

**Michelangelo Sabatino, foreword by Kurt W. Forster, *Pride in Modesty: Modernist Architecture and the Vernacular Tradition in Italy*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2010, 341 pp., \$70, ISBN 978-0-802097-05-7**

Lucy M. Maulsby

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While most of the authors represented in the anthology share the opinion that the integration of visual arts programs into universities has the potential to generate beneficial impacts for both the institution and the art school, including breaking down disciplinary silos, providing forums for debate, and modelling the shift away from hierarchical learning toward contextual and comprehensive learning, several authors highlight current and potential problems of the art school in a university setting. The issue of how to assess artistic investigations in accordance with university research standards appears in several essays, raising the question of whether art education does have different paradigms than other subjects. A number of authors express anxiety about a potential lack of autonomy and minimal funding for art departments within the corporate university structure that rewards quantifiable results. NASCAD professor Bruce Barber's essay, "The Question (of Failure) in Art Research," examines the requirements of "blended" art PhD programs in comparison to PhDs in other fields, and makes an in-depth comparison of programs of The University of Western Ontario, York University, and the European Graduate School. Citing Marcel Duchamp's broken *Large Glass* and "dust breeding," he reminds the reader that a work of art need not succeed in a traditional academic sense, and that the implicit failure of the work can, strangely, be integral to its meaning. Likewise, using the example of Warhol, Barber notes that the artist need not progress through the academy to become a seminal figure in the art world. He cautions that the line between artistic success and failure is a fine line, akin to the one between madness and genius. In a success-driven institution, is the artist at liberty to take the same risks that she would in the studio? In Barber's words, "It is wise to reflect on the status of failure in the fomenting of progressive critical art practice" (54).

The editors organized the essays in "Rethinking the Contemporary Art School" alphabetically, rather than thematically. While this structure was intended to facilitate "intertextual,"

"cross-disciplinary and cross-cultural readings" (3), it is somewhat disorienting, particularly as the authors are not identified with their institutions at the beginning of their essays. This forces the reader to frequently flip to the back of the book to check the notes on contributors to contextualize their viewpoints. The editors refrained from constructing a theory of how art education is evolving globally, or how it might be improved. Rather, they provide a platform for the authors to share their experiences, observations, and opinions, shaped by their particular perspectives in North America and Europe. The viewpoints of American, Canadian, and Australian academics are equally represented, each country contributing four or five essays to the collection. Unfortunately, only two authors represent European viewpoints: Mikkel Bogh (The Schools of Visual Arts at the Royal Danish Academy of the Fine Arts) and Jeremy Welsh (The Bergen National Academy, Norway). Bogh's and Welsh's essays suggest that the issues and tensions in European art education are similar to those in North America, but the absence of offerings from Germany, France, Italy, and other countries prominent in global artistic culture leaves a noticeable gap in the text.

Reading the book feels somewhat like attending a conference, where the panelists put their ideas on the table and the audience poses the questions that reveal the links and contrasts in the speakers' theories. There is no afterword to neatly tie up the information, or to make recommendations—but this seems appropriate, given the unsettled flux of post-secondary art education. The primary value of the book is that it lays out problematic issues as they appear from a wide range of perspectives. Like a good conference, the value of this book will be the debates that take place in the bar afterwards. The reader is left with the message that art education has arrived at a critical juncture, and is poised to move forward into territory that is unknown, but full of potential.

CATHERINE HEARD  
Artist, Independent Scholar

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Michelangelo Sabatino, foreword by Kurt W. Forster, *Pride in Modesty: Modernist Architecture and the Vernacular Tradition in Italy*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2010, 341 pp., \$70, ISBN 978-0-802097-05-7.

