Book Review
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Kengo Kuma, *Point Line Plane*, Thames and Hudson, London, 2024.

Point Line Plane builds on a series of arguments that distinguish Kengo Kuma's approach, communicated through his numerous publications.[1] Kuma's thesis developed throughout the years starting from an idea to *erase* architecture, leading to an elaborate design strategy that puts construction materials at the centre of the design process.

In his essay about the architect, architectural academic Thomas Daniell argues that Kuma's projects and writings seek to dismantle "the public image of the architect."[2] Advocating for a method—rather than an architectural style or a specific geometry—following the ideals of master masons and master carpenters of the pre-Albertian architect, Kuma ultimately aims to supress the architect's authorship, aligning with Roland Barthes' *the Death of the Author*,[3] where Barthes argues that the value of literary work is independent of the author's life and intent. Kuma's legacy, thus, lies in a method derived from the essential characteristics of materials and the continuity between nature and people, creating a "humble"[4] anti-volumetric architecture that blends with its surrounding.

The paradox here lies in the very fact that Kuma's projects and international recognition turned him into a *starchitect*, leading a large architectural company, with offices in Tokyo, Paris, Beijing, Shanghai and

[1] Namely the *Anti-Object* published in 2000, the *Architecture of Defeat* (*Makeru Kenchiku*) in 2004, *Natural Architecture* (*Shizen na Kenchiku*) in 2008, *Studies in Organic* in 2009, *Connecting Architecture* (*Tsunagu Kenchiku*) in 2012, and *Small Architecture* (*Chisa na Kenchiku*) in 2014.

[2] See T. Daniell, "Acting Natural," *AA Files*, 69, 2014, pp. 100–106.

[3] R. Barthes, "The Death of the Author" (1968), S. Heath (trans.), in *Image Music Text*, Fontana Press, London, 1977, pp. 142–148.

[4] A term constantly used by Kuma.

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Seoul. In recent years, especially after Kuma was awarded the design of the Japan National Stadium, imminent questions emerged. How will Kuma be able to *erase* architecture—or architectural authorship—as his company receives larger commissions and as the practice continues to expand both geographically and professionally? How will he maintain smallness while becoming big?

The book seems to be responding to these questions; "this made me wonder if it might be possible to create something that, while being large, existed in a small state that would convey a sense of defeat to people."[5] Despite being a *starchitect* and despite the company's fame, Kuma's buildings—with an austere, almost frugal aesthetic and expression—are derived from a continuously evolving design method that adapts to the context with its materials, users, and state-of-the art technology.

In this book, Kuma reflects on the architectural trends of the 20th century, mainly dominated by concrete as a material, and large volumes and geometric shapes. He proposes a shift towards smaller, more democratic designs where material is the protagonist; to him, "material is not a finish,"[6] it is not a thin layer of cladding added to a concrete structure, instead, every material, natural or engineered, defines the building's structural system based on its inherent characteristics. The book presents, through series of critical reflections and observations on the writings of artists, architects, philosophers, psychologists throughout history, Kuma's point of view. Like in his other writings, he calls for a return to materials to design and build with "particles," where the world is made as an aggregation of dots and lines, and not as three-dimensional objects.

The book is organised into four main sections: the first is titled "A Discourse on Method," it follows on—as the title indicates—with a section on "Point," another on "Line," and finally on "Plane." Throughout the manuscript, Kuma strikes a parallel and a dialogue with Kandinsky's book with a similar title.[7]

In the first section—A Discourse on Method, Kuma investigates the process of moving away from an architecture of volume, specifically by breaking the dominance of concrete and going back towards smaller elements in wood. To support his argument, Kuma refers to Mies van der

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[5] K. Kuma, *Point Line Plane*, 2024, p. 9.

[6] See K. Kuma, *Kengo Kuma: materials, structures, details*, Birkhäuser-Publishers for Architecture, Basel/Boston, 2024.

[7] See W. Kandinsky, *Point and Line to Plane*, Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, New York, 1947.

Rohe's architecture of lines and to psychologist James Gibson's ideas about dismantling volume to texture. Kuma highlights the shift from traditional design methods to computer-based parametric design, as an innovative tool to experiment with 'additive' design.

