R&S reading Bataille’s “Formless”
Architecture as Operational Force
von Ingrid Böck

Inspired by a rather surrealist imagination to represent the uncanny, hidden aspects of the real, Francois Roche, of R&Sie Architects, proposes that “architecture can only be negotiated live, in its contingency on a situation … This ambiguity gives rise to our unstable and unique scenarios.”[1] An example is provided by their project for an extension of the School of Architecture in Venice, titled Aspiration [Aqua Alta] (1998):

[Scenario 1]
[1] Destruction of the existing cement warehouses (preserving a virtual ghost-print of the old building).
[2] Digitized representation of water being sucked up into this imprint.
[4] Lagoon water vegetation infuses membranes through capillary action (into transparent plastic walls for an aqua alta exacerbation).[2]

As the Lagoon water slowly creeps up the Aqua Alta building, into the cavity between two transparent plastic foils, the liquid is sucked up with its saltwater odor, a sea-green plastic matrix colonized by residue and foam. This project expresses processes of capillary action and sedimentation—when the raw material of the city, stagnant water and algae, increasingly becomes the true material of the building envelope. Architecture exaggerates the future threat of the final Aqua Alta outside of the regular and temporary occurrence, the rise of the water level above of the city: “Venice thus anticipates a general liquefaction of the earth … the melting of the polar ice caps, the rise of the level of the oceans, the flooding of entire island groups … it is impossible to reverse this disappearing process, even if we put an instant stop [to it].”[3] It is the simulation of the bygone culture of Venice finally dissolving in the Lagoon.

Another scenario relates to a project called Dusty Relief/B-mu (2002), the design of a Contemporary Art Museum in Bangkok:

[Scenario 2]
[1] Random relief calculated by pixelization of aleatory particles for a pure gray ectoplasm under the lightning-gray sky of Bangkok.
[2] Collecting the city’s dust (Duchamp’s Dust Breeding) on the surface of aluminum latticework using an electrostatic system.
[3] Exacerbating schizophrenic climate between the interior (white cube and labyrinth in Euclidean geometry) and the exterior (dust relief on topologic geometry), and using this sun-protection monolithic interface for an in/outdoor exhibition.[4]

Now that the pollution cloud envelopes the luminous city of Bangkok, the ever-changing shape of the
*Dusty Relief/B-mu* is generated by the dust in the city’s air, which is attracted by an electrostatically charged metal façade. The intoxicating environment not only filters the light with gray spectral frequencies, but even goes so far as to modify the local climate. R&Sie propose two different structures: an “aseptic and deterritorialized universe plunged in an intoxicating urban chaos”. It exaggerates the threatening environment through concentration on the exterior, leaving the pure and sober interior of the museum deprived of any contextual issue. This creates an interior which is “a deterritorialized volume imprisoned between white windowless walls”, while the exterior gives “the white cube what it so clearly negates: its relationship to its concrete reality, its context, its territory”.

For unfolding their dramatic scenarios, the envelopes of both *Aqua Alta* and *Dusty Relief/B-mu* deploy substances—the water of the Lagoon and the dust in the air of Bangkok—which refer to the future threat or the intoxicating situation of the particular place.

A form of waste

In their obsession with filthy and even dangerous materials which are usually considered to be waste matter, provoking disapproval, even disgust, R&Sie may be following Georges Bataille. For Bataille, that which appears as unseemliness, as unassimilable waste, is the realm of the *formless*.

Though it has been over half a century since Bataille developed his notion of *l’informe*, the idea has only recently been deployed in the field of architecture. One of the reasons for this relatively late popularity is that the formless can be understood as a third term standing outside binary thinking, outside the battle between form and content, and the ground for thematizing this third or in-between condition was prepared by deconstructivism in the 1980s. But the formless promises a much more radical assault on the tradition of Western art and architecture than merely the notion of a third condition.

For architects such as R&Sie, the formless is neither surface nor depth; rather, it is the cunning of what has been suppressed in our common notion of reality. In *Spoiled Climate* R&Sie present their recent work, projects which escape the fossilizing effect of architecture and explore its operational conditions. It is a case of architecture becoming a tool for manipulating our reality and initiating processes of transformation, transgression, or disappearance.

