AESTHETICS OF EXPENDITURE:
PHILOSOPHY, ART, AND THE INFINITE FACULTY

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Abstract

The dissertation re-examines the philosophy of Georges Bataille within the context of post-Kantian aesthetics and argues for a re-evaluation of Bataille's notion of expenditure \( \text{depenser} \) within this context. The dissertation argues further that the artistic practice of Robert Smithson is an exemplary case of an 'aesthetics of expenditure.' It is our contention that Bataille's cosmic-energetic philosophy finds a complementary material expression in Smithson's abstract geology and its confrontation with post-Kantian aesthetics. We will argue that this occurs through Smithson's varying strategies, which are grouped conceptually according to the broader logic of their expression: seriality, sedimentality, monumentality, and meandering. While Smithson's own references to Bataille in the early 1970s are discussed in detail, it is not our position that Smithson was enacting Bataille's philosophy 'aesthetically'; rather, by reading Bataille's evaluation of Kant's aesthetics and teleology in relation to Smithson's artistic practice, we emphasize instead that the politics of disgust shared by both figures advance a radical decentring and repositioning of the human in relation to planetary and geological forces. If, as geologists now agree, our present age is that of the Anthropocene\(^1\), our argument is that Bataille and Smithson anticipate this precarious condition analytically, and, perhaps more importantly, that their analysis suggests further important diagnostic considerations at the level of social organization and political composition that might help defer, if not entirely prevent, the catastrophic end of this all-too-human period.

To write, “to form,” where no forms hold sway, an absent meaning. Absent meaning (and not the absence of meaning or a potential or latent but lacking sense). To write is perhaps to bring to the surface something like absent meaning, to welcome the passive pressure which is not yet what we call thought, for it is already the disastrous ruin of thought.

– Blanchot

A philosophy is never a house; it is a construction site.

– Bataille
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INTRODUCTION

Humanity is, at the same time — through industry, which uses energy for the development of the forces of production— both a multiple opening of the possibilities of growth, and the infinite faculty [facilité infinie] for burnoff in pure loss.

— Bataille

(1) INTRODUCTION

The dissertation re-examines the philosophy of Georges Bataille within the context of post-Kantian aesthetics and argues for a re-evaluation of Bataille’s notion of expenditure [depenser] within this context. The dissertation argues further that the artistic practice of Robert Smithson is an exemplary case of an ‘aesthetics of expenditure.’ It is our contention that Bataille’s cosmic-energetic philosophy finds a complementary material expression in Smithson’s abstract geology and its confrontation with post-Kantian aesthetics. We will argue that this occurs through Smithson’s varying strategies, which are grouped conceptually according to the broader logic of their expression: seriality, sedimentality, monumentality, and meandering. While Smithson’s own references to Bataille in the early 1970s are discussed in detail, it is not our position that Smithson was enacting Bataille’s philosophy ‘aesthetically’; rather, by reading Bataille’s evaluation of Kant’s aesthetics and teleology in relation to Smithson’s artistic practice, we emphasize instead that the politics of disgust shared by both figures advance a radical decentring and repositioning of the human in relation to planetary and geological forces. If, as geologists now agree, our present age is that of the Anthropocene\(^1\), our argument is that Bataille and Smithson anticipate this precarious condition analytically, and, perhaps more importantly, that their analysis suggests further important diagnostic considerations at the level of social organization and political composition that might help defer, if not entirely prevent, the catastrophic end of this all-too-human period.

As is well known, the field of aesthetics emerged in the late eighteenth century, first appearing in the work of Alexander Baumgarten, particularly his two

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volume publication of the *Aesthetica* (1750-1758). While the topics under consideration in the *Aesthetica* were not entirely new to philosophy, the grouping of beauty and nature as objects of judgment and taste situated this philosophical endeavour as one determinately concerned with sense apprehension, as opposed to rational or conceptual thought. Kant, writing in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, would follow Baumgarten’s line in his description of aesthetic apprehension as a judgment of taste, despite his earlier well-known criticism of Baumgarten’s aesthetics in the first *Critique*, where Kant’s offered the following appraisal:

> The Germans are the only ones who now [1781] employ the word “aesthetics” to designate that which others call the critique of taste. The ground for this is a failed hope, held by the excellent analyst Baumgarten, of bringing the critical estimation of the beautiful under principles of reason, and elevating its rules to a science. But this effort is futile. For the putative rules or criteria are never merely empirical as far as their sources are concerned, and can therefore never serve as a priori rules according to which our judgement of taste must be directed, rather the latter constitutes the genuine touchstone of the correctness of the former. For this reason it is advisable again to desist from the use of this term and to save it for that doctrine which is true science (*Critique of Pure Reason*, A21/B35, Note, p. 156).

Thus, as we will see in greater detail in Chapter 1, Kant’s ambition for a true science of sensation is fundamental for the broader project of Critical philosophy; indeed, it is precisely Kant’s science of sensation that forms a bridge to connect Kant’s previously dissociated faculties developed in the first two *Critiques*. Yet, in order to do so, Kant requires the ballast of another conceptual register that is equally at odds with the “merely empirical” – teleology.

Indeed, Kant’s intervention in the territory of the power of judgement is not limited to questions of taste, whether beautiful or natural, and includes the often neglected second section which develops the theory of teleology initiated in the work of his teacher, Christian Wolff (*Vernünftige Gedanken on dem Gebräuche der Theile in Menschen, Thieren und Pflanzen*, 1725).\(^2\) While Wolff in fact continued the development of teleology within the context of Aristotelian causation and its

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further articulation in Scholasticism, Kant’s subsequent placement of teleology and aesthetics in such a unique proximity cannot be read as a simple ‘hybridized’ continuation of these two previously disparate lines of philosophical research. Instead, the placement forms an important strategy allowing Kant to harness the power of aesthetic ambiguity and, with a startling sleight of hand, ground the project of Critical philosophy in a tautology: the purpose of Nature, its *telos*, can only be the Moral actions of Mankind that *give purpose* to the anxious ambiguity brought on by aesthetic experience. That is, in order for the possibility of aesthetic experience to be meaningful, it must function as the bridge connecting the ambiguity elicited by our non-conceptual aesthetic apprehension with the Moral principles which give Nature its purpose. Thus, while many contemporary critics have focused on only one bank of the river as if it were a marvellously cantilevered Critical apparatus, we will see that Kant’s bridge is indeed built from both banks simultaneously, relying on the aesthetic and teleological presentation [*Darstellung*] of the power of judgment held in a reductive suspension by the necessity of Moral reason.

