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The Predicament of the Formless

Transform, deform, inform, perform, reform. Such terminological derivations of the word *form* imply a method by which meaning is systematically dislocated. The seeming singularity of a presumed taxonomy as given by dictionary definitions is subjected to a condition of flux, is displaced, destabilized.

A procedure of this kind can be associated with the word *informe*, the title of an article used by Georges Bataille as an entry to the unfinished "Dictionnaire critique," published in the journal *Documents* from 1929-30.[1] *Informe* could be understood as a course of action that undoes classifications. Described as an operation which "serves to bring things down in the world," the word has a task – its task being the dislocation of predetermined concepts. This is made evident in the choice of illustrations accompanying the text of the presumed dictionary. Photographs showing the slaughter houses of La Villette or close-up shots of deformed fingers are examples adhering to the tasks of *informe*, in this case, an assault against aesthetic norms to include that which convention had suppressed.

Architecture, the first entry of the *Dictionnaire critique*, is according to Bataille immanently tied to the concepts of order and stability. The art of building is portrayed as a stronghold of authority expressed by the composition of its forms. "The authority to command and prohibit" is that which is symbolically depicted by architecture, by the presence of its objects, and the cleanliness of its structures. Architecture stands for that which needs to be overturned. When referring to the storming of the Bastille as metaphorically representing the attack to which architectural form must succumb, an assault is waged by Bataille against architecture proposing to dismantle its representation of established orders.[2]

The two articles *architecture* and *informe* comprise a system in which one term is made to offset the other. Architecture represents that which *informe* wants to undo. While architectural form is endowed with meaning

signifying stability and coherence, *informe* is the disturbing element, an operation that destabilizes that to which it is applied. If architecture is to be exposed to such a procedure, in what ways would it change? How would architectural composition, after being shaken from its particular symbolic adherence, be expressed? Or to state the question in an inverse manner, how does *informe* inform form?

Strategies of the Formless

The exhibition *L'Informe: mode d'emploi*, curated by Rosalind Krauss and Yve-Alain Bois at the Centre Georges Pompidou in 1996 , takes up the subject matter of formlessness within art – formless being the common translation of *informe*.[3] According to Bataille, it is within the realm of art that signs of a liberation could be detected from the "architectural skeleton" of established traditions.[4] Taking impetus from Bataille's anti-project, the exhibition attempts to trace developments outside canonized conventions of twentieth-century art. The making of form is viewed not in terms of an affirmation of stable categories but as a procedure predicated by the undoing of form. As suggested by the show's curators, the formless, in itself not a concept *per se*, is primarily an operation for the purpose of dismantling. If one would nevertheless define it as a concept, they write, "it would be the concept of undermining concepts, of depriving them of their boundaries."[5]

Alphabetically organized, the exhibition unfolds according to the structure of a dictionary, and like Bataille's *Dictionnaire critique*, without apparent reference to the logic of deductive reasoning. Whereas categories are identified, all encompassing classifications are suspended by recourse to provisional propositions. Four operations are distinguished pertaining to the undoing of form and seen in opposition to assumed precepts within art. As if pursuing a game, dualities are set up and juxtaposed to one another: *horizontality* against verticality, *base materialism* against the elision of matter, pulse against the exclusion of temporality, *entropy* against structure.

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Horizontality, the first operation, counters the Gestalt Psychologists view that objects are perceived from an upright position. The body's verticality, perpendicular to the plane of vision, establishes a condition of frontality, a specific type of constellation between observer and that which is observed. "Operationally speaking," Krauss suggests, "if you flatten the object onto the horizontal field, you move it away from the visual, from its condition of form, onto a field that attacks the notion of form."[6] Alberto Giacometti's horizontal sculptures, such as *Le Circuit*, Jackson Pollock's drip-paintings, painted on a horizontal surface, or Andy Warhol's *Dance Diagram*, exhibited on the floor, could be considered formal breaks of that kind. The act of pulling the observer out of the vertical axis is a confrontation vis-à-vis the concept of form as image and object of contemplation.

