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New Architectural Grotesque since 1990

Transitioning from Form to Organism

Breaking the Classical Body

Throughout history, architecture has frequently derived its principles from the notion of the human body, which, in the Vitruvian tradition, epitomized the well-proportioned, well-structured and conscious human. If ‘correctly’ translated into the geometry and the syntactic bond between the individual members of the construction, architecture would be able to ‘embody’ the perfection of its natural precursor. As a consequence, architecture would reach its classical telos, and achieve Beauty.

Nevertheless, the possibility of particular transitory emotions of the body seemed to interfere with the more universal and timeless features of its classical ideal. In the mid-18th century, the notorious discussion about the Greek statue of Laocoön between Johann Joachim Winckelmann and Gotthold Ephraim Lessing opened up the conceptual dilemma posed by the representation of bodily passion (Fig. 1). The statue depicted the scene, in which Laocoön and his two sons are strangled by sea serpents sent to them by Poseidon for warning the Trojans against accepting the Trojan Horse from the Greeks. While Winckelmann and Lessing disagreed on the reasons, for which a genuine representation of Laocoön’s agony is avoided, they were nevertheless in agreement concerning the sculpture’s representational characteristic of a “noble simplicity and quiet grandeur.” Lessing explicates that, because Beauty is the supreme aspiration of art, an overly realistic depiction of Laocoön’s suffering was to be avoided: “I wanted simply to establish that among the ancients beauty was the supreme law of the visual arts. [...] If we apply this now to the Laocoön, the principle which I am seeking becomes apparent. The master strove to attain the highest beauty possible under the given condition of physical pain. The demands of beauty could not be reconciled with the pain in all its disfiguring violence, so it had to be reduced. The scream had to be softened to a sigh, not because screaming betrays an ignoble soul, but because it distorts the features in a disgusting manner. Simply imagine Laocoön’s mouth forced wide open, and then judge!”

The wide-open mouth, aside from the fact that the rest of the face is thereby twisted and distorted in an unnatural and loathsome manner, becomes in painting a mere spot and in sculpture a cavity, with most repulsive effect.¹

The particular contortions of Laocoön’s face risk to elevate the specificities of a mere fleeting moment of physical pain to the status of an artistic ideal, fixated in marble. Such an aesthetic basis grounded in the ephemeral condition of pain was unacceptable to Lessing’s neo-classical mindset; the materialized scene could only trigger the mind to imagine the climax of pain.

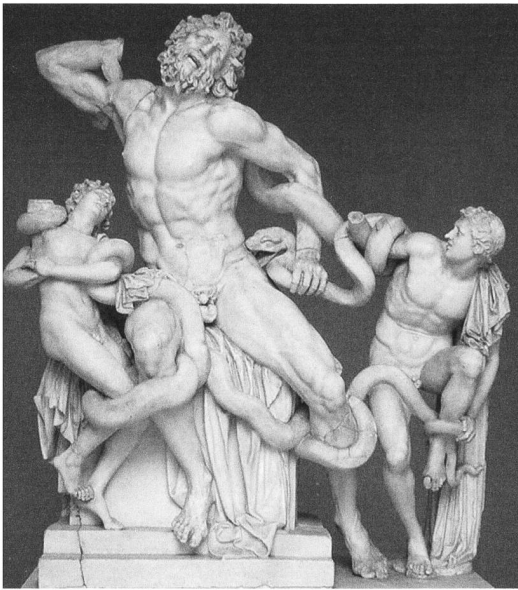


Fig. 1, *the Laocoön Group* (Alinari-Scala), copy of a bronze sculpture by Hagesandros / Polydoros / Athanadoros, ca. second half of 1st century.

