Merz World: Processing the Complicated Order
Yona Friedman in conversation
with Hans Ulrich Obrist

YONA FRIEDMAN What is most interesting for me in the Merzbau is what I would call a "Merz Principle." The Merz Principle means a random agglomeration of things that form a whole. I think this Merz Principle exists in everything. But first I have to clarify certain basic concepts: 1. Reality around us is not isolated facts, but rather processes. It is very important that it is not one part of the process that is interesting for us, but the process as a whole. The problem in particle physics is mathematical models. Mathematical models are absolutely perfect, except that they are unable to describe a process. They are conceived in order to give results. Now, in reality we are not really curious about the results except in engineering, for approximations, but we are interested in processes. A process can be described only and exclusively by its history, by a linear presentation. It means that we can have a different, less mathematical, and more precise presentation of the world around us by sequential description.

I sometimes use a very simple example: the space-time continuum is four-dimensional. In string theory it even goes from nine to 11 dimensions. And I pretend that we have a completely perfect, one-dimensional, linear description of the world: the DVD. The DVD gives you the presentation of a three-dimensional reality and of time. And it gives it simply by a very, very long sequence of 0s and 1s. These sequences are completely non-understandable. This means that we have a one-dimensional presentation of the physical world, a complete presentation, but it is not readable. It can be decoded but that is very, very difficult.

The second term that I use differently to the term of "complexity" is the term "complicated order." In complexity, extreme complexity, you have, for example, a finite number of elements; where there is a direct relation between all of them, there will be only a finite complexity, a finite number of elements. In the complicated order it is different. The complicated order is not a graph but a funny curve, which can go any way. Again: it is a one-dimensional relation, but for a finite number of elements I have infinite possible complicated orders. This is a very big difference. And what we meet is the complicated order. A characteristic of the complicated order is that you cannot make an abridged form through mathematical formulas. One such complicated order that we use everyday is alphabetical order.
We consider that it is an order, but there is no rule to it. The only rule is that we learnt it by heart when we were children. When I was in China I realized that it is absolutely not evident for the Chinese why c follows b. There is no explanation whatsoever. It is simply the way we learn it.

This complicated order is far more general than we think. My dog is a very intelligent being. He lives in a world where he is not using mathematical formulas at all, but he completely understands the world and shows absolutely healthy reactions. What I want to say is that you cannot describe behavior by mathematical formulae, except as sequences.

The difficulty with the city, with architectural products, is that they are based on behavior. Without the behavior of the user they are not complete. The only thing that completes them is that they are used. A building that has no user is not a building. It is a ruin. This shows that in architectural cities the planners are supposed to do something to satisfy the complicated order of behavior. But this is impossible because behavior is far more complicated than the DVD, and far more complicated than the alphabet. It is erratic. That means one step of somebody's behavior does not give us the slightest information about what will be its next step. It can be anything. I think that all this is in a way an explanation, the result for the Merzbau. For me, the Merzbau was one of the first objects to trigger this way of thinking. And we can say that it gets into every field. Therefore, I was saying, in a way jokingly, that we have a Merz principle and we live in a Merz world, in a world which is essentially erratic.

Intelligence starts with improvisation and this is true in every field. I have to be more precise about what I mean by improvisation. Many psychologists consider that we think in words but I think we don't think in words. We think in images. The word is only an abstraction to an image in the head. My daughter, for example, when she was four years old once said, “Oh, I see it in my head.” This sort of image is a kind of improvisation. A good example is science: Newton and Einstein were improvisers. They had ideas born through improvisation. Only then was their work to find mathematical justification. So in this kind of work we improvise inside an erratic world and then, after that, we try to rationalize. And I think this is important as a principle because in classical architecture, in functionalist architecture, everywhere, it is first presented by the rational aspect. But it is in fact the rational aspect that should come afterwards.

First of all, it is an image—I don't like the word “vision”—that creative people build. They
build this image and rationalize the theory after. For example, when I wrote my book Realizable Utopias (Utopies réalisables, L’Éclat, Paris 2000) I started on this basis: first there is an unsatisfactory situation and you imagine a way to get out of it; once you have this image, you look for how to do it. I think that gives perhaps certain hints about methods. Methods are not rules. Method is a routine. That is a difference. And I think that we really have to be honest enough that an architect starts with an image, starts with the imagination. Very often the poverty of architecture is based on the fact that we start with words, with theory, with the paper. We have to have the image in our head before putting it on paper. Therefore, I try to let people simply do the thing. People make constructions the way they see it in their heads. Moreover, it is very important that it is technically easily realizable. That means that the planning should start in their head, planning without the paper, without the drawing. The drawing is only a tool of communication. This is in a way new, but it is also thousands of years old. I am trying to present it in a way adapted to how things are today. And therefore, I see that the first step is Marcel Duchamp. The person who “used” a readymade; but before he had this idea, he had this image of the thing. However, the Merzbau is more interesting because it is not a readymade; it is randomly made.