Base materialism, the second operation, questions the high-low opposition between form and materiality customarily at work within art production.[7] According to Bois, *informe* as a practice dismisses "anything from being taken as a symbol for anything else – being transposed or deciphered into anything else."[8] The notion of matter as something that awaits to be transformed from a low to an elevated realm is rejected. The reference to the domain of the metaphysical is forsaken in favor of an approach that accepts matter as what it is, raw phenomena. Works, such as Pablo Picasso's reliefs of sand and other materials, Robert Rauschenberg's experiments with dirt and mud, or Alberto Buri's burned plastic might be considered within this framework, re-evaluating the representational value attributed to formed matter.

Pulse, the third operation, questions the presumption of the art work as a stable entity in time. Rather than addressing temporality in terms of a narrative structure or as a representation of movement, the element of time is re-addressed as an underlying infinite pulsation or beat which characterizes open-ended processes. In its repetitive serial quality, *pulse* has a performative

function; it is another tactic to undermine the myth of form as a static entity. "Pulse is another form of instability," writes Krauss, "one with temporal dimension." Marcel Duchamp's experiments with rotoreliefs, Jean Tinguely's moveable sculptures, or Richard Serra's film *Hand Catching Lead* are works marked by a fleeting temporality that challenges form as a condition of rest.

Entropy, the fourth operation, denounces the reliance on compositional order as an organizing principle of formal configuration, a type of control to which the art work normally succumbs. As a strategy, *entropy* – a term identifying gradual decreases of energy within systems – implies another possibility for conceiving form, one pertaining to the degradation of order. Such an operation involves, according to Bois, "the transformation of a structure into a state of indifferentiation."[9] Man Ray's photograph *Transatlantic New York* showing the residue of an ashtray emptied on the floor, or Hans Arp's *Papier déchiré* made of torn paper randomly assembled, or Robert Smithson's *Asphalt Rundown* are attempts where the very foundations of structured form are undermined.

The four operations outline devices in which seemingly unquestionable presuppositions are set aside and their opposites unraveled. As in Bataille's project, the authority of form, as much as its symbolic frame of reference, is dismantled as a principle of course. An anachronistic affinity might be discerned between Bataille's program and the post-structuralist position taken by Krauss and Bois. A shared agenda against that which presupposes closure is at work – a suspicion towards the concept of meaning as something immanently tied to form. Notwithstanding this claim, a provocative hypothesis underlies their undertaking, namely that the deployment of form can transgress the very structure – or superstructure – of formal construction. More bluntly stated, form can do the job.

Indicative of recent architectural discourse is a tendency to undo categorical normatives. As within art criticism, the formless in architecture invokes not a dissolution of form *per se*, but a dissolution of an understanding of form. Within such a framework, one might discern a preference for plurality over singularity, heterogeneity over homogeneity, inclusion over exclusion, incompletness over wholeness, ambiguity over clarity. At the core of such approaches is a shift of emphasis from the formless as a type of critique to the formless as a mode of production. Form is not addressed as *what it is* but as *what it does*, redirecting the focus within the discipline from a typology of form to a matrix of operations. Such a quest is not guided by the reinstatement of an aesthetic program, stylistically framed in advance, but involves processes that engender approximations. Different practices of the formless could be traced as pertaining to the undoing of form and seen in opposition to established precepts. Expanding upon the dualities set up in *l'informe: mode d'emploi*, one could distinguish
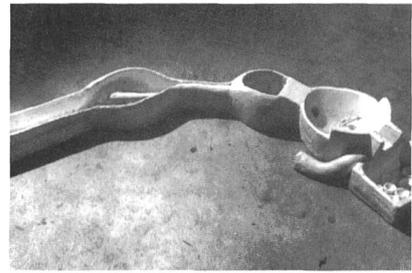
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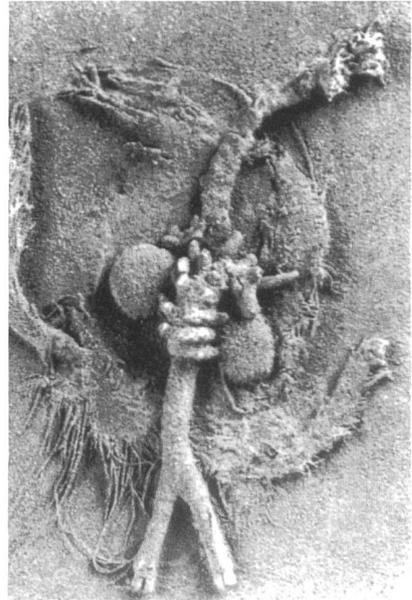
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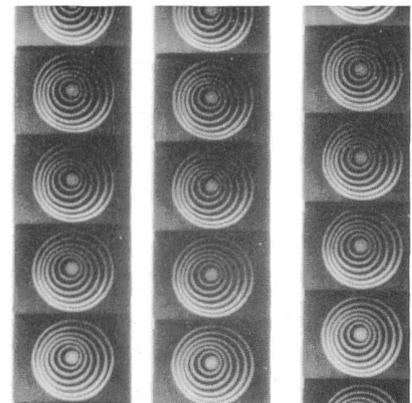
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different operations: *expanded fields* versus the singularity of objects, *weak materiality* versus elevated matter, *fluidity* versus permanence, *circumstantiality* versus the exclusion of incidentalness.