Turning to the work of Georges Bataille (1897-1962), it is now evident that his importance in the development of twentieth century French philosophy is, some eight decades after his early writings on expenditure, without question. Recent scholarship suggests his significant influence in philosophy and the theoretical humanities, as well as in the adjacent fields of aesthetics and art history, critical theory, architectural theory, political economy, and environmental studies. While the present work does not engage in detail with Bataille’s literary works, it should be noted that his literature forms a complementary articulation of many of the concerns we will take up from a more traditional philosophical angle.

Of particular relevance to our discussion which follows is Bataille’s place in the seminal volume *Formless: A User’s Guide*, written by Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind E. Krauss as the catalogue for their co-curated exhibition at the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris in 1996. In this text, Bois and Krauss develop a sophisticated reading of Bataille’s concept of the formless (*informe*) as an alternative approach to issues of aesthetic presentation within twentieth century Modernist art that were previously divided between questions of form and content.
Bataille's *informe* is thus presented as a theoretical lens by which the work of a wide range of postwar artists, including Robert Smithson, might be read productively beyond the antinomies of form and content and their attendant limitations. While the influence of *Formless* on the discipline of art history and its philosophical commitments continues to the present day, our concern in the current work is not with the potential of reading Bataille’s *informe* as an especially adaptable aesthetic category. Instead, our aim is to demonstrate how Bataille’s philosophy and its orientation through the concept of expenditure explodes any delimitation of an exclusively aesthetic economy by undermining the both the separation and hierarchy of the faculties at the centre of the project of Critical philosophy.

Within the broader field of critical theory and philosophy, Denis Hollier, whose monograph study of Bataille – *Against Architecture* – preceded that of his colleagues from *October* by over two decades, is of tremendous significance. Hollier’s pioneering study of Bataille, which was published in 1974 under the title *La Prise de la Concorde* in the original French edition by Gallimard, was decisive in placing Bataille's philosophy within the broader intellectual context of postwar French thought. While any attempt to summarize this magisterial commentary would be destined to inadequacy, we should note at least two of the most consequential claims brought forward by Hollier: first, Bataille’s philosophy attacks one of the most fundamental aspects that remained hidden within the history of the Western philosophical tradition, namely, the reliance on the architectural metaphor (i.e. grounding, founding, rooting, constructing, bridging, etc.) that is operationalized in various iterations as a means of concealing the impossibility of any permanent foundation for philosophical systems. Second, and of no less significance, Hollier situates the ‘headlessness’ of the figure of Acephale (taken up in greater detail in Chapter 5) within the context of a movement to decenter and disorient earlier philosophical trajectories: “Labyrinthine structure imposes a simultaneous ban on the immanence of the ego and on the transcendence of the other. It separates me from myself without turning me loose. This ambiguity is due to the loss of the Archimedean point that used to provide orientation and direction. Labyrinthine structure is acephalous: antihierarchical
(anarchic); one never moves ahead, rather one loses one’s head there.”

Hollier’s observations will indeed guide our reading in the subsequent chapters, calling attention to questions of perspective and meaning and the complex operations within Bataille’s philosophy that attempt to escape from these enduring aesthetic and teleological traps.

Bataille’s most potent entry into architectural discourse in North America would come by way of Bernard Tschumi’s writings in the mid 1970s, collected under the title *Architecture and Disjunction*, and published by MIT Press in 1994. Tschumi’s influence within the field of architectural theory can be seen (at least in part) as resulting from these provocative early writings which championed ideas of transgression, decay, pleasure and desire taken directly from the work of Bataille. Within the context of architectural postmodernism and its attention to the discursive play of historical referentiality, Tschumi’s work unfolds an alternative series of questions that counter the rationality of postmodern discursivity with the force of a neglected experiential dimension and its ineradicable ambiguity at stake in Bataille’s notion of eroticism: “The ultimate pleasure of architecture is that impossible moment when an architectural act, brought to excess, reveals both the traces of reason and the immediate experience of space.”

More recently, current trends in architectural discourse and criticism appear to have readily accepted a bioconstructivist paradigm that sidesteps the tension between reason and experience by appealing to fuzzy atmospheric and affective tropes. We will draw on the insights developed in Tschumi’s early writings on Bataille in the chapters that follow as a means to disable these laudatory but vacant evocations of “life” within contemporary architectural discourse by insisting on the irresolvable tensions between reason and experience in Bataille’s philosophy and Smithson’s artistic practice.

Finally, a more recent appraisal of Bataille’s influence and potential impact

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3 Denis Hollier, *Against Architecture*, p. 64.
5 This discussion is entirely indebted to the scholarship of Andrew Payne, especially his most recent adumbration of the bioconstructivist present in “Sustainability and Pleasure: An Untimely Mediation,” *Harvard Design Magazine*, No. 30, Spring/Summer 2009, pp. 69-83.
on political economy and environmental studies – authored by one of his important English translators, Allan Stoekl – supports our claim regarding Bataille’s enduring relevance for contemporary debates regarding issues such as sustainability, urbanism, resource depletion, and scarcity. While Stoekl’s evocation of Bataille as key philosophical source to reorient these debates is undoubtedly well-argued and timely, our interest in the chapters to follow is less with the transposition of Bataille’s concepts on to contemporary practices (bicycling, gleaning, recycling, etc.), but instead concerns the re-evaluation of their biopolitical foundation within a moral and political order organized according to the logic of utility and waste. That is, while we agree with Stoekl that the most readily deployed concepts for thinking about consumptive activity are in need of a dramatic reformulation to encourage an “understanding of energy as an infinite force and profoundly limited available resource,” we insist that this emphasis be predicated on a fundamental encounter with the philosophical commitments of Critical philosophy and its tautological separation of human consciousness from both organic and inorganic ‘natural’ forces.