In addition to this, again, the image is a continuous process. I am sure that Schwitters didn’t see in advance what he was going to do. It developed step by step. It was a sequence, and is a pity that it couldn’t be recorded as a sequence. And I think, evidently, that the city is like this: it is a process, it is not a product. Architecture is this way. Science is also that way, and so on. And now another factor comes in: the process is emotional. It is not rational. We rationalize art. And it may be that I am not right. This might give a completely different approach to architectural objects as well. There is no final state, it is a long, ongoing process. In this ongoing process everybody is participating, not only the architect.

HANS ULRICH OBERT This leads us to what you did at the Musée d’Art moderne de la Ville de Paris, for the Nuit Blanche in 2003. You presented a kind of Do-it-Yourself set of instructions. You made available a lot of this white polyurethane wrapping material, and created what one could call a very fast Merzbau. It was a Merzbau that started in one night. It started empty, with a few structures you put in, and then developed some forms of very strange density, which actually led
to all kinds of layers. By 3 o'clock in the morning, some graffiti artists from the Parisian suburbs appropriated your structure and painted graffiti all over. So it is no longer about the city, it becomes a city. Can you tell us a little bit about the rules or the method of this project?

YONA FRIEDMANN Let us call it Merz Action, not Merzbau Acting. My personal experience is that the most one can do is trigger a process. The process goes its own way, but you have to start it. People tell themselves it is possible, and then they go on their own. At the Biennale I was doing a project, and I just couldn't stop the workers, because they were carrying on on their own. I had a flight to catch, and they were continuing it. So there are elements in this object that I saw only later, after I had left, in a photograph. I think that this is important: to realize this kind of process.

Also, I don't talk about works of art, I talk about processes of art. We know that the public completes the work of art with its associations. I find it almost more reasonable that you make a work of art, and somebody adds something to it. From your point of view, this might be an error of aesthetics. But it is not an error from the human point of view. When I am speaking about process, I am always thinking about the human actor in it.
And this is what makes it continuous. Be it science, architecture, or whatever you want: it is not simply interaction. It is an ongoing process, an endless process. I was once saying at an architects' meeting that the building isn't finished when the architect walks off the scene. The building is finished hundreds of years later. This is even the case for demolished buildings. In Berlin, many buildings were demolished, but after the buildings had disappeared, the foundations and the property around it determined how it was rebuilt. With the World Trade Center they have been digging out the foundations for three years. All these acts are very long-lasting and that is a very different view from what we seem to have in modern architecture. However, it is true in politics. Politics are determined by hundreds of years of past history, by automatisms. We are brainwashed by history. The political process is typically such a never-ending process.

To sum up what I was saying: I was simply trying to change our way of looking at things.

YONA FRIEDMANN The Gesamtkunstwerk means that the artwork is made by the public. It is really the public who create it, and it depends on the public—what they see in it and how they accept it. We cannot turn the switch and tell the public that something does not exist. In India, for example, musicians told me several times: "We play otherwise, we play differently, depending on the public. We feel the public. And the same musical piece is not the same, if we are playing to this public or to that public." The public does not participate visibly, it is only sensed. And that is really the Gesamtkunstwerk for me.

HANS ULRICH OBRIST At this point I want to bring Constant A. Nieuwenhuys into the discussion, and your exchange with him, because I think it is on this very point that there was a certain disagreement between Constant's idea of New Babylon and your idea of the city. Knowing that...
you had this very unique correspondence with Constant, I wanted to ask you if you could tell us a little bit about this.

YONA FRIEDMANN Constant is one of those people who make a work of art and then it is finished. But I am not looking to make a work of art; I am not able to finish it myself. It is only the public, only the user, who can finish it. I very often give a simple example. Let us take a look at social housing, a tower block 20 floors high. On every floor, the architect has drawn the same plan. However, if you enter each apartment, the arrangement is different on every floor. Because people correct and change the architect’s work. And then other people come in, and it changes again. Or the same people change it.