Expanded Fields

Architecture is typically associated with the mastery of the object asserting the presence of the work in its undefiled condition. This notion of entity, whether circumscribed by shape, geometry, or compositional arrangement, adheres to a structure determined by a figure-ground dichotomy. By flattening the object onto a horizontal field one might discern strategic possibilities for construing architectural form as expanded fields. As given by the characteristics of figure-ground relationships, the object is customarily localized within a context as a figure to be grounded. Fields, in contrast, revoke the distinction between figure and ground dismantling and decentering the idea of the object as a bounded entity.

Greg Lynn's *Stranded Sears Tower* project pertains to the operation of flattening, flipping the architectural object's vertical axis onto the horizontal field of Chicago's city fabric. The tower is disassociated from its condition as a freestanding artifact and transformed into a field. While disengaged from its original site and re-contextualized onto the urban territory, the object looses its quality as figure to coalesce with the ground. The bundled tubes that constitute the tower's initial structure begin to multiply into an irreducible system of untangled strands. The bifurcations and deformations of the individual tubes, although responding to localized forces, appear formally indeterminate and provisional, a strategy accentuating the open-ended properties of field structures.[10]

A series of experiments during the sixties, affiliated with Team X and the Japanese Metabolists, initiated a discourse on form no longer expressed as solitary bodies but as adaptable organizational structures. Fumihiko Maki introduced the concept of *group form*, a term identifying an aggregation of parts forming open clusters. Linkages and connections delineate alliances of varying intensities suggesting loose systems of relations from which architectural assemblies evolve. "Urban society," Maki writes, must be considered "as a dynamic field of interrelated forces." He describes the city as a pattern of events, fluid and mobile in its disposition.[11] In order to address such properties, new forms were tested. The work of Candilis, Josic, and Woods, for example, displayed a preference for structures of horizontal extension, as in their projects for the universities of Berlin and Bochum.[12] Within such strategies the distinction between figure and ground was effaced suggesting a dissolution of the object as unitary body. While the forms produced were criticized for their presumably systematic proclivity, these approaches have received renewed consideration within recent architectural discourse with an emphasis given to the operative potentialities of formal dispositions.

Peter Eisenman, for instance, departs from the notion of architecture as object to investigate understandings of architecture as open territory. His project for the IBA in Berlin, *City of Artificial Excavation*, is derived from a conceptual archaeology, a type of notation of the many physical and non-physical layers of the site. Similarly, the *Wexner Center for the Visual Arts* in Columbus, Ohio seems to merge into a network of traces, grid lines, and geographical demarcations. In the *Rebstock Housing* project in Frankfurt, architectural form dissolves into a field of relationships based as much on real as on invented urban topographies. In these projects, the work is produced from a process in which structures are provisional markers of a momentary and circumstantial condition. No claim is made for stable entities nor for reduction to simple elements; form is deployed as a possibility within a field alluding to other possibilities. Architecture involves here the 'unframing' or 'deframing' of the very forms produced.
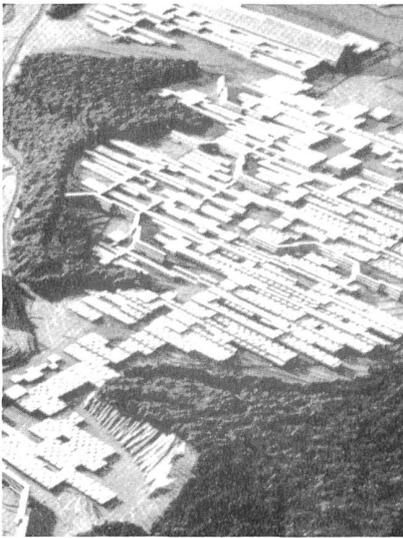
Weak Materiality