Nevertheless, in a contemporaneous essay entitled *A Philosophical Enquiry Into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* from 1757, Edmund Burke made the case for a very different aesthetic philosophy, which opposes the category of the beautiful to the sublime. In it, Burke argued that “the ideas of pain are much more powerful than those which enter on the part of pleasure. Without all doubt [he continues] the torments which we may be made to suffer, are much greater in their effect on the body and mind, than any pleasures which the most learned voluptuary could suggest, or than the liveliest imagination, and the most sound and exquisitely sensible body could enjoy.”² Against the classical prerequisite of absolute values of beauty, Burke here substantiates an interest of all Romantic aesthetic theory in the ‘particular’, including the sick, the distorted, the grotesque, the ugly, and the monstrous.³ In the face of sublime wonder and the ensuing delightful horror, “the idea of a perfect unity can no more be arrived at”⁴, and consequently, the structural autonomy of the well-proportioned, classical body was radically put to question as an aesthetic archetype.

The ‘beautiful’ body is on the verge of losing its formal autonomy and unity in the Laocoön Group. The open orifice of the mouth and the snakes contribute to this process of dissolution in an analogous way: While the gaping mouth is just short of disturbing the visual surface of the body by engulfing it with a grimace, the snakes extend the body’s membrane outwards by entwining it around the bodies. Both the mouth’s cavity and the extending snakes thus almost break the classical visual ‘façade’ of the body, and make it interact both inwards and outwards beyond its classical boundaries.

Sentient Environments

Since the early 1990s, architects have reactivated their attention to the notion of the body – an interest that, I argue, has adopted the Romantic sublime as its conceptual antecedent. Herein the beautiful, autonomous body has mutated into the notion of the architectural organism, capable of new interactions with its spaces within and around the surface of the classical body. One observes that, increasingly often, different physical states of the carnal body changing in time have become paradigmatic for architecture’s morphogenesis – like for instance the body in a state of decomposition or the grotesque body. Once the transient and singular nature of the physical body is emphasized, architecture can engage in an unprecedented way with the ephemeral, the transitional, and the contingent.

In this conceptual frame, the architectural body is not primarily articulated in space, but in time. Amongst other factors, the increasingly sophisticated and versatile animation software since the early nineties opened the way into

1 Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Laocoön. An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry*, [1766], translated by E. A. McCormick, Baltimore / London: Johns Hopkins Press 1984, p. 15–17.

2 Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry Into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful and Other Pre-Revolutionary Writings*, London: Penguin Books 1998, p. 86.

3 On the idea of Neoclassical versus Romantic aesthetics, refer to Pierre Wat, *Naissance de l’art romantique. Peinture et théorie de l’imitation*, Paris: Flammarion 1998, p. 99. What argues the following: “Au general le romantisme substitue la peinture du particulier, donc de l’écart, du laid, du monster, de la maladie, de la mort.”

4 Burke, *Philosophical Enquiry*, London: Penguin Books 1998, p. 115.

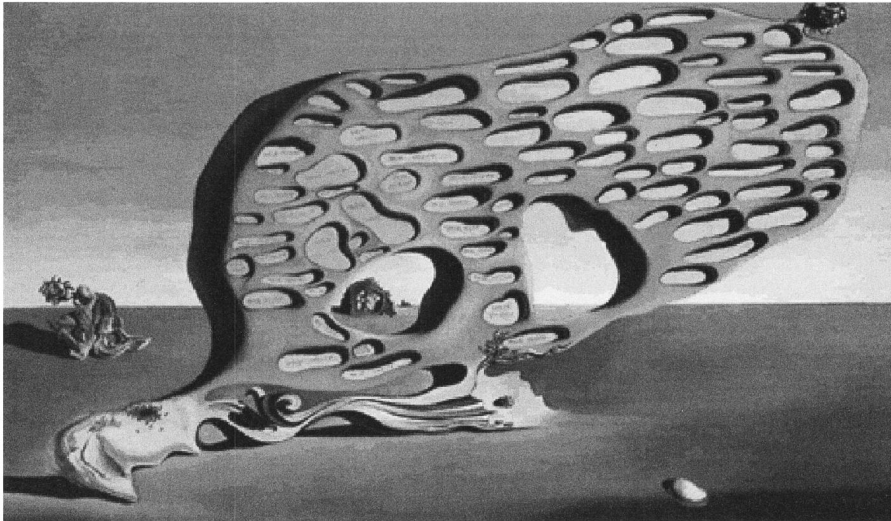


Fig. 3, Salvador Dalí, *El enigma del deseo*, 1929.