Within the same framework, Kuma uses the *Point* section to delve into the use of stone and other materials. He discusses the transition from Greek to Roman architecture, the influence of Mies van der Rohe's modernist designs, and the challenges of using stone in architectural projects. By experimenting with new design and construction methods, he transforms heavy volumes to particles, or lighter elements. He explains this process by referring to some of his built work, namely Stone Plaza, Water Branch House, the China Academy of Art's Folk Museum, Tsumiki, Lotus House and Nagaoka City Hall Aore. Interestingly, these projects vary in size and scope; while Tsumiki is a children's toy, the China Academy of Art is a museum with a built-up area of 5,000 square meters. This confirms once again Kuma's lack of interest in the project's scale, and his focus on a bottom-up approach using parametric design as a method of aggregating small elements to create a system of joining or stacking to generate a whole.

In the *Lines* section, Kuma compares the architectural approaches of Le Corbusier and Mies van der Rohe, where the former works with *volume* and the latter uses *lines*. Here, he examines Kenzo Tange's original use of lines, especially in the design of the Yoyogi National Gymnasium. Kuma moves to discuss the shift from thin lines to heavy volumes in Japanese architecture, referring to the works of Hiroshi Hara, Arata Isozaki, and Kisho Kurokawa. He reflects on his early experiences with wooden architecture and celebrates the flexibility and lightness of traditional Japanese wooden structures. He highlights the importance of lines in Hiroshige's *Ukiyo-e* and demonstrates how it influenced Vincent van Gogh and Frank Lloyd Wright's works. He concludes this section by presenting his experiments in designing with lines, referring to his projects: the Ando Hiroshige Museum, the Victoria & Albert Museum (Dundee), the Komatsu Seiren Fabric Laboratory and the Tomioka Waterhouse.

The *Planes* section examines the work of Gerrit Rietveld and Michel de Klerk, who—unlike their Modernist peers—worked with planes rather than volumes. Kuma goes one step further, beyond Rietveld and de Klerk's planes, and is inspired by the thinness and flexibility of Bedouin tents on one hand and Gottfried Semper's textile model of architecture, on the other. Once again, Kuma provides examples from his own

portfolio, referring to the design of fabric structures like the tearoom in Frankfurt and the experimental ecological house in Hokkaido.

Besides his technical critique of what he calls 20th century architecture, Kuma touches on the complex question of the concept of time in architecture. He brings *time* back to the material itself: "To me, time is not mere motion, but something fundamentally embedded in all matter; and through matter, space and time are inseparably connected."[8] With that, he bears texture and human scale as phenomenological components that render the time/space continuum tangible, as if translating Brodsky's statement into an architectural philosophy: "(...) every surface craves dust, for dust is the flesh of time."[9]

Throughout the book, there is a constant reference to Japan on one side and the "West" on the other. As a prolific writer and public speaker, Kuma constantly positions himself and his work in reference to these two poles, whether citing historical examples or speaking about current times. The book once again certifies Kuma's *Japan-ness* par excellence, both architecturally and culturally.

Furthermore, Kuma presents another critique to the capitalist system that produced "extra large architecture"[10] by proposing to divide, dissect and disperse large objects into small physical elements. Recovering the extra small[11] scale, Kuma continues to execute his own "Architecture of Resistance,"[12] first by rooting himself in his *Japan-ness* and then by responding to the project's direct context: "The world is not evolving unidirectionally toward larger and larger things. Rather, the more that large things grow larger and fast things move faster, the more we are drawn to and enchanted by the small, slow things that are always close at hand and can be grasped directly."[13]

With his focus on tectonics, Kuma builds his reasoning just like he makes architecture, starting from a point—a particle, connecting it to other points, forming lines and gradually creating planes, allowing the

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8 K. Kuma, *Point Line Plane*, p. 38.

9 J. Brodsky, *Watermark: An Essay on Venice*, Penguin Group, London, 1992.

10 In reference to Rem Koolhaas's "S, M, L, XL." See R. Koolhaas, B. Mau, S,M,L,XL, Jennifer Sigler (ed.), The Monacelli Press, New York, 1995.

11 K. Kuma, *Point Line Plane*, p. 55.

12 In reference to Kenneth Frampton's famous essay "Towards a Critical Regionalism: Six Points for an Architecture of Resistance," in T. Docherty (ed.), *Postmodernism: A Reader*, Routledge, London/New York, 1993, pp. 268–280.

13 K. Kuma, *Point Line Plane*, p. 54.

architectural volume to emerge. Similarly, the book creates thematic threads between different thinkers throughout history, to make critical lines and planes, constructing a consistent and regenerated argument about architecture and society in the post-industrial age.