Michelangelo Sabatino's *Pride in Modesty* is a detailed and evocative account of the emergence and appropriation of the vernacular tradition in Italian architectural culture from the early 1900s to the 1970s. Sabatino argues that the vernacular, in all of its rich variety and complexity, served as a critical point of reference for modernist architects as they struggled to engage with the rapid social, political, and economic changes that

transformed Italy in the twentieth century. The book brings a valuable new perspective to the scholarship on Italian modernism, much of which has focused on the Italian example in relationship to international avant-garde trends and on the fascist regime's engagement with propagandistic cultural production. Although both of these themes are addressed, by shifting the reader's attention to the study, reception, and influence of vernacular traditions, Sabatino constructs an alternative narrative that serves as a basis for evaluating the continuities within Italian architectural culture in the twentieth century.

Sabatino begins his chronological account by probing the efforts made by ethnographers, preservationists, and de-

signers (artists and architects) around the turn of the century to document and record the living conditions and art forms of the agrarian peasant class. Organized by the ethnographer Lamberto Loria, the 1911 *Exhibition of Ethnography (Mostra di etnografia)* in Rome displayed in a picturesque setting the traditional dwellings and material culture found in the various regions of Italy. The design and staging of this section stood in sharp contrast to the axial formality employed elsewhere in the exhibition. Constructed on site, typical vernacular houses built with traditional techniques and materials offered a largely bourgeois urban audience a glimpse of a continuous and still vibrant native building tradition unspoiled by academic influences. Sabatino argues here and elsewhere in the book that the vernacular provided an alternative to the dominant narrative of Italian national identity, which favoured the classical tradition since the unification of Italy in 1861. Following the installation, a number of symposia, conferences, and journals dedicated to folk arts and vernacular architecture spread this kind of ethnographic appreciation to a larger public. Beyond the academy, the emergence of a new leisure industry, brought about by new rail and road networks, drew Italians into remote rural environments where they could experience peasant cultures first-hand. Romanticized images of peasant and working-class culture appeared in the work of artists and literary figures in the first decades of the twentieth century. For example, Sabatino suggests that the “grace and humility” captured in Futurist painter Giacomo Balla’s *Peasant Woman in Front of Two Reed Huts* (1910) represents the artist’s solidarity with Italy’s rural peasant class, and he points to the work of other artists who similarly sought to portray the daily hardship of peasants in a sympathetic way (49). However, he does not discuss how such images obscured the plight of Italy’s rural poor. In contrast, the writer-activist Gabriele D’Annunzio cultivated primitive and savage associations in his depictions of the rugged beauty of the Italian countryside and the people who were its primary inhabitants. Noting that their motives were not identical, Sabatino demonstrates that their work is representative of a growing intellectual and artistic interest in the vernacular as an alternative, and potentially subversive, national narrative.

In the 1920s the vernacular tradition also served as a resource for renewing architecture and the decorative arts in Italy. Once again, the exhibitions and, to a lesser extent, books serve as Sabatino’s primary mode of tracing and analyzing larger cultural shifts. In 1921 architects Gustavo Giovannoni, Marcello Piacentini, and Vittorio Morpurgo launched the modest *Exhibition of Rustic Art (Mostra di arte rustica)* in Rome. Covering a wide variety of regions throughout Italy, the exhibition not only documented vernacular buildings but also argued that they contained valuable lessons for practitioners, an approach that stood in sharp contrast to the documentary thrust of the 1911 *Exhibition of Ethnography*.