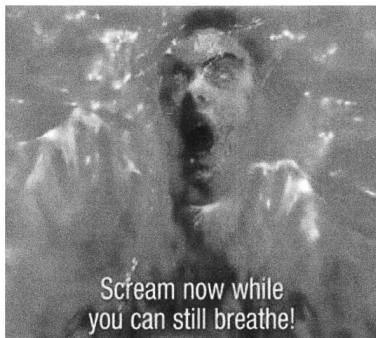


Fig. 2, Irvin Yeaworth (director), *The Blob*, 1958, film-still.

an understanding of form as dynamic and, at the same time, as inhabited by some enigmatic agency with an idiosyncratic and quasi-autonomous behavior. Herein, the effects of the software, which has a progressively more opaque logic of operation to the architect-user, hold a great poetic potential: the creative software-user relishes the ineffable effects that the different algorithms produce, and he is awed in face of the unfolding techno-sublime.

For an architect like Greg Lynn, the new paradigm was presented as having mostly geometrical effects. Indeed, throughout a number of his early texts, Lynn situates his project within the formalist tradition from Rudolf Wittkower to Colin Rowe, and, against their 'reductive formalism', lays out the parameters for an irreducible formalism that is based on anexact geometries. Yet, in the very first sentences of his argument in *Animate Form*, Lynn explains that "animation implies the evolution of a form and its shaping forces: it suggests animalism, animism, growth, actuation, vitality, and virtuality."⁵ Both this quote and his reference to the series of Blob films, starting with *The Blob* directed by Irvin Yeaworth in 1958, reveal that Lynn's interest goes beyond the new geometries; in fact, he is fascinated by the changed psychological conditions the new monstrous, dynamic and amorphous forms provoke in the beholder of architecture.⁶ In these films, the 'blob' is a scary alien life form, which consumes and gulps everything in its path as it expands (Fig. 2). Its 'stickiness' reverses the condition of articulation, in which architectural tectonics has hitherto been grounded; instead of making the joinery of different formal systems articulate, blobs erase the legibility of such connections altogether; hence their uncanny appearance. And, most importantly, the subject's loss of readability is at the same time his loss of jurisdiction about the object-world. At least on a theoretical level, the body of the subject and the body of architecture now influence each other interactively, and render the autonomy of either of them impracticable.

The motif of humans losing control in face of the ineffable behavior of the blob acts as an analog to the changed relationship of the architect towards his design. No doubt, the architect's agency finds itself radically altered when feeding the computer with data while abandoning the traditional design techniques of the paper sketch. This type of architecture unfolds through iterative processes, instead of being thought through in a sequential manner by a designer, who makes a series of conscious, step-by-step, non-automatic and non-linear decisions. Lynn's creepy, sticky and slimy forms impose on both the designer and the beholder of architecture psychological sensations of fascination and, at the same time, of impotence and horror. The clear-cut distinction between the subject of the designer as the agency of formal decision-making, and the object to be designed as the 'receiver' of formal information, is removed.



Fig. 5. H. R. Giger, *Landscape X*, Work No. 203, 1972.



Fig. 6. H. R. Giger, *Li I*, Work No. 250, 1974.

The surrealist authors and painters from Hieronymus Bosch to Salvador Dali had already daydreamed about mysterious life forms, which erased the ontological differentiation between live and dead matter (Fig. 3). In fact, their imagination had both the capacity and the ambition to thoroughly animate all constituents of their visions. Beyond these painters, also science fiction authors such as Stanislaw Lem, for example, had envisioned whole sentient planets in outer space, as Lem did in his 1961 book *Solaris*. The planet Solaris is covered with an 'ocean', which turns out to be a single live organism enveloping the entirety of the surface. In the human researchers' endeavor to analyze the planet from their space station, the sentient environment stays opaque to their scrutiny and does not reveal anything about itself; instead, the environment acts on the scientists' minds, laying bare their own repressed and daunting thoughts: they are confronted with their own psychological horror. Again, Lem upsets the subject-object relationship, which hitherto tended to be based on the one-sided agency of the subject – the subject framed by a passive environment.