With these preliminary remarks in mind, we may now suggest how Bataille’s concept of expenditure [depenser] is situated in our present discussion. The notion of expenditure emerges in Bataille’s writing in the early 1930s. Despite the valences of this concept within his own work, we may provisionally summarize the concept according to his own early formulation in ‘The Notion of Expenditure’: “Human activity is not entirely reducible to processes of production and conservation, and consumption must be divided into two distinction parts. The first, reducible part is represented by the use of the minimum necessary for the conservation of life and the continuation of individuals’ productive activity in a given society; it is therefore a question simply of the fundamental condition of productive activity.” Bataille continues, “The second part is represented by so-called unproductive expenditures: luxury, mourning, war, cults, the construction of sumptuary monuments, games, spectacles, arts, perverse sexual activity (i.e., deflected from genital finality) – all these represent activities which, at least in

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primitive circumstances, have no end beyond themselves. Now it is necessary to reserve the use of the word *expenditure* [*depenser*] for the designation of these unproductive forms, and not for the designation of all the modes of consumption that serve as a means to the end of production.” From this point of view, expenditure is the unproductive or wasteful exercise of energy wherein the activity or organization facilitating such practices does not aim to reinvest them within another regime or framework (i.e. restricted economy). In the original French, it is indeed the case that the verb *depenser* evokes a polysemic series of connections that exceed the highly commercial associations of the English *expenditure*. Our purpose here, however, is not to lament the limitations of translation; the importance of the notion of expenditure within Bataille’s philosophy is certainly not its vernacular resonance, but its interrogative capacity in relation to the logic of socio-economic organizations and their attendant articulations of utility and value more broadly.

Of course, we must keep in mind throughout the present work that Bataille himself undermines the possibility of any conclusive determination of utility in the opening paragraph of the same essay: “Every time the meaning of a discussion depends on the fundamental value of the word *useful* – in other words, every time the essential question touching on the life of human societies is raised, no matter who intervenes and what opinions are expressed – it is possible to affirm that the debate is necessarily warped and that the fundamental question is eluded. In fact, given the more or less divergent collection of present ideas, there is nothing that permits one to define what is useful to man.” Therefore, without lamenting the absence of *a priori* or universal designations that would decide questions of utility, our interest will be in pursuing the logic of practices of expenditure which exacerbate the tension between utility and waste. That is, our interest in expenditure will focus on its conceptual value as a means to undermine processes by which apparently wasteful activities within a broader (i.e. general) economy of energy are subsumed and reinvested within restricted economies of Moral reason and practical value. It is precisely this dimension of expenditure that places

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Bataille's philosophy in a direct confrontation with Kant’s Critical philosophy and allows our reading of the artistic practice of Smithson as a complimentary material articulation by way of an aesthetics of expenditure.

Robert Smithson’s (1938-1973) enigmatic intellectual fecundity, autodidactic capacities, and radical artistic production have made him a major figure within post-Minimalist American art. Indeed, an immense field of scholarship is now readily available regarding his work and its place within the tradition of European and American art history and adjacent disciplines. While a complete account of this vast amount of scholarly work is beyond the scope of the present dissertation, several texts have proved indispensable for the argument that follows. Of primary importance is the collection of Smithson’s writings, edited by Jack Flam, which brings together a wide range of essays and criticism that demonstrate unequivocally Smithson’s brilliance as a author, simultaneously evincing his rhetorical and antagonistic interventions in art historical discourse and hastening the dematerialization of the art object. The numerous catalogues accompanying his exhibitions, both during his lifetime and posthumously, have also been invaluable for the arguments which follow. In addition to the collection of his essays, we must note the following catalogues for their unquestionable influence: Robert Smithson, organized by Eugenie Tsai and Cornelia Butler, MOCA, Los Angeles; Robert Smithson: Sculpture, organized by Robert Hobbs, Herbert H. Johnson Museum of Art, Cornell University (along with the more comprehensive eponymous text that was subsequently published by Cornell University Press and edited by Hobbs); Robert Smithson in Vancouver: Fragmentation of a Greater Fragmentation, edited by Grant Arnold, Vancouver Art Gallery; Robert Smithson: Mapping Dislocations, organized by Elyse Goldberg, James Cohen Gallery; and, Robert Smithson: Drawings, organized by Mario Amaya, New York Cultural Centre. It is with tremendous gratitude and humility that I admit the present work would have been all but impossible without reference to these collections.


Scholarship within art history has proven no less significant for the present work. Of particular relevance to my research is Ann Reynolds’ *Robert Smithson: Learning from New Jersey and Elsewhere*. While Reynolds’ appraisal is, for the most part, disinterested in philosophical questions raised by the present work, her careful and somewhat idiosyncratic reading of Smithson’s artistic practice is without comparison and informs our subsequent reading of many of Smithson’s works. Of equal consequence for the present analysis is Ron Graziani’s *Robert Smithson and the American Landscape*, which situates Smithson’s geological attack on Modernism within the history of American cultural debates and their political efficacy. Again, while Graziani’s interests in his study remain somewhat adjacent to our philosophical concerns, his excellent readings of Smithson’s works have proven indispensable.

As noted above, Smithson also appears in Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind E. Krauss’s *Formless: A User’s Guide*, wherein several of his more notable works are read according to the logic of the *informe*. While this text remains an inescapable influence on the present work, not least because of its suggestion regarding the potential relation between Bataille’s philosophy and Smithson’s art practice, two points of distinction are worthy of note: first, Krauss and Bois follow a particular line of intellectual fetishization with respect of Smithson’s autodidactic singularity. This is made especially clear in a note to their discussion of Smithson that reads, in part, “The translation of *L’Erotisme* (*Death and Sensuality* [1969]) was in his library, and it is more than probable that his remarks on the relations between waste and pleasure originated there.” The validity of the “more than probable” facts of causation can be left to statisticians and their kin; however, we should address the question of this relation between Smithson and Bataille more broadly as it directly impacts the scholarly commitments of the present dissertation. While we will indeed argue for the importance of Smithson’s relation to Bataille, it seems somewhat inadequate to locate the most consequential element of this relation solely in the contents of a personal library. As is well known among the more generous lenders within any intellectual tradition, the most important books of one’s library tend to go missing through the process of late night loans and...