Considerations of the formless suggest a reassessment of the material domain of architectural form, namely the possibility of regarding materiality as something that cannot coalesce into a singular entity, accepting its irresoluteness and, in this sense, *weak* condition.[13] In order to address such a proposition, one might examine that which is repressed within the material realm of form production, the very *other* of elevated materiality – the ordinary, inferior, impure, crude, messy, or wasted, that to which no form is attributed in the ideal sense. Sigmund Freud's assertion "dirt is matter in the wrong place" could be taken as a point of departure from which to possibly overturn the notions of material rightness or wrongness.

The work of Gordon Matta-Clark can be seen within this context for it uncovers customarily rejected – and thus suppressed – material aspects of architecture. The intervention *Conical Intersect*, a response to the revitalization of the *Quartier Beaubourg* in Paris, suggests alternative approaches to the issue of materiality in juxtaposition to the immaculate construction of the adjacent Centre Georges Pompidou. Matta-Clark's process involves cutting and removing in order to reveal that which is concealed. Studs, rubble, wiring, and other disparate parts of sub-assemblies, as well as the messiness of building processes, are literally exposed. The work engages in a kind of uncovering of presumed assumptions, not only as to architecture's physical constitution but in terms of its solidly anchored ideological structure.

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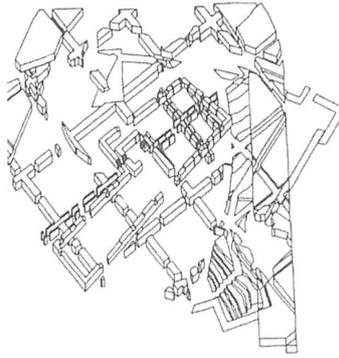
The issue of materiality has been repeatedly brought up within the Modern Movement as a means to disengage from traditional precepts. Adolf Loos' assertion that no distinction of value should be made between materials, Le Corbusier's *béton brut*, and Mies van der Rohe's employment of industrialized steel sections are attempts to liberate material possibilities from particular significations. Alvar Aalto's experiments with materials and techniques in his house at Muuratsalo reconsider the question of construction assemblies. The notion of homogeneous principles, to which a work must comply is forsaken in favor of heterogeneous assemblages of loose cohesion. The possibilities of incongruous constructions are exploited, questioning the value of all-encompassing systems of order to which material assemblies normally abide. Notwithstanding ontological interpretations of such approaches, their liberating aspect has incited reconsiderations of materiality within recent architectural practices.

Frank Gehry's early work employs materials taken from the banal and ordinary domain of cheap construction – plywood, gypsum board, chainlink fence, corrugated metal, and the like. Although ubiquitous and appropriated from the so-called 'cheapscape' of the contemporary urban fabric is made, such materials are traditionally expelled from collective consciousness. According to Gehry, they belong to the realm of an "invisible architecture," given by the realities which one selects not to see.[14] Considered from such a vantage point, Gehry's contention is not to reveal that which is presumably hidden but to displace such systems through unfamiliar allocations and fabrications. The casual and transient – if not to say degraded – qualities of informal constructions are pursued. Allowing material form to evade particular significations, materiality in its indecisive and weak condition is deployed as a tactic of the formless.

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Fluidity

Within models of formlessness in architecture the disposition of fluidity is being currently considered. Bearing affinities to the continuity demonstrated in Frederick Kiesler's Endless House and the undividedness embodied in the habitable sculptures of Andre Bloc, a conception of architectural form emerges in terms of fluid morphologies where discrete boundaries seemingly dissolve. As suggested by Bois and Krauss, the incorporation of dynamic systems in fluid structures undermines the stability of form as a condition of rest. Fundamental to this understanding is the treatment of the enclosure as a figuration of fields. By offering a visual flow of perpetual motion and continuous multiplicity, heterogeneous yet coherent architectural forms are suspended in a temporal dimension of pulsation – "endlessly searching for another and another and another object."[15]

In architectural design, combinatory methods of juxtaposition, collage, and assemblages are gradually venturing towards a new logic of amalgamation to include such operations as grafting, tracing, folding, and distorting. Intrinsic to this logic is the tendency to transgress physical perimeters, or to blur contour lines, a strategy capable of serving diverging tasks. On the one hand it aims for disjunction by weakening and insubstantiating holistic masses, on the other hand it aims for coherence by linking disjointed, stratified organizations into a congruous whole.