A year later the powerful Artistic Association for the Cultivation of Architecture, which included all three of the exhibition’s organizers among its members, launched a series of publications dedicated to the documentation of minor architecture, or *architettura minore*. Translated by Sabatino, the introduction to the first volume reads: “By minor architecture we mean those architectural manifestations found in our cities that don’t necessarily fall under the rubric of monuments...but are modest works like houses, groups of buildings... that is—architectural prose alongside poetry” (59). No longer concerned only with the rural traditions of Italian peasants, the group expanded their interest in the vernacular to include the modest, typically domestic, buildings that characterized Italian cities and towns. Sabatino’s work sheds new light on one of the most significant architects in the interwar period, Piacentini, by drawing attention to his early interest in the ordinary buildings that had long served as the backdrop for the monumental classical buildings and urban schemes most often studied by architects and historians. However, Sabatino stops short of tracing possible links between this phase of Piacentini’s career and his work for the fascist regime of the 1930s and 40s, much of which is dismissed as “pompous and heavy-handed” (65). In the 1920s the vernacular served as the grounds for formal inspiration in the work of numerous architects, including Giovannoni, whose idealized interpretation of rustic motifs and winding streets gave his Garden City Aniene (Città-Giardino Aniene, 1920) a picturesque character. In a different fashion, the Milanese architect Giulio Ulisse Arata fused a muscular rustic sensibility with the mysticism of the Liberty Style, the Italian interpretation of Art Nouveau. In the same period, and with Piacentini’s support, cultural critics and reformers such as Antonio Maraini saw the rediscovery of peasant art as a means to revive the flagging production of decorative arts in Italy, an approach that showed the influence of the Arts and Crafts Movement in England, Germany, and elsewhere.

In contrast to those dedicated to the “picturesque revival” of the 1920s, artists and architects in the following decade appreciated the vernacular for its ability to evoke an authentic national tradition that was untarnished by the false promises of nineteenth-century bourgeois historicism. As Sabatino demonstrates, despite the significant differences between the Futurist, *Novecento*, and Rationalist movements, all took inspiration from the forms and materiality of pre-industrial buildings of the Italian peninsula and Mediterranean basin. In particular, these artists, as well as wealthy clients for whom they provided weekend and vacation homes, were drawn to the landscape of the island of Capri and the Amalfi Coast, where the spare white geometries of basic dwellings fell along a dramatic and rugged topography toward a glistening sea. Futurists like Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, the author of the incendiary *The*

*Foundation and Manifesto of Futurism* of 1909, celebrated the raw and dynamic tensions produced by this landscape of vivid contrasts. For the Rationalists, particularly those associated with the Gruppo 7, the simple residential architecture of the Mediterranean coast provided a tangible link to the classical and vernacular past and evoked myths of origin, both narratives that could be easily married to Mussolini's fascist politics. In addition, vernacular buildings served as a model for presenting architecture as a natural extension of its environment. Sabatino's close reading of courtyard houses by the architects Luigi Figini and Gino Pollini, on the one hand, and Gio Ponti and Bernard Rudofsky, on the other, clarifies how a shared interest in the vernacular could yield profoundly different results, even among architects who were oriented to the mythic and poetic qualities of *Mediterraneità*.

Rationalism served as a large umbrella under which architects with dramatically different convictions operated. For architects and engineers such as Giuseppe Pagano, straightforward rural buildings fashioned by anonymous builders represented a model of economical, spatial, and material construction. Trained as an architect and engineer, Pagano promoted his interest in rural architecture, a term that was sympathetic to Mussolini's contemporary embrace of "rural" values, in *Casabella*, the journal he co-edited, as well as in the seminal *Exhibition of Rural Italian Architecture (Architettura rurale italiana)* at the VI Milan Triennale, organized with Werner (Guarniero) Daniel in 1936. In contrast to earlier exhibitions that had favoured sketches, drawings, and chronological narratives, *Rural Italian Architecture* presented artfully composed black-and-white photographs organized by type with the aim of providing practitioners with timeless models for the design of a range of building types, including schools and mass housing. Pagano was not unique in his appeal to use simple vernacular dwellings as the basis for the design of low-cost housing and for the reform of residential architecture in Italy. Such designers turned not only to the stucco-covered masonry buildings of central and southern Italy but also to the rustic wood buildings found in rural Alpine communities. These simple timber-frame structures offered a model for architects and engineers—Enrico Griffini and Carlo Mollino are two examples—interested in forging links between the pragmatic construction techniques of vernacular traditions and industrial processes. For such architects vernacular architecture offered valuable lessons in process and method as well as an alternative to the rhetorical demands of representation that were essential to the fascist regime's propagandistic agenda.