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12 Kraus and Bois, *Formless*, Note 6, p. 279.
their inevitable prodigality. Thus, it is as amusing as it is suspect that Krauss and Bois situate their confidence regarding Smithson’s relation to Bataille in the placement of the latter’s book in the former’s library. Indeed, the fetish for an empirically-localizable intellectual history is at times difficult to avoid, if not least for its ability to suggest hard facts and irrefutable evidence. We can only hope to undermine such scholarly rhetoric with more subtle but less evidentiary claims. The second point of divergence is related to Smithson’s own position regarding the line of approach lauded in *Formless*. It is indeed worth noting that in an interview conducted in 1969 Smithson contends, “Every single perception is essentially determinate. It isn’t a question of form or anti-form. It’s a limitation. I’m not all that interested in the problems of form and anti-form, but in limits and how these limits destroy themselves and disappear” (RSCW 191). Thus, while our analysis of Smithson’s works will indeed draw on the work of Bois and Krauss, it will extend beyond their analysis of the *informe* by way of our reading of Bataille and, perhaps, allow us to remain closer to the intellectual commitments and material effects of Smithson’s own artistic practice.

Most recently, Margaret Iverson’s argument for the relevance of psychoanalytic considerations within studies of aesthetics has placed Smithson’s work in relation to the philosophy of Bataille. In a central chapter dedicated to Smithson’s *Spiral Jetty*, Iverson sets out to “[pursue] the death drive’s aesthetic implications by focusing on Robert Smithson’s interest in the concept as mediated by Anton Ehrenzweig and Georges Bataille. I will argue that Smithson’s great work, *Spiral Jetty* (1970), is an attempt to render the death drive visible.” While our own interest is perhaps less inclined to bind itself entirely to this ‘great work,’ Iverson’s study offers several important insights, including her emphasis on Smithson’s encounter with Ehrenzweig’s psychoanalytic studies of art, as well as her iteration of Smithson’s engagement with Bataille. Regarding the former point, while our current study is somewhat adjacent to the aesthetic impact of psychoanalysis, we recognize the value of Iverson’s compelling reading of

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13 Smithson makes a similar argument in his interview with Dennis Wheeler; see RSCW 199.
14 Margaret Iverson, *Beyond Pleasure*, p. 73.
Ehrenzweig in relation to Smithson’s work in the late 1960s and early 1970s. With respect to the Smithson-Bataille relation, Iverson’s discussion is somewhat limited as it takes up less than four pages of her analysis and, like Kraus and Bois, relies on the presence of Bataille’s *Death and Sensuality* in Smithson’s library as evidence of the impact of Bataille’s concepts of sacrifice – read through her analysis of the death drive – on Smithson. Thus, while our reading of the Bataille-Smithson relation finds a certain affinity with Iverson’s analysis, we are again in pursuit of a more consequential relation regarding the concept of expenditure that must go beyond the decisive but somewhat limited encounter staged in *Beyond Pleasure*.

While the elaboration of Smithson’s relation to Bataille will be deferred until Chapter 2 of the present work, it is important to locate, at least provisionally, a certain shared commitment to the annihilation of any simple historical narrative that would allow the values and morality of Man to infect our analysis. As we will see, both Bataille and Smithson share a politics of disgust that is entirely related to the problems of history and progress, whether articulated in terms of social and political life, aesthetic refinement, or philosophical inquiry. Perhaps the most striking statement demonstrating Smithson’s affinity with Bataille on these points is to be found in Smithson’s ‘travelogue’ essay “The Domain of the Great Bear,” which describes his visit to the Hayden Planetarium and was originally published in *Art Voices*, Fall, 1966. In the final section, “Illustrations of Catastrophe and Remote Times,” Smithson describes an especially relevant *mise-en-abyme*:

The problem of the ‘human figure’ vanishes from these illustrated infinities and prehistoric cataclysms. Time is deranged. Oceans become puddles, monumental pillars of magma rise from the dark depths of a cracking world. Disasters of all kinds flood the mind at the speed of light. Anthropomorphic concerns are extinct in this vortex of disposable universes. A bewildered ‘dinosaur’ and displaced ‘bears’ are trapped in amazing time dislocations. ‘Nature’ is simulated and turned into ‘handpainted’ photographs of the extreme past or future. Vast monuments of total annihilation are pictured over boundless abysses or seen from dizzying heights. This is a bad-boy’s dream of obliteration, where galaxies are smashed like toys. Globes of ‘anti-matter’ collide with ‘proto-matter,’

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billions and billions of fragments speed into the deadly chasms of space. Destruction builds on destruction; forming sheets of burning ice, violet and green, it all falls off into infinite pools of dust. A landslide of diamonds plunges into a polar crevasse of boundless dimension. History no longer exists (RSCW 33).

The themes described in this passage hang from the following chapters like corpses from an open wagon, clumsily winding its way to an open grave: cataclysm, derangement, monumentality, disposability, dislocation, bewilderment, obliteration, destruction. The impossibility of the historical narrative of Man and his values, his Morality, and his purpose, are taken up as fundamental concerns shared by Bataille and Smithson, where their respective philosophical and artistic works reciprocally elucidate the argument against Kant’s Critical philosophy and its fundamental denial of the ambiguity of human existence within the geological and cosmological continua. Where Kant sought to harness the power of the aesthetic (i.e. general) economy as a driver of Moral growth, we will see how this subsumption is overturned as much in Bataille’s philosophy as it is in Smithson’s artistic practice. Thus, we will recast the investment in Moral reason and management as an economic bubble that can only be destroyed by the exacerbation and amplification of the very contingencies from which it draws its profits. Certain academic requirements lead us to situate this discussion in a historical context wherein Bataille can appear to be reacting to Kant; within this context, Bataille’s work could be read as a neo-critical project articulating practices of critique first initiated in Kant’s philosophy and thus perpetuating its legacy. Our position, however, takes an entirely contrary trajectory: Bataille and Smithson affirm a libidinal-materialist line of inquiry that hastens the demise of Kantian Critical philosophy and its epistemological commitments by undermining the hierarchical relation between the restricted and general economies through an aesthetics of expenditure.