The idea of real-time interactivity between humans and their milieus in this sci-fi episode also appealed to architects in the sixties. Archigram's project for an *Electronic Tomato* from 1969, amongst others, expressed the desire for an active subject-object engagement – although the nature of the interaction remains cryptic (Fig. 4). Nevertheless, Archigram's quasi-biological prosthetic gizmo had a stimulating effect on the human body, causing it to abandon either a passive state of being, that is bourgeois spectatorship, or, on the contrary, its position of control over the object. It appears as an updated version of the Laocoön in that the electronic wires have taken over the stimulating effect of the sea-snakes: this time, it is not pain but ecstasy, which makes the human figure in Archigram's Laocoön contort her body and open her mouth.

Barely anyone has depicted the idea of the symbiosis between organic and inert matter in such a powerful way as the Swiss artist Hansruedi Giger, who, interestingly, was originally educated as an architect. Giger's exploration of a 'biomechanoid' aesthetics epitomizes whole 'living landscapes' made of both biological and mechanical substances (Fig. 5 + 6). In these settings, humans have yielded any conscious control over their surroundings while the latter are elevated to the rank of vegetative organisms. The confines between the human body and both other bodies and the world are overcome with the help of the body's orifices and extensions. Giger's oeuvre is in many ways visionary of much of the experimentation of the past decade in architecture. Amongst many others, the theme of the fusion of morphologies with dissimilar ontologies, that is the fusion of living bodies with technological 'prostheses', has been constitutive of many of the more provocative projects since the early nineties, including the one of Karl Chu, of Marcos Novak, of Xefirotarch, and others.



Fig. 4. Warren Chalk & David Greene, *Electronic Tomato*, 1969.

5 Greg Lynn, *Animate Form*, New York: Princeton Architectural Press 1999, p. 9.

6 Greg Lynn, "Blobs. Why Tectonics is Square and Topology is Groovy," in: *Any* (1996), May, No. 14, p. 169–186.

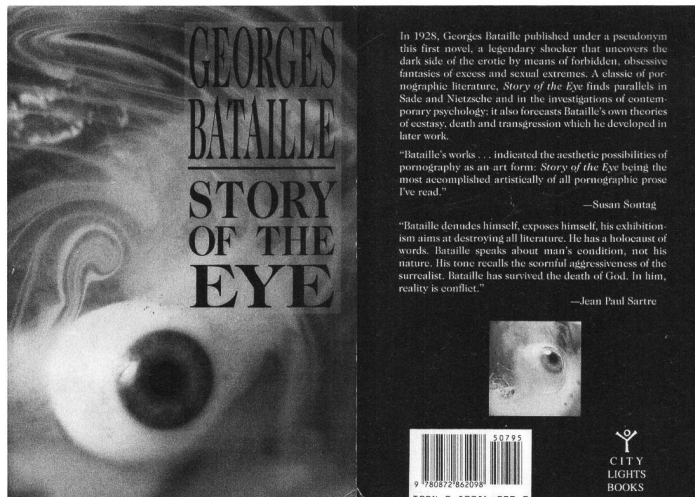


Fig. 7, Georges Bataille, *The Story of the Eye*, 1987, cover page and back.

Bataille's Grotesque

The formal inventions of this series of authors, who are all associated in one way or another with the thought of the sublime, find their theoretical counterpart in the anti-philosophe Georges Bataille. Bataille most visibly makes use of a wealth of grotesque body metaphors to undo what he sees as the repressive and static force of 'architecture', underlying all human effort of structuring. Indeed, for him, all architecture only exists in the service of the official power structure of the society that erects it, and, as a consequence, has its conceptual origin in the building of the prison: the official voice of society imposes its ethical 'forms' onto the individual, who has no choice but to move within the space given to him by society. Nevertheless, Bataille's argument is even more fundamental, in that he conceptualizes the human body – man's own form – as the first prison he is incarcerated in.⁷ Based on this assumption, Bataille invests his writing in finding ways to de-structure these authoritarian constraints, and to highlight their transient and artificial nature by dismantling the biological prison that the human body represents. Therefore, he finds an early interest in the human body in the state of 'ecstasy', for example a body that literally breaks out of its own boundaries. This pursuit is already most clearly portrayed in his first novel, *The Story of the Eye*, from 1928, which plays with the notions of human obsession, excess, and deviance⁸ (Fig. 7). Here, all traditional limitations of the body's morality and physical integrity are suspended, and replaced with the decadent pleasures of sexuality, eroticism, and necrophilia. Bataille's bodies are penetrated or torn to pieces in acts of sexual, brutal and grotesque spectacles. The novel's main tropes are constructed through the exaggeration of the improper.