With Mies van der Rohe's Glass Skyscraper project of 1922, one could distinguish a particular device which contributes to a tectonics of disappearance and dissolution. In the curvilinear outline, the inflected contour lines animate the object's idleness and articulate its relationship with the force fields surrounding it, thus maximizing the surface area of the enclosure, transforming the building mass. Investigated in different practices today, this configurative device is polarized by divergent techniques where the effect of indistinctiveness is pursued by way of envelopes that contain but do not define.[16]

Greg Lynn's work, for example, addresses morphogenic studies of fluid mechanics, where matter cannot be reduced to purely geometric or ideal qualities. Rejecting fragmentation, Lynn searches for a condition of multiplicity that would engender both differentiation and continuity. The single-family residence project in Long Island presents architectural masses comprised of force fields of graduated motion. Not unlike the intentions of the British painter Francis Bacon, who started with a form and sought to "distort it far beyond appearance, but in the distortion to bring it back to a recording of its appearance," Lynn develops techniques where figurative integers are developed to transform the building's volumetric mass. He then proceeds to blur these forms in a series of steps, utilizing procedures such as 'smoothing' or 'morphing' to create the illusion of transformation through the simultaneous superposition of intermediate frames. By transgressing the center and deforming the perimeter, this operation provides a temporal dimension that destabilizes the object's condition of rest.

Circumstantiality

Pivotal to the project of the formless in architecture is a preference for the degradation of order over the articulation of structure. Given the tendency of twentieth-century art towards the dematerialization of the object, the comprehension of such degradation is often founded on the dichotomy of order and chaos. Underwritten by another form of structural determinism, this condition runs the risk of vindicating randomness by illustrating disjunctive irregularities. Conversely, the performative rather than the iconic possibilities of entropy generate a prevailing interest in circumstantiality as a projective disposition.
Rudolf Arnheim's analogy of shuffling a deck of cards, utilizes disorder as a vehicle rather than an end in

itself.[17] While shuffling could be regarded as a replacement of an initial sequential grouping with another, entropy places attention upon the overall distribution of 'kinds' of order within a given arrangement. It focuses on the possibilities of summation, as given by the serial order of the deck versus the order of the game versus the order of homogeneous distribution that perpetuates the order of chance. Hence, the whirling of cards is not understood simply as the conjectural absence of order but as the clash of uncoordinated orders.

One could decipher such a condition in the film *Der Lauf der Dinge* by Peter Fischli and David Weiss, who metaphorically compare themselves with sewer workers engaging in the examination of society's refuse. Unlike Jean Tinguely's self-destruction machines where exploding constructions strive towards the deterioration of order, Fischli/Weiss' arrangements unfurl in an almost seamless procession of controlled disorder. Each set up is systematically activated by the energy released from the collapse of the previous arrangement. Here, the circumstantial accommodates transformative possibilities. With extreme precision in the manipulation of the otherwise imprecise props, the processional set ups are constantly on the verge of entropy but never actually succumb. Emerging from such models is the issue of circumstantiality as an operation of the formless in architecture.

Daniel Libeskind's urban projects capitalize on circumstances suppressed within urban planning – the disintegration of zones, the dissolution of functional contexts, and the abolition of meaningful locations. His Potsdamerplatz project in Berlin accentuates the fractures of war by utilizing the city's left-over spaces. Creating a network of aggregated linear fragments intersecting at different levels, a fabric of vectors is superimposed onto the fabric of the city. In the Alexanderplatz project, Libeskind manipulates the 'ground' as an ever-changing three-dimensional matrix of traffic, street patterns and built structures.[18] Oscillating between the confirmation and the erasure of history, this new ground not only infiltrates existing interstitial spaces but creates new ones, growing over and subverting the built fabric to initiate new urban textures. In both projects conventional expectations are contravened by incorporating ephemeral conditions into generative mechanisms. It is within this realm that architecture will have to rethink not only the forms it produces, but as a condition of doing so, rethink the articulation of their circumstances.
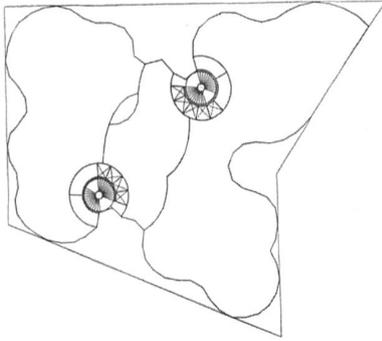
Against Classifications