(2) CHAPTER OUTLINES

Chapter 1 – Bataille’s ‘Infinite Faculty’

The first chapter of the dissertation engages with the legacy of Kant’s philosophy of aesthetics. It begins with a brief reading of Daniel Birnbaum and
Sven-Olov Wallenstein’s essay “Thinking Philosophy, Spatially”\textsuperscript{16} as an introduction to the important role of exhibition and presentation [\textit{Darstellung}] in the traditions of post-Kantian philosophy and aesthetics. Provisionally, we might address here an obvious question regarding the decision begin our discussion with Kant, or with the relation between Kant and Bataille, as it is often given only secondary importance following Bataille’s more well known affiliation with Alexandre Kojève and therefore, by way of Kojève, G.W.F. Hegel. For at least two contemporary readers of Bataille – Arkady Plotnitsky and Nick Land – it is indeed necessary to return to Kant as a way of confronting several key questions in the work of Bataille that are too easily neglected in an emphasis on the Bataille-Hegel relation. While both Plotnitsky and Land acknowledge Hegel’s efficacy in the philosophical commitments that unfold throughout Bataille’s \textit{oeuvre}, two points are worth noting: first, for Land, Hegel’s philosophical project can only be read as a reaction to Kant: “the Hegelian text is nothing other than a response to the predicament of transcendental philosophy, so that all of its terminology is operative from the start within a Kantian register.”\textsuperscript{17} Indeed, for Land, “Irrespective of his own immensely confused intellectual project, Bataille’s reading of Hegel is a regression into the nihilistic momentum of critique; into a thanatropism which Kant largely misconceived, and which Hegel attempted to speculatively excise. Hegel’s philosophy is the life-support machine of Kantianism, the medical apparatus responding to a crisis. When Bataille explores this machine it is not primarily in order to understand its inherent potentiality for malfunction, but to excavate the euthanasia it prohibits.”\textsuperscript{18} As we will see, this attempt to animate rather than ameliorate the crisis in Kant’s philosophy is regnant in both Bataille’s philosophical project and Smithson’s artistic practice.


\textsuperscript{17} Land, \textit{Thirst for Annihilation}, p. 3.

\textsuperscript{18} Land, \textit{Thirst for Annihilation}, pp. 3-4. It should be noted that the project of understanding the ‘inherent potentiality for malfunction,’ is, for Land, precisely the deconstruction philosophy of Jacques Derrida. Here Land is in complete agreement with Shaviro, who reads Derrida’s philosophy as an endless footnote to Kant; see Steven Shaviro, \textit{Without Criteria} (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2009), pp. 10. For Land’s merciless criticism of Derridean deconstruction, see Land, \textit{Thirst for Annihilation}, pp. 16-22.
The second point worth noting here, developed in Plotnitsky’s reading of Bataille, is that Bataille shares with Kant a highly developed economic analysis that inflects his philosophical considerations more broadly. For Plotnitsky, Kant’s philosophical system implies an economy of exchange and reward that is exploded by Bataille: “As Bataille’s analysis of expenditure suggests, no economy of any kind can be unconditionally reduced either to an exchange economy or an economy absolutely free of exchange.” While Plotnitsky’s argument is indebted to an especially Derridean reading of Bataille (indeed, a reading severely attacked by Land), it is clear that regardless of how one parses the relation between restricted and general economy (i.e. as a difference in degree or a difference in kind), it is of fundamental importance for Kant’s philosophy. To borrow language from Bataille – the ‘general economy’ of aesthetic (non-conceptual) apprehension cannot be allowed to subsume the ‘restricted economy’ of Moral reason. While we will return in detail to these considerations in Chapter 1, we can already see that a rereading of Kant’s Critique of the Power of Judgment within the context of the project of Critical philosophy provides a necessary backdrop to bring into relief any reconsideration of Bataille’s notion of expenditure.

Having established Kant’s relation to Bataille by way of the legacy of philosophical modernity, Chapter 1 then moves to an overview of Kant’s theory of beauty and the sublime in the third Critique. Here we pay particular attention to how the third Critique suggests that the cognitive apprehension of aesthetic objects without concepts occurs with a facility [facilité] that creates an anxious problem for the adjacent faculties [facultés] of Reason and Understanding. This anxiety, for Kant, is due to the life-affirming ease of aesthetic apprehension that simultaneously reveals the ambiguity of allegedly purposive experience. Following a close reading of this decisive tension, we move to a brief discussion of two important studies of Kant by Gilles Deleuze and Jacques Derrida. For Deleuze, in Difference and Repetition (1968), it is Kant’s own ‘image of thought’ that comes undone by the transcendental exercise of the faculties. For Derrida, in ‘The Parergon,’ (initially published in 1979 and subsequently included in The Truth in Painting, 1987), it is Kant’s attempt to frame (parergon) the work (ergon) of

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philosophy that delimits what escapes both from thought and as thought. The limit and potential of both readings is then made explicit by contrasting them with Bataille’s notion of expenditure.

For Bataille, the decisive gesture of Kant’s third *Critique* can only be read as the reinvestment of the aesthetic experience into the rational economy of practical reason. While both Deleuze and Derrida can be understood as following a similar line of criticism, it is Bataille’s movement away from a spatial logic to an emphasis on the temporal structure of Kant’s ‘restricted economy’ that allows for the development of a concept of general economy and a radical transformation of Kant’s project. In this sense, we determine that Bataille’s notion of expenditure responds to both elements of Kant’s third *Critique*: the aesthetic analysis and the analysis of teleology are read together within the dynamics of a general economy of conservation and dépenser. In reading Kant’s ‘project’ not as a site but as a ‘projection’ of a futurity always threatened by the morality of the present, the conclusion of Chapter 1 draws on Rebecca Comay’s essay ‘Blueprints.’ In this short text, Comay traces the historical instances of architecture and philosophy that produce order, noting Bataille’s specific challenge to the spatiality of the old “geometrical conception of the future.”

This reading establishes the ‘infinite faculty’ as a Bataillean play on the ‘facility’ or ease by which the faculty of judgement undermines the purposive work of Moral reason through its own anxious, life-affirming ambiguity.