Instead of refusing waste because it is impure, Bataille speaks of a *moral* devastation resulting from our ideal notion of matter.[7] For matter is not formulable in terms of idea; it is inequality, even to itself. That which is ineradicably idealist cannot be put into an equation with matter. In this way, the materialism is inconceivable as a system of equal exchange, because this neglects the sacrificial nature of expenditure: “There is lost time and there are waste lands, unproductive expenditures, things one never gets over, sins that cannot be redeemed, garbage that cannot be recycled.”[8]
Bataille describes the death of the Minotaur as an act which brings society out of the archaic, labyrinthine age by means of a final bloody sacrifice; the killing of the hybrid creature and the liberation of the inhabitants of Crete from its monstrous animality give birth to Athens. For Bataille, the real victims of this original murder are the individuals of the society cleansed of unseemliness, uncleanness, and waste. By eliminating any trace of animality, homological theory glazes the world over with the clean and ideal, repressing any difference that cannot be formulated in comprehensible terms. Once the waste matter has disappeared, there is no trace of anything absent, a consumption with no remains, a total sacrifice, an initially bloody process that in the end does not leave any stain. Where the beast once lived, no emptiness remains, as if there were no loss. Nothing is lacking on the bloodless surface as if nothing had been eliminated.

Reading Marcel Mauss’s *The Gift* enabled Bataille to develop his notion of expenditure (dépense). Mauss explored the ritual of the potlatch among the North American Indians. It is not only a tribal feast at which presents are given and received, but also an excessive “throwing away of possessions to enhance one’s prestige or establish one’s position”. In this sense, the potlatch is a way of acquiring power by recklessly squandering and, in some cases, actually destroying vital resources.

For Mauss, gift-giving involves circularity in the return of that which the other owes me, whether this exchange is immediate or deferred. In this way, the gift deals with raising the stakes, economy, counter-gift and the annulment of the gift—in short, everything which brings about once again the circle of necessities and interests. While for Mauss the gift is a profane transaction that can be understood in terms of its social function, for Bataille, the gift as revealed in the potlatch seems to belong to the realm of the sacred. Its idea cannot be reduced to the Western conception of social utility, but it is a transgressive experience of non-functional, senseless destruction. After accumulation there is always a need for expenditure liberated of utilitarian purpose. Bataille claims that the ritual of potlatch saves the material things from mere utility and thereby, restores the sacredness of the world.

In light of Bataille’s dépense theory, the bloody madness of pre-Columbian Mexico represents a society openly acknowledging the sacrifice demanded of its members. In *Extinct America* he describes the pyramids the Aztecs left behind after Cortez’s arrival: they had been the site of the spectacle, where the priests had performed the ritual killing of the victims before the eyes of all citizens. For Bataille, the Aztec ritual of human sacrifice restores the victims to the sacred world, wrenching them from the grasp of the profane and the utilitarian. After the servile use has degraded them, the sacrifice releases them into the realm of the divine.

In *The Accursed Share* Bataille attempts to subvert conventional models of political economy grounded in utility, and replace them by his theory of “general economy”, involving unproductive modes of expenditure and excess, the consumption of the superfluous, and the sacrifice as the accursed share.

Either the accursed share is spent knowingly without gain in the arts, eroticism, sumptuary monuments, and spectacles, or, if repressed, it obliviously leads to a catastrophic outpouring in war. Bataille argues
that “human activity is not entirely reducible to processes of production and conservation, and consumption must be divided into two distinct parts”.[12] While the first part is represented by the necessary activity for the conservation of life, the second part is defined by unproductive expenditure and “activities which, at least in primitive circumstances, have no end beyond themselves.”

Smooth operation

In his Documents’ “critical dictionary” Bataille suggests that the power of formless is the slippage and the effect of shocked surprise that it produces, and its value as an operation.[13] According to his definition, “‘formless’ is not only an adjective having a given meaning, but a term that serves to bring things down in the world, generally requiring that each thing have its form. What it designates has no rights in any sense and gets itself squashed everywhere, like a spider or an earthworm. In fact, for academic men to be happy, the universe would have to take shape. All of philosophy has no other goal: it is a matter of giving a flock coat to what is, a mathematical flock coat. On the other hand, affirming that the universe resembles nothing and is only formless amounts to saying that the universe is something like a spider or spit.”[14]