Following the Kantian contention that what cannot be classified cannot be recognized, categorical normatives are generally used for the elaboration of broad affinities among otherwise heterogeneous practices. Despite the ostensibly strict taxonomy according to which the formless within art and architecture is being appropriated, the classifications brought forth are nevertheless unsharp in their structure. The four operations of *Expanded Fields, Weak Materiality, Fluidity, and Circumstantiality* are more prognostic than diagnostic. The examples offered are interchangeable, so as to suggest a field of possibilities from which other interpretations might emerge. As in Borges' Chinese encyclopedia, quoted in the famed opening paragraph of Michel Foucault's *The Order of Things*, new categories are set up to upset accepted categorizations.[19] Correspondingly, the classificatory structure of *informe* complies in itself to the procedures of the formless, breaching established divisions such as style, period, technique, theme, or type.
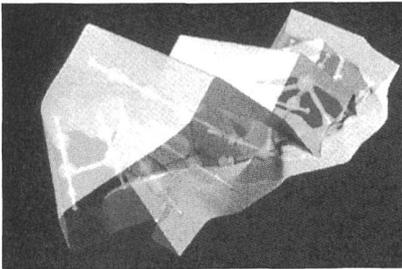
The notion of the oeuvre as a complete entity, as suggested by Foucault in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, is a driving force of Western epistemology.[20] Similarly, the history of ideas in architecture is marked by descriptions of continuities, coherences, and successions. As much as the discipline is portrayed as a unity of discourses so are its products and the rules that govern them: the clarity of intention, the congruity of form, the logic of structure. Indicative of such an understanding is Foucault's metaphorical use of the term architecture, in such phrases as "the architectonic unities of systems" or "the unity of a logical architecture" of knowledge. At the level of symbolic representation, architecture is unequivocally attached to the idea of completeness.

Foucault suggests that another history could be traced, one in which differences and systems of dispersion might be investigated. Whereas a method of analysis is at first pursued focusing on discontinuities, ruptures, thresholds, limits, and transformations, ultimately the very concept of unities is suspended. It is specifically the understanding of a work as a unitary body, closed and finite in its structure, demarcated by "the limits of its beginning and its end", that is forsaken. An approach is put forth in which a field rather than an object of inquiry is delineated. "Instead of seeking the permanence of themes, images, and opinions," Foucault writes, "could one not mark out a field of strategic possibilities?"[21]
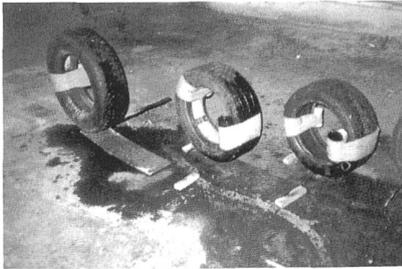
Architecture as a discipline can be considered in similar terms – that is as a system of differences and dispersions. In this sense, any attempt at establishing frameworks of classificatory order, can only be considered as a momentary constellation awaiting to be subjected to the destabilizing structure of formless operations. As stated by Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, "classification is a condition for cognition and not cognition itself; cognition in turn dispels classification."[22] Architecture might be considered in itself "a field of strategic possibilities," in a state of flux and indeterminate in its form.