**Chapter 2 – Politics of Disgust**

Chapter 2 begins with an appraisal of Smithson’s reading of Bataille and his references to Bataille’s *Death and Sensuality* in his writing and interviews in the early 1970s. We then examine how both Bataille and Smithson share an affective disgust with politics and explore the complementary strategies they develop to combat this ‘original curse.’ This leads to a consideration of culture by way of Luis Fernadez-Galiano’s analysis of the consumptive energies of endometabolic and exosomatic processes. Locating culture on the side of exosomatic energetics, it is then possible to understand the ‘curse’ of politics within the expanded field of the

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Anthropocene age; that is, geologically. This situates a reading of Smithson’s alliance with the politics of the Triassic period and his emphasis on abstract geology in relation to Bataille’s general economy. For Smithson and Bataille, the refusal of inherited terms by which politics is articulated requires a dramatic recasting of human activity within an geological and cosmological energetics (understood in philosophical terms as the turn toward a libidinal materialism) that is completely at odds with Kantian Morality and its reductive (i.e. restrictive) delimitation of the faculties.

Chapter 3 – Seriality

Chapter 3 begins with a reading of the Jewish Museum’s ‘Primary Structures’ exhibition, which included Smithson’s Cryosphere, 1966. In this context, we distinguish Smithson’s project from other minimalist sculptural works of the period and begin to investigate his development of the strategy of serialism. Here we consider Smithson’s reading of George Kubler and the complementary role of the serial in Kubler’s historical analysis and the late 1960s philosophical work of Gilles Deleuze. Following this comparative reading, we see how both Bataille (prior to structuralism and poststructuralism) and Smithson locate the limits of the serial strategy in its reliance on a linguistic model. Thus, Bataille’s entries in the Critical Dictionary are read alongside Smithson’s Heap of Language, 1966, as exemplary cases of ‘printed matter,’ which work to provoke questions of sedimentation. Here we locate Bataille’s emphasis on ‘base materialism’ and its resistance to the ideality of both language and thoughts as a key move in the explosion of the Critical project. Our transition to processes of sedimentation from strategies of seriality includes a reading of Smithson’s Leaning Strata, 1967 and Pointless Vanishing Point, 1967.

Chapter 4 – Sedimentality

In Chapter 4, the emphasis on sedimentality in Smithson’s artistic practice is read through the first ‘Earth Art’ exhibition at Cornell University in 1969. Smithson’s relation to the other so-called ‘Earth Artists’ is discussed through a reading of the artists’ panel held in concert with exhibition. This leads to a further
discussion of the relationship between seriality and sedimentality. Against the accusations by critics of this exhibition that Smithson is simply a ‘neo-picturesque artist’, we consider Smithson’s work as an ‘abstract geology’ that foregrounds the inorganic and entropic elements of the picturesque. That is, returning to Smithson’s own discussion of the picturesque, we find a refusal of sentimentality within the legacy of aesthetic apprehension that returns us to a discussion of Kant’s aesthetics and initiates our consideration of Bataille’s concept of sovereignty. The relation between Bataille’s theory of nature (drawn in part from his reading of the Marquis de Sade) and this concept of sovereignty is also taken up here is greater detail. The question of ‘nature’ is further unfolded by considering Smithson’s commitment to acting as a ‘geological agent’ in alliance with the inorganic forces of time against the organic forms of ‘natural history’ and their anthropomorphic iterations. We conclude this chapter with a reading of Smithson’s last nonsite, *Nonsite, Site Unseen*, 1968.21

Chapter 5 – Monumentality

Beginning with an analysis of the historical and perceptual logic of Smithson’s *Enantiomorphic Chambers*, 1965 this chapter examines mirror strategies of erasure and displacement. We develop an analysis of perception, especially in Kant, as the centre of the aesthetic and juridical subject (videre — evidence; “with my own two eyes” as the admission of stereoscopic vision). The reading of *Enantiomorphic Chambers* is complemented by an analysis of Andre Masson’s drawing of Acéphale for the first cover of the magazine, and connected to later developments of the ‘headless,’ including those of Deleuze and Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus* (especially in the plateau ‘How Do You Make Yourself a Body Without Organs?’). We will see how Smithson, like Bataille, attacks the ‘judging subject’ and the ‘viewing subject’ that are grounded by the illusions of evidentiary judgement as dead metaphors.

This relation is read through Bataille’s analysis of experience (as contestation) and ground (as experience) and is further analyzed and unfolded in a reading of Smithson’s extension of the work of art, which departs from notions

of discrete objects (icons or monuments) to arrive at the diffusion and dissemination of the (art) object through the artist essay and travelogue. Picking up on themes from the discussion of the picturesque above, we follow a close reading of some of Smithson’s most influential essays, including ‘Incidents of Mirror-Travel in the Yucatan,’ 1969, and ‘A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey,’ 1967. The chapter concludes with a close reading of Smithson’s ‘Partially Buried Woodshed’, 1970 as a final realization of the ‘de-architectured’ monument.

Chapter 6 – Meandering

This chapter turns to the question of “progress” in both Bataille and Smithson through a consideration Smithson’s drawings and projects that emphasize the snake-like movement of the river – meandering – as well as Bataille’s considerations of energy flows by way of the river, especially in On Nietzsche. We develop an appraisal of Spiral Jetty (as site, film, and essay) to argue that the work, in its multiple iterations, undermines the commercial and utilitarian logic of nautical commerce, consumer promotion, and coherent philosophy. Both Bataille and Smithson are then read through a more emphatic and non-metaphoric logic of river flows and their ‘decisions’ (river breaks) in far from equilibrium (“FFE”) situations. Thus, we will see the connection among Bataille’s conception of energy flow, Smithson’s comportment to history within the meandering works, and various iterations of complexity theory that find a complimentary trajectory in their treatment of non-human thought. We will then examine Smithson’s pouring works which begin within a larger process – a

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‘fragmentation within a greater fragmentation’ – and examine how no action “begins” but is always inserted into a field of attractors, even when one attractor appears to dominate the potential relations. To further analyze the affinities between Bataille and Smithson, we will examine in detail two additional works by Smithson: *Asphalt Rundown*, 1969 and *Glue Pour*, 1969. Following a detailed analysis of the logic of this work as operating against more traditional readings of ‘process art,’ we will consider Smithson’s unrealized reclamation proposals and their relation to Bataille’s notion of the ‘project’ in relation to the field of aesthetics. We will conclude by reconsidering the tension between the architectural (project) metaphors in Kant and the dynamic metaphor of the river in Smithson and Bataille as a movement of ebullition that overwhelms the reductive levies of progress.