Of course, Bataille's interest in this sort of transgression is part of a broader project of his critique of academicism, as well as of undoing the metaphysical a-priori of all Western thinking. He challenges the traditional forms of epistemology by acknowledging the existence of the formless, defined as follows: "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 has its form. What it designates has no rights in any sense and gets itself squashed everywhere, like a spider or an earthworm. [...] Affirming that the universe resembles nothing and is only formless amounts to saying that the universe is something like a spider or spit."⁹

The analogies of 'unformed' matter with such 'low' bodily substances like spit, and the 'low' and 'ugly' animal species like a spider or an earthworm radically opposes the venerated values of traditional human forms – such as language, society, architecture, and so on. Each one of these other metaphors eschews the inertia of the formal and static universe; instead, all three metaphors – spit, the



Fig. 8, Giovanbattista Piranesi, *Carceri*. Plate VII. *The drawbridge*, etching, print out of the series *Carceri d'invenzione*, published 1754.

spider and the earthworm – are mere quasi-forms in perpetual morphological transition.

Due to the lack of specificity and ‘formed-ness’, Bataille’s grotesque metaphors are in fact over-saturated with meaning, and constantly transitioning to new possibilities of significance. For this reason, not the meaning itself, but the duration of formation of multiple ephemeral meanings is at stake in these bodies in transition. Arguably, nobody has described this specificity of the grotesque body more convincingly than the Russian philosopher and literary scholar Mikhail Bakhtin. In Bakhtin’s words, in the grotesque, “the entire mechanism of the word is transferred from the apparatus of speech to the abdomen [... it is] the drama of the body giving birth to the word.”¹⁰ The foregrounding of the ‘lower stratum’ of the body creates the grotesque effect in the service of the delivery of new connotations in the making. The grotesque imagery capitalizes on the fullness of meaning by suggesting a wealth of promiscuities to the surrounding world: “It is looking for that which protrudes from the body, all that seeks to go out beyond the body’s confines. Special attention is given to the shoots and branches, to all that prolongs the body and links it to other bodies or to the world outside.”¹¹ The recurring motifs for the interweaving of the body and the world include gaping, swallowing, bulging, devouring, defecating, and so on.

In the context of this argument, Bataille’s fascination with the grotesque body is most relevant, since with it, the clear-cut distinction between the body’s interior and its surroundings is blurred. Instead of the net distinction between inside and outside, both the body and its context are woven into some kind of labyrinthine continuum, which finds its analog in the endless prison spaces of Piranesi (Fig. 8). In both Bataille’s description of the human body and in Piranesi’s sublime spatial fantasies, exaggeration, hyperbole, excessiveness and relentlessness of the corporeal dimension are fundamental in producing the effect of the grotesque.

In his book *Monsters of Architecture. Anthropomorphism in Architectural Theory*, the architectural historian Mario Frascari describes the grotesque body as “a body in the act of becoming. It is never finished, never completed; it is continually being built, continually created; it is the principle of others’ bodies. The logic of the grotesque image ignores the smooth and impenetrable surface of the neoclassical bodies, and magnifies only excrescences and orifices which lead into the bodies’ depths. These outward and inward details are merged. Moreover, the grotesque body swallows and is swallowed by the world.”¹²

The grotto, which is at the etymological basis of the grotesque, figures as another archetype of the womb-like space, which engenders multiple future



Fig. 9, Pirro Ligorio, *the Orc at the Bosco dei Mostri (Monsters’ Grove)* at Bomarzo/Italy, 16th century.