Even the last proposition has to be modified, though, since neither the spider nor spit really are as alien as Bataille would have the formless be. In order to characterize that which by definition must remain outside of linguistic categories, he continues to describe how the formless escapes geometry, morphology, or the idea; it does not resemble anything; it cannot be gathered into the unity of any concept. This escape is unbearable to reason, because it makes no sense and hence, has no rights. Bataille assesses the contrast between the rational, utilitarian nature of form and shape, which are equated with content, and the operational, performative force of the formless. The formless is a device for any kind of alteration, a practice of dismembering conventional structures. Hence, the operational force of the formless proposes “to break up the subject and re-establish it on a different basis is not to neglect the subject; so it is in a sacrifice, which takes liberties with the victim and even kills it, but cannot be said to neglect it.”[15]

Bataille’s dictionary as a whole can be seen as gambling with the contrast between the very use of the conventional form of the dictionary, the implicit idea of totality, and the operational moment of surprise and disgust of the single categories. Seemingly a set of fragments of alphabetical arbitrariness, the entries include items such as camel, man, dust, reptiles, and shellfish.

As Carl Einstein in a Nietzschean mood claims in his contribution to the Documents dictionary, “Words are, for the most part, petrifications that elicit mechanical reactions in us.”[16] In the article on the rossignol (nightingale), Einstein describes the forces of repression, arguing that “Nightingales can be replaced: (a) by rose, (b) by breasts, but never by legs, because the nightingale’s role is precisely to avoid designating this aspect.” For Einstein, the operation of the formless is like revealing the legs under the skirt.
The issue of the formless is already inscribed in Plato’s dialogue *Parmenides*. Socrates asserts that there are forms (or ideas) themselves-by-themselves of the just, the beautiful, and the good, but under Parmenides’ questioning he is undecided as to whether there are also separate forms of the human being, fire, or water.[17] But the elder philosopher goes on to inquire whether there are forms for things that are ignoble and base: “And what about these, Socrates—they would really seem ridiculous—hair and mud and dirt, for example, or anything else which is utterly worthless and trivial. Are you perplexed whether one should say that there is a separate form for each of them too, a form that again is other than the object we handle?”[18]

Parmenides evokes hair, mud, and dirt, as Bataille evokes spit or spiders as a counterexample to the theory of forms. These other, formless objects are connected with laughter and touch, they are ridiculous, worthless, and trivial in relation to the realm of ideas that for Plato are always related to the good. In the Platonic conception, forms are ontologically the formal causes of things as well as paradigms, and epistemologically the objects of knowledge as thoughts, concepts and universals. All of these implications of the theory of forms come to bear on the famous parable of the cave in Plato’s subsequent dialogue Republic. Plato explains that our perception of the world is like that of prisoners in an underground cave, chained since birth at the leg and the neck. Unable to move their heads, the prisoners stare at the back wall of the cave with the only source of light, a fire, behind them. Between the fire and the prisoners there is a road cutting across the cave, and on the road there are people carrying statues of living things. The light from the fire projects shadows of the things onto the wall in front of the captives, but the people carrying the things are hidden by the walls along the road. For the captives of this remarkable cave, then, the shadows of the real objects in the world are all that they can ever see. Hence, Socrates points out, “In every way, then, such prisoners would recognize as reality nothing but the shadows of … artificial objects.”[19] The task of the philosopher is to liberate himself from the fetters and darkness of the physical world of the senses and escape to the freedom and radiance of the world of the mind, from mere appearances to pure forms. In this way, the theory of purity always leads away from the immediate perception of the material world and the realm of the senses. Only pure intuition and contemplation enable the free vision of the ideal world beyond the reach of the treacherous senses.

Both Parmenides and Bataille attempt to determine the limits of the theory of forms, exploring that which is incapable of being reduced to logical forms, and that which escapes idealization in Plato’s sense. For both, only something with an operational existence, like base matter or an obscene word that derives its force from the very act of delivery, transcends the logic of idea, for it is (worth) nothing in itself.

Since in the essentialist notion purity was initially defined as immaterial, the material existence of a work of art creates tension. Yet it cannot exist without involving materiality and sensuality. Instead of the notion of idealizing matter, Rosalind Krauss emphasizes the phenomenological reading that complicates the purity of conception with the contingency of perception. She argues that “in the age of *post-medium* condition … [even the term] ‘medium’ seemed too contaminated, too ideologically, too dogmatically, too discursively loaded”.[20] Rather, Krauss insists on the inseparability of the temporal and the spatial
conditions of objects in a particular situation and thus, rethinks the artistic medium in a long passage “from a static, idealized medium to a temporal and material one.”[21]

Inaugural event

[Scenario 3]
[2] Moving up and down like a jellyfish.[22]
R&Sie, Floating Carpet (1996), Reopening of the Art Center in Grenoble, Inaugural event

