, uncoordinated and uncontrolled urban intensification, and mass housing projects.[22] Those are results of the rapid rural-urban migration in 20th century, which at first brought the informal, illegal settlements called *gecekondu*, what then was targeted by the Turkish government, which created The Housing Development Administration of Turkey (TOKI) meant to provide legal, safe and affordable housing for the less affluent inhabitants and newcomers. Institution has quickly become very influential, in some cases even more than local authorities[23], and continued to push out the city's limits with typified, characteristically uncharacteristic groups of blocks.

Fig. 5 Adolf Loos, Goldman & Salatsch Building, 1912, Vienna, Austria.

Image via Aaron Young.

[21] https://francescatorzo.it/works/n09-z33-hasselt-belgium-2011-2019.
[22] [23] Fatih Terzi and Fulin Bolen, 'The Potential Effects of Spatial Strategies on Urban Sprawl in Istanbul' (2012).

Transport infrastructure and commercial facilities do not always keep up with the pace of rapidly growing TOKI housing units, therefore from the outside, some of them have a bizarre, overwhelming aura of a group of aliens or pioneers, hoping for a bright future on the newly claimed land. It stands out particularly in the case of Kayabaşı neighbourhood located on Istanbul's Western periphery. Rigid, orthogonal layout of each "group" gives a dose of abstraction to the spaces in between the blocks, whose oppressive repetitiveness reminds of a mechanical pulse that accompanied their creation. The neighbourhood surrounded with hilly meadows, landfills, ash and scattered houses does not give a welcoming impression, from the distance, their aligned facades create a clear demarcation line between inner and outer world. However, after observing this housing unit from the inside, with a perspective of an inhabitant, it becomes clear that some of the mentioned attributes may be in fact preferred by the lively crowd occupying bus stops, walkways, sipping Turkish coffee in front of a bakery. On the peripheries of Istanbul, we can see many similar cities within a city forming a rim of a frame of the metropolis. *Mute Icon* associates sameness with muteness, which overall effect "loses discreteness in favour of contributing to the tightening of the continuum. The material becomes the substance of the natural condition of the building: free from the self-consciousness derived from the anxiety of understanding, it becomes intrinsic to the value of the whole."

Although, does *same* equal *generic*? The two words seem interchangeable after reading the definition: "*generic* - shared by, typical of, or relating to a whole group of similar things, rather than to any particular thing"[24]. Generic refers not only to an undifferentiated common quality or ability, which is prior to the individual, but also to the idea of a 'life-activity,' 'originating,' 'giving rise,' 'becoming.'[25] The term was planted into the architectural discourse by Rem Koolhaas, describing a Generic City as a reflection of unconscious working response to metropolitan conditions. He emphasises that today "cities actually grow faster than humans"[26] and in order to supply the requirements and accommodate the global world, the city breaks all kinds of connections that can be an obstacle for its development process. Therefore, all the traditional methods of urban design are dismissed and whatever grows fast is accepted. Generic Cities present a strange sense of familiarity. It is all the same building blocks that are constantly being assembled in different ways. Koolhaas's Generic City thrives on the liminal residual zones in between cities, which are free from conscious state politics and the site of endless commercial manipulation. Even though the author does not clearly position himself as a proponent or an opponent of the described phenomenon, he is certainly fascinated with it: "The great originality of the Generic City is simply to abandon what doesn't work - what has outlived its use - to break up with the blacktop of idealism with the jackhammers of realism and to accept whatever grows in its place."[27] What seems vital in Koolhaas reasoning is definitely the need to observe and reconcile ourselves with the fact that generic, repetitive, abstract and mute objects are present and do not seem to suddenly disappear, based on the presented examples. Overlooking them poses the risk of losing the opportunity to understand silent forms, recognize their potential and discover what they have to offer.

[24] 'Generic' in *Cambridge Dictionary*, https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/generic, accessed 25.11.2022.
[25] https://genericarchitecture.org.
[26] [27] Koolhaas and Mau, *S, M, L, XL*.

Fig. 6 Aldo Rossi, San Cataldo Cemetery, Modena, Italy.

source: failedarchitecture.com

Fig. 7 Francesca Torzo, Z33 House for Contemporary Art, Hasselt, Belgium.

source: archdaily.com

Fig. 8 Kayabaşı housing, 2010, Istanbul, Turkey.

Photograph taken by the author (2022).

CONCLUSIONS

By limiting legibility and visual pleasure, mute architecture demands closer scrutiny. Anti-aesthetics, being its inherent feature, seems to be the key to understanding the relevance and placing Minimal Art, contemporary culture and architecture side by side in this paper. The collection of essays edited by Hal Foster undertakes the challenge of determining the type of thinking "resistant both to academic modernism and political reaction"[28] which are not intended as a negation of representation in art or aesthetics in general. Anti-aesthetic aims to "destruct the order of representation in order to reinscribe" it. The idea behind this argument is to ask if the aesthetic categories, which have been reigning for centuries, are still valid? Sianne Ngai focuses on aesthetic experiences grounded in equivocal affects, the ones grounded on feelings that explicitly clash, releasing energy, creating new lookouts.

The essay presents visual muteness as a potential answer to Foster's demand to inscribe visual representation in a new way. Mute and abstract aesthetics are relevant today, because of their illegibility, indifference, counterintuition and doubt, which invite the idea of complexity and ambiguity, which are crucial in understanding the present. When looked at closely, silence offers mutability and plenitude of interpretations and re-readings. However it may seem, its resistance conveys resilience, and its introversion stimulates communication.

[28] Hal Foster, *The Anti-Aesthetics. Essays on Postmodern Culture* (Washington: Bay Press, 1983).

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