

Zeitschrift: Trans : Publikationsreihe des Fachvereins der Studierenden am Departement Architektur der ETH Zürich
Herausgeber: Departement Architektur der ETH Zürich
Band: - (1998)
Heft: 2

Artikel: The heteroclite : between being and nothingness
Autor: Siress, Cary L.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-919319>

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

Download PDF: 11.12.2025

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>

The Heteroclite: between being and nothingness¹

Desire is what transforms Being, revealed to itself by itself in true knowledge, into an "object" revealed to a "subject" different from the object and "opposed" to it. It is human desire that is formed and is revealed as an "I", as the "I" that is essentially different from, and radically opposed to, the "non-I".

Alexandre Kojève, Introduction to the Reading of Hegel

Any discussion of form will inevitably come to bear on the nature of objects. When one pursues an interrogation of the object, any object, one discovers that it does not simply occupy the space allocated to it by a specific culture. Which is to say, it is not simply an object but a complex intersection of heterogeneous systems of representation.² Architectural discourse plays a crucial role in these systems of representation because it is in this discourse that the status of objects is made thematic. Current debates over what is constitutional to architectural discourse are precisely concerned with maintaining certain formal and discursive accounts (representations) of architectural objects, and therefore, of objects in general. This debate persistently endures in the form of a dichotomy of those who denounce theory of any sort and question its relevance, or even necessity, to the (architectural) object, and those who adamantly promote theory to open architecture to other discursive practices (i.e. science or philosophy).

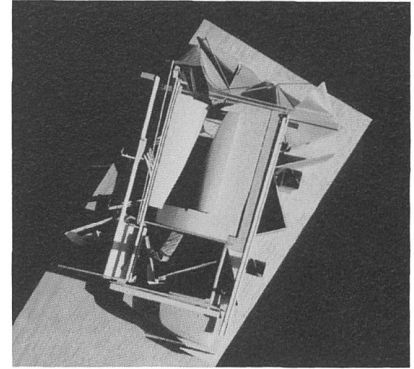
Those architects (professors, assistants, students) who denounce theory of any sort, would have us stand face to face with immediate (unmediated) reality – Kant's, "the thing in itself". With their stubborn demand for cohesion and coherence they attempt to produce a defensive and domesticating screen which blocks countervailing accounts of the (architectural) object and protects it from potential radical transformations, in the name of culture, thus, ironically insulating the object from culture. These neorealists would have it that the world is made up of ordinary objects, entities that possess clear attributes of their own whether observed or not (a brick is a brick). Theory in their mind is produced only in its application to architecture in that moment when ideas that are presumably indigenous to (and only to) architecture are supposed to impregnate form. In that magical moment, the architect infects form with the irresistible presence of an idea – the moment of design in the romantic view of the architect.³ Anything else is a senseless wallowing in empty formalism that obscures the world's simplicity with needless mystification.

Now, it would greatly astonish both parties of the debate to discover that the will to do theory or not is not an act of determination on the part of a unified subject in simple response to self-reflection or an internal

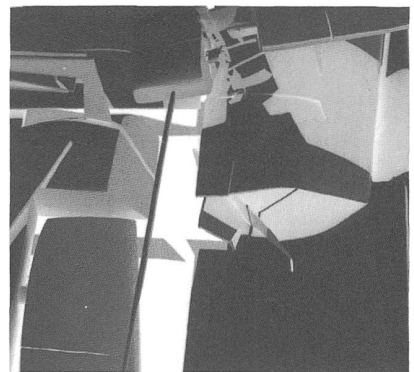
impulse. Rather, it is a state of self-organized indeterminacy in response to complex causal restraints. It constitutes a real degree of freedom, but the choice belongs to the overall dissipative system of plural selves – society.⁴ This choice is cocoused by the intersection of chance and determinacy. In other words, the desire to theorize or not is never strictly a personal affair, rather, it is a tension between sub- and superpersonal tendencies that intersect in the person as empty category.

It would also astonish both parties that a call for an end to binary systems of difference (i.e. theory/non-theory) is not a call for undifferentiation or sameness. Such oppositional difference is the same, it is a form of the Same: it is the most abstract form of expression of society's homogenizing tendencies. Saussure assures us of this: "meaning (linguistic value) is a system of equivalences between things (signifiers and signifieds) belonging to different orders" – Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, p. 114.⁵ How can language be a system of equivalence, yet be entirely made up of difference? Only if difference amounts to the Same. Language in its Saussurian functioning (form) provides a unity for that which by nature has no unity. The unity of language exists on a pure abstraction at which there is only negative difference: a sign is understandable only in opposition to what it is not: theory is not practice. None of these terms has positive content. They are empty categories forming an oppositional grid cleansed of what Saussure calls the *heteroclite* – the confusing and unclear mass of things that we experience in the world.⁶ Equivalence is imposed between two orders that lifts something out of its uniqueness and places it in a system of difference ("not that") in which it is reduced to the Same – pseudo-radical singularity in a class of "not that"s.