(3) CRITICISM & METHOD

A note on the form of criticism and the method employed is customary. In the same year as Bataille’s *La Part maudite* was released in France, Maurice Blanchot would publish *Lautréament et Sade*. The subtitle to the Preface of Blanchot’s 1949 essay — “What is the Purpose of Criticism?” — signals one of the most inescapable questions that we face as contemporary readers (critics), and one that I have no doubt struggled with during the research and writing of the dissertation. Unfolding this subtitle, the question becomes: what authority, what legitimacy, and what function does the present work (the work of the critic, undoubtedly, regardless of any rhetorical flourishes), have, or claim to have, in relation to either Georges Bataille or Robert Smithson? The recourse to academicism is certainly undermined by Blanchot, as are the journalistic drives to clarity or politics. While Blanchot’s concern is unmistakably literary, we must insist that the critical endeavours imbricated in philosophical and artistic gestures

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are equally consequential in reading his brief but sagacious remarks on the work of critical appraisal. Blanchot begins by establishing the relative place of criticism: “Journalism and the academy constitute the entirety of its reality. Criticism is a compromise between these two forms of institution. Everyday knowledge, which is prompt, capricious, fleeting, and scholarly knowledge, which is permanent and certain, unite one with the other and commingle, sometimes successfully, sometimes not.” Following the mundane truth of criticism that is located within either of these institutional forms, or precariously sustained between them, Blanchot prepares for our arrival “at the idea that criticism is lacking in almost any substance of its own,” adding the attendant warning that “such a disparaging view as this one does not fluster criticism. It openly welcomes it, as if, on the contrary, this very lack revealed its deepest truths.” This is because, for Blanchot,

Critical discourse has this peculiar characteristic: the more it exerts, develops, and establishes itself, the more it must obliterate itself; in the end it disintegrates. Not only does it not impose itself—attentive to not taking the place of the object of discussion—it only concludes and fulfills its purpose when it drifts into transparency. And this movement toward self-effacement is not simply done at the discretion of the servant who, after fulfilling his role and tidying up the house, disappears: it is the very meaning of its execution, which has proscribed in its realization that it eclipse itself.

This strange work of self-effacement – of criticism – is doubled by the peculiar need to separate criticism from ‘creative’ work. The legitimacy of this separation is indeed difficult to maintain because, as Blanchot suggests,

the dialogue between the critical and the ‘creative’ discourses is strange. Where is the unity of these two? Is it a historical unity? Is the critic there to add something to the literary work: to bring out its latent meaning (present as an absence) and to indicate its development within history, little by little raising it toward truth, where in the end the work may become stagnant? But why may the critic be necessary for this task? Why, between the reader and the work, between history and the work, should this mediocre hybrid of reading and writing insert itself, with the help of this critic who oddly specializes in reading and who, nevertheless, only knows how to read through writing, writing only about what he reads, and who must at the same time give the impression, through writing, reading, that he does nothing,

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25 Ibid., p. 2.
26 Ibid.
nothing but let the depth of the literary [philosophical/artistic] work, that which resides therein, always more clearly and more obscurely, speak?\textsuperscript{27}

For Blanchot, and for us, the problem of mediation that is raised by the figure of the critic who appears between the reader and the work introduces not only a sense of distancing, but, because of the distance that is given a place by the critic, a sense of proximity. Without question, this is as much the case for the time of criticism as it is for the space of the critic: “Thus the mediating role of criticism is limited to the immediate present, it belongs to the passing day and is connected to the anonymous and impersonal murmur of daily life, the understanding that runs through the streets of the world and that allows for everyone to always know everything in advance, although every individual person may still know nothing.”\textsuperscript{28} By advancing through history in order to anticipate every future reading and recuperate every reading that has already past, the work of the critic collapses the continuum within which the distinction between critical and creative acts can be maintained. This progressive continuum, whether understood dialectically, or, perhaps more modestly, as a certain rhythm of culture less concerned with progress than with movement, is undone through the non-work (\textit{désouvrement}) of the self-effacing critic. This occurs because of the simple yet deceptive fact that:

it is never criticism that speaks, when it speaks: it is \textit{nothing}. […] Criticism is nothing, but this nothingness is precisely that in which the literary [philosophical/artistic] work, silent and invisible, allows itself to be what it is: radiance and discourse, affirmation and presence, speaking seemingly about itself, without faltering, in this void of great quality that it is critical intervention’s mission to produce. Critical discourse is this space of resonance within which the unspoken, indefinite reality of the work is momentarily transformed and circumscribed into words. And as such, due to the fact that it claims modestly and obstinately to be nothing, criticism ceases being distinguished from the creative discourse of which it would be the necessary actualization or, metaphorically speaking, the epiphany.\textsuperscript{29}

The manifestation or display of the unspoken void of discourse, this space of criticism, “may already belong to the reality of the literary [philosophical/artistic] work and also be at work within it, while it takes shape, only moving

\textsuperscript{27} Ibid., pp. 2-3.
\textsuperscript{28} Ibid., p. 3.
\textsuperscript{29} Ibid., p. 4; my italics.
outside it when it has achieved its purpose and to accomplish that purpose.”

It is then possible for us to say simply, with Blanchot, that “All that criticism does then is represent and follow outside what, internally, like a shredded affirmation, like infinite anxiousness, like conflict (or even in all other forms), does not cease to be present as a living reservoir of emptiness, of space, or error, or, better yet, as literature’s [philosophy's/art's] unique power to develop itself while remaining perpetually in default.”

