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Complexity and Contradiction at Fifty

**On Robert Venturi's
"Gentle Manifesto"**

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There are 350 images in *Complexity and Contradiction*. It is a surprising quantity for a book of the 1960s—even for a book on architecture. Most architecture books of the period, even lavishly illustrated ones, had far more text and far fewer images. The images in Venturi's book flow parallel to the text, producing a narration of their own. This is the consequence of the way Venturi assembled *Complexity and Contradiction*, which grew out of the sequences of slides he used for his lectures at the University of Pennsylvania. In the manuscript that Venturi submitted to the Graham Foundation in 1963, the text and the atlas of images were still entirely separated. In the book's final version, too, the images and the text remain somehow distant. Their relationship is very different from the illustrated manifestos of Le Corbusier: there, the images and texts reinforce one another, producing a sort of obsessive mantra, but in Venturi's book, images and text do not perfectly coincide. A gap remains, an in-between. This gap creates an inner tension that was already at the time of its publication the most fascinating aspect of the book.

Fifty years later, what is surprising is actually the text. Confronted with the contemporary proliferation of collections of exquisite architectural images (simply put together without a sense of needing the slightest justification), Venturi's exercise seems incredibly humble and astonishingly honest. Venturi felt obliged to explain his series of images. He did not escape the trouble of delivering a text.

Venturi is not a great writer (the good writer is Denise!). He does not achieve the unsettling tautological poetry of Rossi,

and he does not master the dry wit of Koolhaas. Somehow Venturi is *too gentle* to be a good writer. And nevertheless there is plenty of text in *Complexity and Contradiction*. Venturi probably knew the writing was not the best part of the book, but he felt that images alone would not be enough. In this project, words were necessary to challenge the images.

In *Complexity and Contradiction* images are combined with incredible skill. Venturi puts together Roman Baroque architecture with Pop art, Thomas Jefferson and Jasper Johns, Alvar Aalto and Vignola. The combinations are so visually convincing that it seems pointless to question them. And then, exactly at this point—as if he were the only one not entirely satisfied with his visual alchemy, as if he feared being fooled by his own bravura—Venturi inserts his text. And he inserts it as an element of disturbance, to slow down the pace at which one goes through the pages, to introduce a certain friction, to challenge the perfection of taste. Skill is necessary, and there is plenty of it in *Complexity and Contradiction*, and yet—if architecture is to be considered a form of thinking—skill is not enough.

Robert Venturi's *Complexity and Contradiction* at Fifty

First published in 1966, Robert Venturi's *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* is widely considered a foundational text of postmodernism and has become an essential document in architectural theory and criticism. This two-volume boxed set pairs a facsimile of the original edition with a compendium of new scholarship on and around Venturi's seminal treatise. Essays by leading architecture historians and critics—a number of which were presented at a conference co-organized by The Museum of Modern Art to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of *Complexity and Contradiction* in 2016—address issues such as the circumstances of the book's publication, its prose style, and its relationship to Venturi's own built work, or reflect on broader themes, among them the politics of the architectural profession, the idea of complexity in the mid-1960s, and the connection between architecture and modern art. Additional short commentaries by distinguished contemporary practitioners likewise attest to the book's enduring influence. Together, these two volumes expand the horizons of—and introduce a new generation to—Venturi's "gentle manifesto."

The second volume of this boxed set is edited by Martino Stierli and David B. Brownlee, and features essays by Jean-Louis Cohen, Lee Ann Custer, Peter Fröhlicher, Dianne Harris, Andrew Leach, Mary McLeod, Stanislaus von Moos, Joan Ockman, Emmanuel Petit, and Martino Stierli; commentaries by Deborah Berke, Sam Jacob, Stephen Kieran and James Timberlake, Michael Meredith, and Pier Paolo Tamburelli; and interviews with Rem Koolhaas and Stanley Tigerman.

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