HANS ULRICH OBRIST Another thing that is discussed in Dietmar Eigers’ essay are the architectural pioneers of the early 20th century. We talked about Taut and also Finsterlin and the link of that architecture to Schwitters’ Merzbau. In a recent interview done for the Tinguely Museum, Daniel Spoerri was asked about literature and the influence of the Merzbau, and it is interesting that he said that in the 1960s there was hardly any literature about the Merzbau. It was really only through firsthand sources, through people who
had actually known Schwitters, that it was possible to have access to texts. It was very complicated. A similar thing was true for all these architects like Finsterlin or Taut. There was a great degree of amnesia about many of them. Finsterlin was only rediscovered in the 1970s. Thinking about your generation of architects, I was wondering what your relationship was to these historical examples of the avant-garde of the early 20th century. Did you have access to them, or was it also more indirectly, through very scarce information, that you connected.

Yona Friedman: I will give two different answers. The first is simply an anecdote. I knew Spoerri before he was starting to be an artist. One day I was with him in a café (he was with Tinguely, and we were neighbors) and in the café there were all kinds of things left on the table. And Spoerri suddenly told us: “I can glue it there, and this will be a work of art.” That means I was present when he was inventing his tableau piège. I mention this only for the anecdote.

But to answer your question: when I was very young, I thought very positively about modern architecture. However, then came the Second World War—and I am practically a product of this World War; of a world were all the rules became somehow invalid. Nothing was normal and nothing was adapted to this rupture in the world. So I understood that the need, the possibility to adapt to conditions, can abruptly and brutally change. How do you live in a city where the water services are broken? How do you produce food in a city where there is no food? I found the answers in the poor neighborhoods, in the shanty towns where you have to find a way to produce your food, where you have to get your water somehow. In January 1945, I was living in a city without water, so we were drinking snow. These special conditions can happen at any moment... look at Baghdad, or the Tsunami victims on TV. A city essentially is a tool for survival. It has to be. What is survival? Again: it cannot be planned, it is improvised under pressure and it is invented by the people. People in danger become inventive.

So I think, and I don’t mean it pejoratively, that all the absurdity of the Bauhaus was goodwill, too much goodwill, instead of adapting to reality. The Second World War was a lesson in reality and now we are again in a similar state. In certain periods and certain places, architecture becomes above all a status symbol. Without doubt, this is a very important element. But I think that the status symbol can also be invented by the user. In many countries people paint and decorate their houses in their own way. You saw a part of my apartment. The postman was
telling me that he wished he could do the same. So I told him to just do it. And that is exactly the point: making it easy, this adaptation.

HANS ULRICH OBERTH I have a very last question. I have always been very fascinated by the fact that only a few months after Schwitters started to work on the Merzbau, Stefan Zweig wrote a very important text called Die Monotonisierung der Welt (On the Monotonization of the World, 1925), talking about globalization. Reading Stefan Zweig is almost like reading globalization critiques of today. It feels a little bit like reading Edward Glissant. One becomes aware that there have been different periods of globalization. As Glissant points out, at the moment of such homogenizing forces of globalization, as we experience it now and as Zweig seems to have experienced in 1924–1925, one possible answer to globalization in the form of resistance is through creating non-homogenized spaces. I don’t think that it is by accident that the whole Merzbau discussion has come into architecture and, particularly, into the museum discussion at a moment when there is an ever increased degree of homogenization, of that sort of global branding of museum architecture. To cut a long story short, I wanted to ask you if you could tell us a little bit about your idea of globalization, about Glissant’s idea of mondialité as opposed to globalization.

YOKA FRIEDMANN I use the term “mass individualism.” It seems to be a contradiction, but we are living in it. Everything is homogenized and made uniform, and each of us has made an effort to break away from this and to introduce ourselves as individuals. This simply means that I have to be different from my neighbor. I think that there are very long-term examples. The most globalizing phenomenon in all human history was the incredible invention of languages, acoustic signs that are organized in a certain way. The whole thing is incredibly complex. Still, there are no two people who speak exactly the same language. Each of us has his own language. All literature is based on it: a writer is characterized by the fact that he writes differently to another. And the reader reads the same text differently to another. So this incredible globalization invention, our articulated language, is incredibly complicated. Moreover, each of us overcomplicates it in order to get his own way. The actual globalization is similar. The problem is that it is being developed too fast. It tries to impose things and this is what causes the absurdity. A slow globalization would take, say, 500 years. If it happens in 20 years, it leads to a crisis.