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1 Georges Bataille, "Informe," in Documents, no. 7, Dec.1929. See Georges Bataille, Visions of Excess, Selected Writings, 1927-39, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1985, p. 31.
2 Georges Bataille, "Architecture," in Documents, no. 2, May 1929. See Denis Hollier, Against Architecture, MIT Press, Cambridge MA, 1989; originally published in 1974 as La Prise de la Concorde.
3 Yve-Alain Bois & Rosalind Krauss, l'informe, mode d'emploi, Éditions du Centre Pompidou, Paris,1996.
4 Op. cit., Georges Bataille, "Architecture."
5 Lauren Sedofsky, "Down and Dirty," in Artforum, interview with Rosalind Krauss and Yve-Alain Bois, New York, Summer 1996, pp. 91-95, 126, 131.
6 Ibid., p. 126.
7 Georges Bataille, "Materials" and "Base Materialism and Gnosticism," Visions of Excess, Selected Writings, 1927-1939, op. cit., pp. 15, 16, & 45.
8 Op. cit., Lauren Sedofsky, p. 131.
9 Op. cit., Lauren Sedofsky , p. 136.
10 Greg Lynn, "Stranded Sears Tower," in Folding Architecture, Architectural Design Profile, London, No. 102, 1993, pp. 82-85.
11 Fumihiko Maki, Investigations in Collective Form, Washington University, St. Louis, 1964. See also Fumihiko Maki, "The Theory of Group Form," Japan Architect, feb. 1970.
12 See Team 10 Primer, edited by Alison Smithson, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 1968; and Team 10 Meetings, edited by Alison Smithson, Rizzoli, New York, 1991.
13 The term weak is borrowed from a collection of essays entitled Il pensiero debole, edited by Gianni Vattimo and Pier Aldo Rovatti, Feltrinelli, Milan, 1983.
14 Frank Gehry, "Invisible Architecture," Architectural Record, June 1976.
15 Krauss, interviewed with Yve-Alain Bois and Lauren Sedofsky in Artforum, Summer 1996, pp. 131.
16 Regarding the architectural profile, see Luigi Moretti's definition of modernatura, published in the article "Valori della Modernatura," in Spazio 6.
17 Rudolf Arnheim, Entropy and Art, an Essay on Disorder and Order, University of California Press, London, 1971.
18 See "Daniel Libeskind 1987-1996," El Croquis, Madrid, 1996, pp. 74-95.
19 Michel Foucault, The Order of Things, Random House, New York, 1970; originally published as Les mots et les choses, 1966.
20 Michel Foucault, The Archaeology of Knowledge, Pantheon Books, New York, 1972; originally published in 1969 under the title L'Archéologie du Savoir.
21 Ibid., p. 37.
22 Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, Dialectic of Enlightenment, 1972, p. 212; originally published in 1944 under the title Dialektik der Aufklärung.

Illustrations:

1 Eli Lotar, "Aux abattoirs de la Villette", Documents, 6, 1929.
2 Jacques-André Boiffard, "Gros orteil, sujet féminin, 24 ans", Documents, 6, 1929.
3 Alberto Giacometti, Le Circuit, 1931
4 Pablo Picasso, Composition, 1930
5 Marcel Duchamp, Anématic Cinéma, 1925
6 Man Ray, Transatlantic New York, 1920
7 Peter Eisenman, Moving Arrows, Eros and Other Errors: Romeo and Juliet, Verona, 1985
8 Candilis, Josic, and Woods, University of Bochum, 1967
9 Gordon Matta-Clark, Conical Intersect, Paris, 1975
10 Frank Gehry, Gehry House, Santa Monica, 1977-78
11 Mies van der Rohe, Glass Skyscraperproject, Berlin, 1922
12 Greg Lynn, Single-Family Residence, Long Island, 1995
13 Fischli/Weiss, Der Lauf der Dinge, 1987
14 Daniel Libeskind, Alexanderplatz Project, Berlin, 1993

Die Auseinandersetzung mit Themen der Instabilität, Dynamik und Mobilität haben dazu geführt, dass bis anhin geltende physikalische Gesetzmässigkeiten in der Architektur in Frage gestellt werden. In diesem Zusammenhang wird auch dem Kontext seine Grundlage als räumliche Konstante entzogen. Muss er deshalb neu definiert werden, welche Kriterien können in einer solchen Neu-Definition enthalten sein?

Neue Tendenzen weisen auf eine geänderte Wahrnehmung hin, Landschaften werden gebaut und nicht mehr bebaut, die Beziehung zwischen Figur und Grund wird hinterfragt, klare Grenzen verwischen. Die Form wird zur hybriden Gestalt.