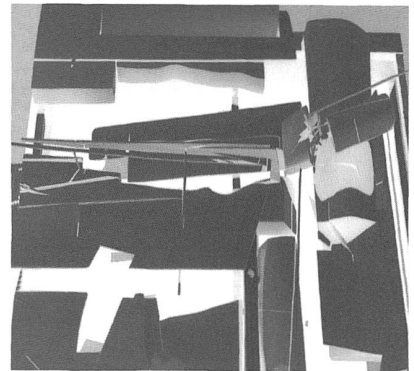
The heteroclite is not confused or unanalyzable. It simply obeys other, far more complex rules of formation. It is undifferentiated only from a point of view of a system of difference predicated on equivalence and yielding sameness (the point of view of architects claiming not to "do theory" while hiding in the shadow of Saussure's tree). The heteroclite, rather than being undifferentiated, is hyperdifferentiated (Deleuze). The operative distinctions made by its rules of formation (its evocation of forms) are too fine to be caught in the mesh of binary abstraction (this, not that). Here, positivity is the dynamic interplay, at any given event in space-time, of material tensions enveloping potential paths of becoming, a teeming void rather than a diacritical emptiness. The heteroclite transgresses the point at which it is recuperable by the socius as it presently functions, beyond which, a lack of definition becomes the positive power to select a trajectory.



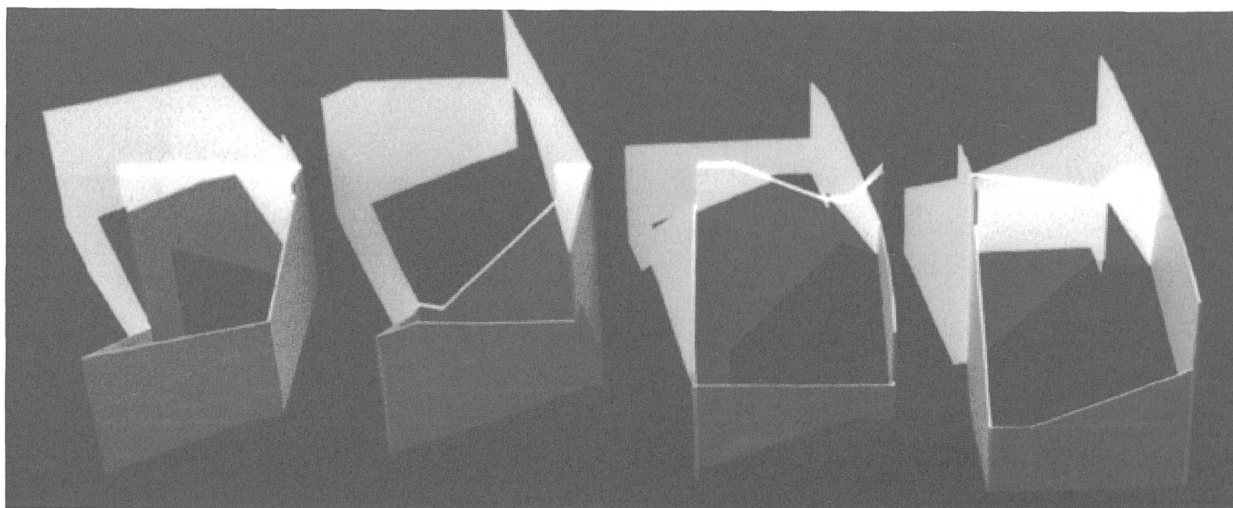
1



2



3



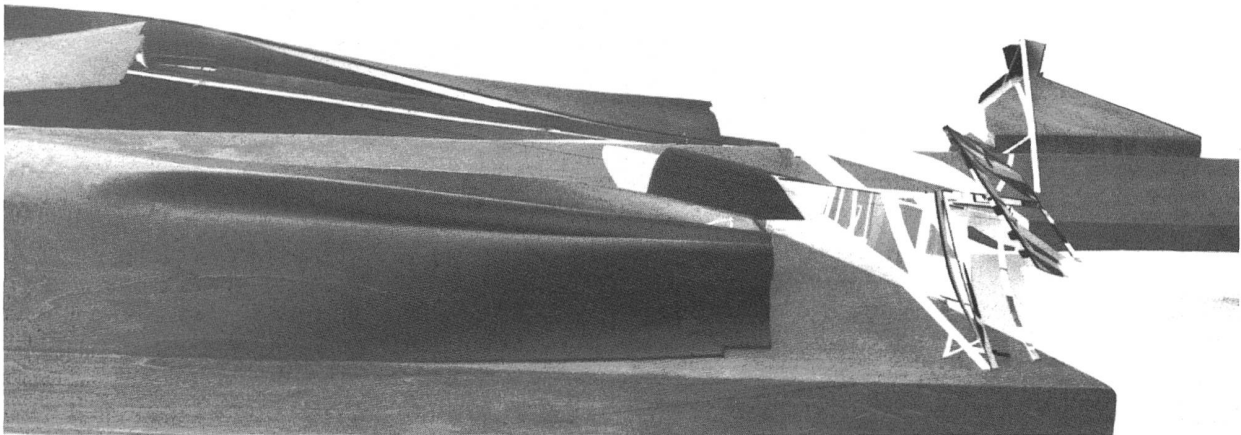
4

Beyond this “threshold of recuperation” the heteroclite dissociates form from the social apparatus of overcoding that has up to now defined it.