As the principal weapon against the idealizing and fetishizing of matter Rosalind Krauss proposes four basic categories of the “use value” of formless (alluding to Bataille’s “The Use Value of de Sade”): base materialism, horizontality, pulse and entropy.[23]

The concept of base materialism, as represented in Robert Rauschenberg’s early works such as the Dirt Paintings and Gold Paintings (1953) mingling precious materials with waste. He operates with value-loaded substances, such as gold leaf, sometimes a bit of silver, using it to cover a sheet of newspaper or other ignoble materials. Since materialism basically tends to idealize matter through setting up hierarchical relationships between the elements, Bataille claims that filth/waste is the type of matter that has no idea, no form, that “has no rights in any sense and gets itself squashed everywhere”. In this way, base materialism of filth/waste serves to eliminate all spiritual entities and the obsession with an ideal form of matter, because only what is formless cannot be draped with a “mathematical flock coat” of science.

Referring to her second category of formless, Krauss claims that horizontality is another powerful means of the formless. This idea can be related to Bataille’s paper, “Big Toe”, an entry in the Documents proclaiming that man is proud of being erect and thus emerges from the horizontal and animal axis, although this upright posture is founded on repression of vital needs, leading to all kinds of sublimatory activities.[24] Thus, Bataille refers to Sigmund Freud’s analysis in Civilization and Its Discontents, suggesting that there are two different axes in the human body. On the one hand, arts and culture address the human as an erect and therefore mental being, because our upright posture promotes the supremacy of vision, which represents the height of reason. In this sense, pictures are conceived as a vertical section through the “purely visual”, separating the perceiver from his feet still standing in the dirt. [25] On the other hand, the horizontal axis governs the life of animal as well as of human activities relating to mere biological functions. For Bataille, the strict demarcation of the verticality of the visual field (the realm of the mental) and the horizontality of the carnal (the literal space of our body) is a fiction. Thus, he claims that “the big toe is the most human part of the human body”. [26]

According to Krauss, horizontality as the rotation of the image out of the axis of the vertical and onto the
horizontal is the “literalness of formlessness”. She cites Pollock’s “drip paintings” as the literal subversion and eliminating the prevailing hierarchical relationships and therefore, a strike against the vertical, “cultural” axis, and equally against form.

Although the remaining two terms (pulse and entropy) are not part of Bataille’s vocabulary, pulse figures as a category that attacks the purely optical conception excluding any temporal aspects. Duchamp’s Rotoreliefs (1935) consist of a variety of spirals which alternate with eccentrically organized visual patterns. As if in motion, they create the illusion of swelling and retreating and hence, the rhythm of a pulse or beat. This pulsation is distinct from literal movement, involving an endless beat, an irruption and punctuation of the visual field. Following Krauss, this engages precisely the aspect of pulse that furthers erotic associations and “produces the intrusion of desire”.

The final category entropy, as constant and irreversible degradation of energy ultimately leads to disorder and non-differentiation within matter. Entropy is the negation of any movement, the loss of energy through heat without any performed motion. Melting is an entropic process par excellence, since it means yielding to indifference.

The operational mode of entropy relates to Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s conception of the Body without Organs (BwO), where “only intensities pass and circulate … It is not space, nor is it in space.”[27] Rather than identifying the BwO with any medium that is in a state of matter provided with a particular amount of internal structure, it defines a limit in the process of destratification. One way of imagining the BwO is as the “glacial” level of matter/energy/information resulting from bringing the structure-generating process beyond a de-stratifying limit.[28]

In terms of dynamics the (provisional) hardening crust of appearances may be the least important component of the interacting organization. The genesis of form does not relate to any divine realm of Platonic ideas, but is rather an immanent property of the unformed flow of matter/energy/information.[29] If there appears a totality among the heterogeneous components anywhere in the process of stratification, “It is a whole of these particular parts but does not totalize them; it is a unity of all those particular parts but does not unify them.”[30]

In his Documents article “Architecture” Bataille argues that philosophy, mathematics, and architecture have generated a system of petrification that cancels the individual perception through becoming a unified whole of fixed determinations of what was initially concrete, sensuous, and liquefied. In this way, scientific theories are attempts at “depriving, as far as possible, the universe in which we live of every source of stimulation”. [31] Bataille concludes that “it is obvious, that mathematical organization imposed on stone is none other than the completion of an evolution of earthly forms … In morphological progress men apparently represent only an intermediate stage between monkeys and great edifices. Forms have become more and more static, more and more dominant.”[32]