In the post-war period Rationalist Italian architects contended with the legacy of their involvement with the fascist regime as they faced the substantial material and spiritual needs of a war-torn nation. Numerous voices, including those of Ernesto Rogers, Giancarlo De Carlo, and Bruno Zevi, contributed to

this debate and offered a variety of strategies for incorporating vernacular traditions within contemporary practice while liberating this engagement with the past from the ideological constraints of fascist politics. The associations of pretentious neoclassicism with a discredited regime, the realization that the traditional cultures and landscapes of Italy were being erased in favour of suburban sprawl and shopping complexes, and the desperate need to provide housing for urban residents, many of whom had recently arrived from the countryside, created an environment in which a vernacular-inspired modernism emerged as the defining characteristic of post-war Italian architecture. Sabatino's analysis of residential complexes such as Mario Ridolfi and Ludovico Quaroni's Tiburtino housing estate (1950–51) and Ludovico Quaroni's village of La Martella (1951) draws attention to the salient differences between these vernacular-inspired projects and the planned communities of the 1930s. Vernacular models also continued to serve as a point of departure for the design of sophisticated buildings catering to the leisure classes who were eager to enjoy the natural beauty of the Mediterranean and Alps. Describing the pervasive hold that the vernacular had on Italian culture in the post-war period, Sabatino touches on the extent to which the environments, materials, and forms of rural Italy continued to influence a wide range of creative expression, including furniture design and cinema, after the war. As a means of concluding his study, Sabatino explores the European and American reception of Italian modernist architecture inspired by vernacular traditions and thus argues for the broader significance of his scholarly work.

*Pride in Modesty* provides an opportunity for scholars already familiar with twentieth-century Italian architecture to reposition familiar figures, debates, and cultural events within the context of an ongoing engagement with vernacular traditions. References throughout to European and American architects interested in vernacular traditions in the first half of the twentieth century alert readers to the importance of these traditions outside of Italy and call attention to the need for further investigation of this topic.<sup>1</sup> The chronological organization of the book lends individual chapters, particularly the two chapters on the inter-war period and the chapter on the post-war period, to use in courses on modern Italian architecture or, given the interdisciplinary nature of Sabatino's work, cultural studies. Indeed, although the vernacular in architecture is the primary theme, he discusses art, literature, and urban planning. A detailed bibliography of primary and secondary sources at the end of the volume will be of use to students and scholars alike. Secondary themes—such as the tension between urban and rural cultures, and the status of high and low art in historical and cultural narratives—further enrich the text and suggest ample ground for further research, as do the tantalizing references to some of the intellectual underpinnings of the vernacular tradition in Italy.

Sabatino also pays great attention to the different terms applied to vernacular—primitive, minor, rural, rustic, and so forth. His analysis of these terms sheds valuable light on the cultural environments in which discussions surrounding vernacular traditions took place. Sabatino's ambitious project unquestionably establishes the vernacular as a major feature of Italian modern-

ism and invites scholars to reconsider the topography of inter-war and post-war Italian architecture, which has for too long been defined by a narrow cannon of exemplars.

LUCY M. MAULSBY  
Northeastern University

## Note

<sup>1</sup> In this vein, see the recently published collection of essays: Jean-François Lejeune and Michelangelo Sabatino, eds., *Modern Architecture and the Mediterranean: Vernacular Dialogues and Contested Identities* (London, 2009).

Ève Lamoureux, *Art et politique. Nouvelles formes d'engagement artistiques au Québec*, Montréal, Éditions écosociété, 2009, 272 p., 28 \$, ISBN 978-2-923165-61-5.