Fig. 10, Francis Bacon, *Head VI*, 1949.

7 On the significance of Bataille’s writing for architecture, refer to Denis Hollier, *Against Architecture: The Writings of Georges Bataille*, translated by Betsy Wing, Cambridge/MA: The MIT Press 1989.

8 Georges Bataille, *The Story of the Eye*, San Francisco: City Lights Books 1987.

9 Georges Bataille, quoted in: Rosalind Krauss / Yve Alain Bois, *Formless. A User’s Guide*, New York: Zone Books 1997, p. 5.

10 Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Grotesque Image of the Body, Rabelais and his World*, Bloomington/Indianapolis: Indiana University Press 1968, p. 309.

11 Ibid., pp. 316–317.

12 Marco Frascari, *Monsters of Architecture. Anthropomorphism in Architectural Theory*, Savage/ML: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers 1991, p. 32.

13 The subject of the monsters of Bomarzo is related to “love, orgy, play, death and the torments (infernal and terrestrial)”. Cf. André Pieyre de Mandiargues, *Les monstres de Bomarzo*, Paris: Grasset 1957, p. 14.

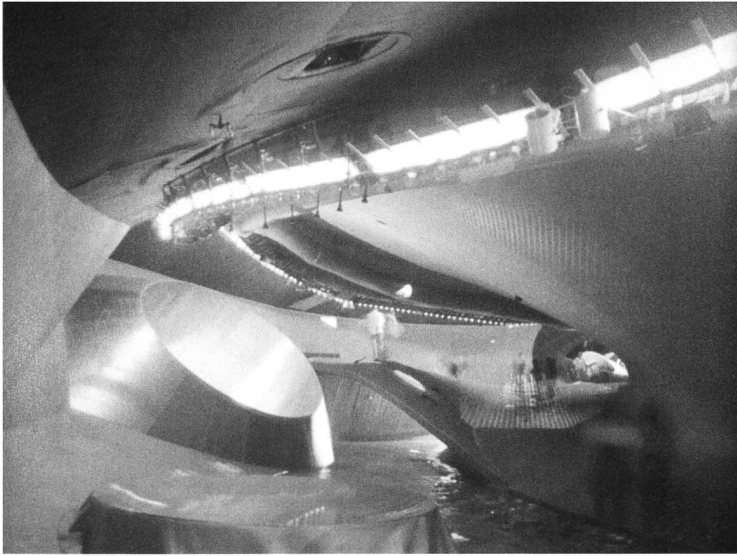


Fig. 12, NOX, H_2O Pavilion, 1994–1997, Neeltje Jans/Netherlands.

meanings to be delivered. The grotto's orifice becomes the interface between the hidden image of the body and its open appearance – an interface, which, due to its special function of transitioning, has inspired monstrous imagery – an imagery in the process of morphological formation and metamorphosis. The grimace of the monstrous Orc at the Mannerist Bosco dei Mostri (Monsters' Grove) at Bomarzo is merely one example of this idea¹³ (Fig. 9). In this discussion, the architectural archetype of the grotto and the carnal aspects of the human body reveal their physicality in an equivalent way. The same imagery of the mouth as the orifice, which connects the head of the human – his locus of the intellect – to the stomach and the intestines, can be found in Francis Bacon's paintings (Fig. 10). The mouth is a most ambiguous interface, since it is the bodily abyss, which gives birth to 'low' bodily secretions – such as spit – as well as to 'high' metaphysical words. This ambivalence has been a challenge to the discipline of architecture at the beginning of the 1990s, trying to rethink the relationship between its cerebral theories, and the new possibilities of materiality, physicality, and atmosphere.

Transition Architecture

A whole series of architectural projects since the early 1990s can be used to illustrate the ideas discussed above. But Lars Spuybroek's (NOX) H_2O Pavilion in Neeltje Jans in the Netherlands from 1994–1997 seems particularly well suited for the purpose. In this project, 'space' is no longer understood as a void that is delineated by a material container, but the space congeals into a plasmatic atmosphere in its own right. What is more, the building immerses the human body in a dense environment, which resembles the human's own entrails, thus turning the surface of the human body into a facade between an inside and an outside, which perform in comparable, metabolic ways.