This tendency of the individual to disappear in a “disproportionate superiority”—and the threat to social
freedom that this entails—is described by Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer as “the self-destruction of the Enlightenment”. In Dialectic of Enlightenment they argue that while magic is an attempt to imitate nature preconceptually, myth firstly seeks to separate the self from amorphous nature and secondly names, classifies, rationalizes and thus subordinates nature under human control. This turn to the “blindly objective and natural” is intensified by the birth of scientific rationalism and empiricism. When nature is no longer seen as possessing secret powers, the reification and total domination of nature, and subsequently of other people, becomes possible. Thus, the Enlightenment project of separating or purifying the self from any traces of amorphous nature necessarily lead to a dissolution of the abstracted self, a condition characteristic of the totalitarian society. Adorno and Horkheimer argue that in its final stage these tendencies of the Enlightenment led to German fascism culminating in the Holocaust.

The rationalistic spirit that Horkheimer and Adorno attack can certainly be detected in most modernist architects. For example, Le Corbusier, Bataille’s contemporary, described the city as “the grip of man on nature. It is a human operation directed against nature.” In a Pythagorean manner, Le Corbusier considered man essentially a geometric animal, creating pure geometry when allowed to express himself freely. Thus he could interpret culture as opposed to nature as “an orthogonal state of mind.”

Le Corbusier’s Villa Savoye provides a case in point, claiming to be “the most rational of buildings”, both for its pure geometry and functionalism. In Advertisements for Architecture, no. 4 (“eROTic, where glass meets mould”) Bernard Tschumi proposes yet another quality opposed to its proclaimed rationality, namely the sensuality of the ruinous state of the villa (adding a photograph of its decayed condition in 1965). Tschumi connects sensuality to decay, which suggests further that “The contradiction between architectural concept and sensual experience of space resolves itself at one point of tangency: the rotten point, the very point that taboos and culture have always rejected. This metaphorical rot is where architecture lies.” As Kari Jormakka notes, the point of Tschumi’s writing of “eROTic” is that only desire “seems to involve the synthesis of opposites: the favorite material of the modernists, glass, is inorganic, pure, crystalline and seemingly timeless while mould is an organic informe growing without a specific shape.”

Similar to Tschumi’s notion of architecture, R&Sie’s projects are examples of how formless, highly sensual material operates across and through a surface, disabling the imposition of form. In a recent lecture Francois Roche described his fascination with the advanced geometries of disciplines such as mathematics or physics—whether non-Euclidean, anexact or computational—for generating complex, changeable, and formless shapes. For Roche, this rethinking of form has gained increasing attention in architecture largely due to the advancements of the new digital technologies for modeling on the one hand, and the innovations in fabrication and specific material performances on the other.

One of his favorite projects, Roche stated, is the house for an art collector in Trinidad, titled Mosquito Bottleneck (2003). Lurking amidst the paradisiacal environment of the tropic island are two threads of different scales: the hurricane and the mosquito-borne West Nile Fever virus. By constructing the surface
of the house like a Klein-bottle-twist, R&Sie attempts “mixing this objective paranoia with a desire for safety”.[41] *Mosquito Bottleneck* and the project for the Contemporary Art Museum, the *Dusty Relief/B-mu* in Bangkok, both deal with nearly invisible perils, their powerful exaggeration, concentration (mosquito) and simulation (hurricane) on the exterior surface in order to gain a purified, safe interior space.[42] Thus, R&Sie’s use of formless bridges reason and irrational, intoxicating, even threatening situations. Instead of reducing architecture to “a highly equipped safety bunker”, Roche proposes that “What is needed therefore, is a new kind of angst-management that frames the dangers instead of blocking them out, not to senselessly offer us up as victims but in order to accept their presence and get used to them.”[43]

For surrealist thought, and by extension surrealist architecture, offers an experience of space that is grounded in individual, theatrical, even repelling, uncanny, or coarse perception. Or as Breton describes the surrealist ability to produce “uninterrupted successions of latencies”, “delirious associations and interpretations”—desire unbound. Bataille’s formless is the slippage (*lapsus*), while further continuing that by etymology falling due (*cadentia*) has the same origins as chance: it is the chance of how the dice fall[44] ‘The operation of the formless challenges the rational model of the subject: it is the chance, the luck of the fall.'
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