BAZON BROCK, born 1936 in Stolp/Pommern; 1957 to 1964 study of German language and literature, philosophy, history of art and political science in Zurich, Hamburg and Frankfurt a.M.; at the same time training and activity as dramatic advisor; 1957 first action piece; 1959 first happenings with Hundertwasser, Kaprow, Beuys, Vostell and Paik; since 1968 visitor schools at documenta in Kassel; 1965 to 1976 teaching of aesthetics at the University of Fine Arts, Hamburg; 1977 to 1980 Professor of the University of Applied Arts, Vienna; since 1980 Professor at the University of Wuppertal, focusing on neuronal aesthetics, imaging sciences; 1992 appointment as Doctor of Technical Sciences at the ETH Zurich; Co-founder of the research group Kultur und Strategie; 2004 Award of the Federal Cross of Merit, 1st class.

INTERVIEW WITH BAZON BROCK

My work is marked by the mixing of physically perceptible space with virtual worlds. This act of mixing soon leads us to ask in which spaces we actually find ourselves. Can you please explain your approach with reference to the subject of media façades?

There are basically three important aspects. The first is architecture parlante, or speaking architecture. In the modern period this was rejected as a form of methodological weakness until it was rediscovered by the postmodern in the form of Venturi’s book “Learning from Las Vegas” in 1972. Postmodernism regarded the design of the external skin as a means of attracting attention to the contents of the building. In this way, the postmodern swiftly approached the standards of the modern because, when Mies van der Rohe regarded the use of a glass façade to connect inside and outside as democratic and recommended this as a way of articulating ubiquity and presence, then this was exactly what was meant by speaking architecture. Mies’ modernism sought to use speaking architecture to express the social and political self-image of its occupants and a glass façade was an ideal means of removing this distinction between public and private.

Hence the media façade belongs to the theoretical tradition of architecture parlante and can, basically, be seen as close to Venturi’s idea, with the only difference being that the media façade enables the representation of many different messages. I do not have to move far if I wish to encounter a range of styles, volumes and materials, because the media façade can concentrate all of these in one place. And this can create huge savings when one considers that a change in the ownership of a building can often lead to costly changes to the façade – especially where issues of corporate design are involved.

The disadvantage of this summarizing quality of architecture parlante is, of course, the fact that such buildings are harder to classify. If every company were to adopt such an approach and the façade of every building given the media treatment then there would be an inevitable loss of presence and individuality. It would be wrong to
use such technology everywhere. If media architecture wishes to demonstrate its strengths then the use of its reductivist approach should be highly targeted. The maxim “less is more” applies here too and the relentless desire to show that everything is possible is counterproductive.

The second important aspect of the media façade is anthropological and involves, principally, the notion of facial mimicry which holds that any confrontation between two realities must lead to a mutual reaction and that only then does a situation come to life. This means that the media façade must become a means of expressing – of communicating a sense of surprise, disgust, anger and tenderness, etc. It must be equipped with the ability to take into account the mood of the viewer or, put another way, buildings must develop the ability to reflect the viewer’s expectations. This principle is indispensable; it is derived from the notion of remote action and is comparable to the way in which two animals use facial expressions to signal if they wish to threaten each other or not. It is precisely this ability which enables animals to resolve disputes at a distance.

Media façades – but not architecture – have such potential and this potential could be realized if they were equipped (through, for example, the use of camera recognition technology) to react and, therefore, set up a dialogue. This principle of facial mimicry is extremely important precisely because it raises completely new possibilities. It is now possible for a building and its viewer to interact and for media façades to engage in the anthropologically important concept of mutual reaction. A company could, for instance, use advertising to evaluate whether its products respond to the needs of its consumers; or set up a dialogue with an instructional character by, for example, using technology to encourage environmental awareness amongst its customers by showing that the attractiveness of a product should depend as much upon the extent to which it is sustainable as upon price.

The third aspect is derived from the fact that the media façade is seen simultaneously by many people, as a result of which it creates – in the democratic sense – a true piece of the public realm.

Which brings us to the second area that I would like to discuss with you. Urban spaces are becoming ever more complex but the aesthetic differences between their buildings are being interminably leveled out.

Stop. It is not a question of being leveled out. The fact that spatial qualities are falling ever more into line is not a sign of leveling out but actually an aspect of the notion of Utopia. “Utopos” is, by its very definition, nowhere. But nowhere can only be made manifest by everywhere. Utopia describes a situation in which nowhere is special precisely because everywhere is. The architecture of the Hilton Group is, for example, the same everywhere which means, for the visitor, that he moves in a sort of utopian space. He can no longer use the architecture as a means of finding out where he is – and this is exactly how he wants it. Rather than complaining that differences are disappearing we should recognize that this is Utopia and that the task is to develop those other more mental abilities which we associate with Utopia; the abilities to imagine, make free associations and lend meaning. For, the more that differences disappear, the more I will have to rely on such abilities.

My suspicion is that this Utopia will make it very difficult for people to develop a sense of security.

Yes, because they lack the spiritual energy. In other words, technology has created the worldwide potential to truly create Utopia – or, to put it another way, the universal nowhere. And the question is whether humanity can survive this situation. How many people have the ability to mentally record differences and locate themselves physically without requiring external signals? This realization of Utopia means that one no longer needs to travel and that the mental work of creating an image of the world can be done at home.