Spuybroek's pavilion is conceived as a place to raise awareness of the scarcity of water, and thus devises some type of interactive water 'experience'. The exhibition visitors enter into the pavilion's longitudinal space and, while transitioning through it, activate sensors that control light, sound, projections, and water nozzles within it (Fig. 11 + 12). Here, architecture coalesces as an ephemeral experience, which is contingent on the presence and the movement of each one of the visitors. What is more, the traditional relationship between a spectator-subject and a static object of architecture is challenged. The pavilion does not define a 'place' for observation, but a mere pipe of passage, of flux and of movement. The architectural beholder passes through a spatial atmosphere, which materializes literally through the mist of the water sprayed

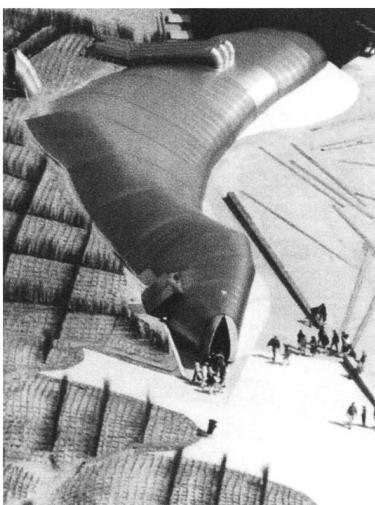


Fig. 11, NOX, H_2O Pavilion, Neeltje Jans/Netherlands, 1994–97, aerial photo.



Fig. 13, NOX, *The Future is Now*, Expo.02, Biel/Switzerland, 1998.

throughout the pavilion's interior. Architectural perception here is no longer constituted in the postmodern setting, according to which a spatial interval or distance between the beholder and the building creates the possibility for a contemplative and visual apprehension; the subject now participates in the building's metabolic exchange as if swallowed by it. What is more, the building's 'container' is turned into a formless membrane, the significance of which is argued to be directly contingent on local prerequisites to assure the performance of the building.

Yet, this architecture's metaphorical reference to the biological 'lower stratum' of the body described above cannot be repressed. Just as much as the pavilion's form is only discussed in relation to its performance, equally, the 'form' of entrails and intestines has never been given critical attention as such in metaphysical descriptions: the 'form' of a digestive system, for example, has always been seen as a mere product of the task in the service of which it stood. But in this project, the grotesque iconography cannot be downplayed, because it puts the subject in the very special position of being the only form or façade in this environment. It is as if the subject visited the inside of his own body, thus understanding the intense feeling of complete spatial immersion. Spuybroek's building is understood as an organism, which achieves its grotesque and monstrous effects through the display of the building's depth to the outside. The building's 'performative' shape is like an organism turned inside out, revealing its interior metabolism to the outside, without relying on the representational tool of a synthetic form.

The metaphoricity of this building is not merely casual or accidental. Indeed, just one year after completing the H₂O pavilion, Spuybroek designs a project entry for the *Expo.02* in Biel/Switzerland, called "The Future is Now"; (Fig. 13) in the description of the project, he is very explicit about the intent to revisit the human body's interior with his architecture. He explains that his architecture "is to show the future not as an 'object' far away in space, but as something hidden in the present and inside ourselves. [...] One [is] surrounded by molecules, constantly dividing up and making new connections."¹⁴ This is the lure of the multiplicitous transitional morphologies inspired by the wonder of organic bodies in constant renewal. Architecture here distances itself from its traditions of static and theatrical form, and seeks to connect to the dynamism of organic morphologies in perpetual transition.

Emmanuel Petit studied architecture at ETH Zurich. He holds a Ph.D. in the history and theory of architecture from Princeton University. He is currently junior professor at Yale University, teaching both design studios and the theory of architecture, and edits a book on the American architect Philip Johnson.

¹⁴ NOX, project description for an Interactive Exhibition in Biel/Switzerland "2001_Future.com", in: http://www.noxarch.com/flash_content/flash_content.html, state May 2006.