Nécessaire réflexion sur l'engagement en arts visuels dont certains ont voulu croire qu'il était dépassé, *Art et politique* suscite pourtant, tout au long de sa lecture, bien des questions sur l'existence même de l'art engagé. Alors que la plupart des artistes interrogés par l'auteure Ève Lamoureux ne se disent pas vraiment engagés, les définitions, les motifs et les motivations de l'engagement des artistes sont fort diversifiés et personnels et « les objectifs de l'engagement sont assez restreints »; de plus, l'art engagé « n'implique plus nécessairement la marge ou la confrontation »<sup>1</sup>. Lamoureux se fixe pour objectif d'examiner les conditions de survivance de l'engagement artistique au fil des dernières décennies et commente les formes particulières qu'il a pu prendre récemment. Citant abondamment des auteurs québécois et tout particulièrement des articles de la revue *Inter*, elle nous ramène au constat essentiel que la réflexion sur l'art engagé reste une source active de débats au Québec.

Si le premier chapitre constitue un intéressant regard historique sur l'engagement des artistes québécois depuis le *Refus Global*, la lectrice avide aurait souhaité y trouver un plus grand nombre de descriptions d'œuvres, de manifestations, etc., ce portrait historique n'étant accompagné que de peu d'exemples et parfois de simples listes. Cette insuffisance s'explique peut-être par le fait que Lamoureux est politologue et que l'ouvrage fut d'abord sa thèse de doctorat. Le second chapitre explore les dynamiques à l'œuvre dans le champ de l'art contemporain québécois: l'internationalisation, l'affirmation régionale, le rôle de l'État, etc. Vient ensuite une analyse de trois œuvres, *l'État d'urgence* de L'ATSA, la *Manifestation pour le droit au bonheur* de l'organisme Folie/culture et *Entre nous* de Devora Neumark, qui offre une description tout à fait captivante des œuvres portée par une position critique fort bienvenue n'excluant aucun point de vue sur l'action des artistes et sur les pièges inhérents aux formes

artistiques engagées. Toutefois, l'auteure n'approfondit pas par la suite les analyses faites dans ce chapitre, de sorte que leur pertinence par rapport à l'ensemble de l'ouvrage en semble réduite.

Dans les trois chapitres suivants, Lamoureux se penche sur certaines modalités de l'inscription du politique dans les arts actuels qui ressortent des entrevues qu'elle a menées auprès d'une dizaine d'artistes et de collectifs d'artistes issus de trois « tranches générationnelles » établies selon les périodes correspondant aux premières années d'activité artistique: 1975–80 pour Nicole Jolicoeur, Alain-Martin Richard et Jean-Claude St-Hilaire; 1985–90 pour Devora Neumark, Sylvie Cotton, Doyon/Demers et Danyèle Alain; et enfin, 1995–2000 pour ATSA (Action terroriste socialement acceptable) et ses fondateurs Annie Roy et Pierre Allard, BGL (Jasmin Bilodeau, Sébastien Giguère et Nicolas Laverdière) et Raphaëlle de Groot. À travers ces entrevues, Lamoureux cherche à définir l'art engagé et ses objectifs et étudie la réception et l'impact de ce type d'art, de même que la position des artistes par rapport aux institutions.

Alors qu'elle se propose de vérifier l'hypothèse voulant qu'il y ait renouvellement de l'engagement dans et par l'art depuis les années 1970 et ce sous des formes variées, l'auteure met en question le concept figé d'une représentation sociale de l'art engagé qui n'aurait retenu que « les expériences radicales », une « vision qui fait généralement référence aux œuvres des artistes féministes militantes et à l'art marxisant » (p. 76). Tout en faisant le constat que ces artistes actuels qu'elle classe sous la rubrique « art engagé » rejettent pour la plupart la représentation ou l'image encore tenace de pratiques qui, à force d'être trop politiques en auraient oublié d'être artistiques, elle en arrive, au fil de ses descriptions et analyses, à démontrer que l'engagement peut être (et est de plus en plus) multiple, multiforme et « micropolitique ». Suivant l'analyse de Lamoureux, le potentiel transformateur de l'art résiderait désormais dans la possibilité « de se changer soi-même—c'est vrai pour le créateur et pour le public—à travers sa participation », dans la possibilité de « réfléchir sur soi, sur l'autre et sur le monde dans la rencontre