The heteroclite is a breach of the World As We Know It. For all intensive purposes, it is perceived by good/common sense as a simple negative: a lack of functioning, a liminal wasteland in socially significant constellations. By neorealists, it is seen for what it is not (without the yet). But, such analogical thinking is always limited to an isolated object (or individual) considered to be “typical” and ends in a category coherent enough to take its rightful place in a preexisting system of good/common sense. Such a limited view renders “global” representations that tend to reduce entire multiplicities to static and finite schemas – Cartesian clarity in the wake of turbulence. The last bastions of good/common sense have to come down.

The heteroclite is quantal. The paradoxes of atoms and the menagerie of particles inhabiting them are well known from quantum physics: particle or wave, matter or energy. Test it one way and it’s a particle, test it another way it’s a wave. If you know its velocity, you don’t know its position; if you know its position, you don’t know its velocity. Quantum stuff in general has the nasty habit of failing to obey the law of noncontradiction.⁷ The electron takes two latitudes that do not seem to coincide (particle and wave formation) and yields a third that coincides with neither – the heteroclitic electron. Because a measured electron is radically different from unmeasured electrons, quantum reality give us not one but at least two descriptions of the same thing, two descriptions that are contradictory, but coincidental – phase entanglement. Scientific measurement of such phenomenon actualizes a virtual particlewave (tell this to a neorealist). It changes the mode of reality of its object, bringing into being one of the states that the quantum phenomenon holds in the all-the-time density of virtuality which subsists everywhere and in everything, and contracts it into a here and now (quantum immanence – from nowhere to now here). Thus, the waveparticle is cocoused in an encounter between two realities: that of indeterminate potential and the act of scientific measurement (Aristotle’s potentia).

The quantum void is the opposite of nothingness (no thinness): far from being passive or inert, it contains a dimension of potential of all possible particlewaves. Quantum stuff acts behind the scene, so to speak, carrying no energy itself (anenergetic) and reveals itself only through statistical influence on a large number of particle events. Matter, with no firm foundation, depends on this quantal coresonance of the actual and the



5

virtual, a membranous porosity between the actual and virtual (Einstein's *Gespenssterfeld*). In this sense, all of matter, the whole stratified world, is one massive agitator of virtuality. It is at once a superabstract and infraconcrete form whose only object is the inseparability of distinct variations. This prevents any system, however controlled, to have a whole dimensionality and entirely predictable behaviour, therefore eliminating any efficacy of simple binary oppositions: actual – not virtual, particle – not wave, theory – not practice, this – not that.

The price that quantum physics has paid for its remarkable predictive power of reality at multiple scales is its inability to picture in plain language a representation of the atomic world or reality in general (i.e. just a particle or just a wave). However, must the account of experimental strategies of any discursive practice be expressed in unambiguous language and made applicable to the terminology of everyday experience in a utilitarian society? This formal (representational) challenge to quantum physics implies that no language or any other system which lends itself to visualizability alone can describe quantum indeterminacy, that quantal reality is not entirely intelligible, and that the reading of quantum facts greatly alters their factual status. This in turn suggests that there comes a moment when discourses formulated in terms of exclusivity are exhausted, when the biased fixations on the modernist triad of visibility, intelligibility, and readability are bankrupt and must be transgressed to open the way to innovation. It is here that concepts, sensations, and functions become undecidable, at the same time as philosophy, science and architecture become indiscernible, as if they shared the same shadow that extends itself across their different natures and constantly apanies them.⁸

So, what's wrong with a slew of concepts and who cares where they come from? They may not fit together in a neat package. But architecture is not a package deal. A slew of concepts may be seen as a repertory from which to pick and choose, to recombine and manipulate in the hope that they may be useful in understanding processes of structuration: the integration of disparate elements into more or less stratified formations from a basis of chance.⁹ Under the quantum microscope, the closest thing there is to order is the approximate, and always temporary, prevention of disorder. The closest thing there is to determinacy is the relative containment of chance. Neorealists be aware: the opposite of chance is not determinacy. It is habit.

1 Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, Philosophical Library Inc., New York, 1956; originally published as *L'Être et le Néant*, Paris, 1943.

2 Mark Wigley, „The Architectural Displacement of Philosophy“, in *Form; Being; and Absence: Pratt Journal of Architecture*, Rizzoli International Publications, New York, Spring 1988, p. 6.

3 *Ibid.*, p. 6.

4 Brian Massumi, *User's Guide to Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, MIT Press, Cambridge, 1996, p. 81.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 82.

6 *Ibid.*, p. 53.

7 Nick Herbert, *Quantum Reality, Beyond the New Physics*, Doubleday, New York, 1985, p. 57.

8 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, Verso, London, 1994, p. 218.

9 *Op. cit.*, Brian Massumi, p. 54.

Images.

1 Hyperbolaward 0752pH

2 Hyperbolaward 0844pH

3 Hyperbolaward 0844pH

4 Hullhouse Series 0952pH

5 Hyperbolaward 0445pH

all images courtesy of the author