From the point of view of consequences, then, the gesture of hospitality that occurs through self-effacement indicates criticism’s presence, but “... is no longer an external judgement placing the literary [philosophical/artistic] work in a position of value and bestowing opinion, after the fact, on this value. It has come to be inseparable from the internal working of the text, belonging to the moment when it becomes what it is. Criticism is the search for and the experience of this possibility.” If, in agreement with Blanchot, we admit that this work of self-effacement before another work enacts a search for the experience of possibility, we must also admit that we are momentarily drawing the critic quite close to the Kantian project of Critical philosophy and its impossible search for the conditions of the possibility of experience. But it seems that Blanchot brings us nearer to this Kantian critical shore only to remind us how lost the critic is ‘at sea,’ or, in that other place Blanchot makes clear in Thomas L’Obscure, ‘life.’ We see that Blanchot approaches Kant only in order to then distance himself as follows: “‘Criticism,’ in the sense intended here, may, even now, be closer (but the similarity remains deceptive) to the Kantian meaning of the word ...” — then, as it approaches, the wave breaks — “... Kant’s critical reasoning interrogates the conditions for the possibility of scientific experience, just as criticism is connected to the search for the possibility of literary [philosophical/artistic] experience, but this search is not only a theoretical pursuit, it is the very process constituted

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30 Ibid.
31 Ibid., pp. 4-5.
32 Ibid., p. 5.
33 “The water swirled in whirlpools. Was it actually water? One moment the foam leapt before his eyes in whitish flakes, the next the absence of water took hold of his body and drew it along violently [...] It all came down to continuing his endless journey, with an absence of organism in the absence of sea.” See Thomas the Obsolete, pp. 7-8.
through testing and contesting, through creation. ‘Search’ is a word that should not be understood in an intellectual sense, but as an action taken within and in light of a creative space.”

That is, the experience of possibility Blanchot indicates above is that of the real possibility of literature [philosophy/art], of its reality, of its abyss and communicable absence, and not, as Kant would have it, the condition of possibility that longs to govern these experiences.

This move toward the reality of experience and the conceptual unfolding of that reality outside the domains of morality and value is no doubt a concern Blanchot shared with Bataille, as well as with Klossowski, Deleuze, and Foucault, but, as we will see, it is one that is also shared by Robert Smithson. The work of criticism, both in the dissertation and as the dissertation, becomes the work of unfolding the affinities between Bataille and Smithson as a map of an aesthetics of expenditure. Thus, we can concur, emphatically, with Blanchot:

insofar as criticism belongs more intimately to the life of the literary [philosophical/artistic] work, it turns what is not able to be evaluated into the experience of the work, it grasps it as the depth, and also as the absence of depth, which eludes every system of value and challenging in advance every affirmation that would like to get its hands on it to validate it. In this sense, criticism — literature [philosophy/art] — seems to me to be associated with one of the most difficult, but important, tasks of our time, playing out in a necessarily vague movement: the task of preserving and of liberating thought from the notion of value, consequently also of opening history up to what all these forms of value already released into it and to what is taking shape as an entirely different — still unforeseeable — kind of affirmation. 

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34 Ibid.
CHAPTER 1
THE ‘INFINITE FACULTY’

What if the architectonic in Kant were not an overarching system but something that has itself to be constructed anew, in each case, in relation to fresh problems – something looser, more flexible, less complete, more irregular, a free plan in which things hang together without yet being held in place? What if the Kantian “schematism” were only a temporary construction always to be reinvented through a free artifice no longer based on the rules of a “productive” any more than a “reproductive” imagination? What if we thus said that at no time can we ever be quite sure what our bodies can yet do, our lives become, the shapes they might assume, the spatial arrangements into which they might enter – if we started from the idea that we are singular indefinite beings, held together, prior to anything like the unified manifold of the Kantian “I think,” by informal plans that are always departing from the fixed geometries of our being, opening out onto virtual futures? What if we then, through constructions, could free the whole idea of “aesthetics” not only from the Kantian problem of regulated faculties but also from the whole salvationist problematic of judgment or a judgment day, connecting it instead to another unfinished sense of time, peculiar to the city?

– John Rajchman, Constructions

(1) INTRODUCTION: ‘THINKING PHILOSOPHY, SPATIALLY’

Of the recent considerations of philosophy and its aesthetic commitments, Daniel Birnbaum and Sven-Olov Wallenstein’s “Thinking Philosophy, Spatially,” despite its brevity, is no doubt one of the most compelling engagements, not least because of its articulation of the problems of perception and spatialization within the history of philosophy. Birnbaum and Wallenstein orient their appraisal of philosophical and curatorial presentation with the following questions: “What would be such a thing as a philosophy of the exhibition, or even, more radically, a philosophy as exhibition? A way to think of philosophy spatially, so that the exhibition medium, in its installatory and curatorial practices, would be the logical solution to the problems of conceptual articulation – which thereby would cease to be purely conceptual, and instead migrate into the field of the sensory, tactile,

If the authors locate their reading within the context of the “upheaval of the book” in relation to the figural and phenomenological, reading Lyotard’s development of Husserlian phenomenology as move toward the immaterialization of the art object (especially by way of the Lyotard’s exhibition Les Immatériaux), their historical account manages to conceal as much as they reveal regarding the history of presentation within philosophical discourse.

While Birnbaum and Wallenstein offer key philosophical figures, such as Gilles Deleuze and Jacques Derrida, as predecessors of the “spacing of order of reading and presentation” developed by Lyotard, the emphasis on spatiality and its subsequent resistance to traditional modes of aesthetic sensibility within the new sensorium obscures the significant spatial dimension of philosophy since Kant and its reliance on the architectural metaphor. In order to contest the novelty of the curatorial turn suggested by Birnbaum and Wallenstein, we will need to further investigate the dimensions of presentation and its attendant architectural referents in Kantian Critical philosophy and its subsequent readings by Deleuze and Derrida more closely. This rereading is less concerned with challenging the value of Birnbaum and Wallenstein’s argument and more with locating its trajectory and complicated articulation within a broader logic of presentation, and the attendant architectural metaphors and spatial implications, that is fundamental to the project of Critical philosophy and its Moral commitments.

(2) RE-READING THE THIRD CRITIQUE

First published in Leipzig in 1790, Kant’s Critique of the Power of Judgment remains one of the most fundamental texts in the history of philosophy, philosophical aesthetics, and adjacent disciples for several reasons. First, it completes Kant’s own philosophy by enabling a hierarchical ordering among the

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38 For further discussion of presentation within the sensorium, see Andrew Payne, “Surfacing the New Sensorium,” Praxis: Journal of Writing + Building, Issue 9, ‘Expanding Surface,’ pp. 5-13.
39 In the introduction to his translation of Jean-François Lyotard’s Libidinal Economy, Iain Hamilton Grant offers an excellent review of the libidinal hostility to critique and critical hostility to the libidinal wherein Lyotard’s energetic/libidinal period is contrasted with his later re-turn to Kantianism. The energetic dimension of construction and maintenance at stake in many of the discussions which follow is highly indebted to Grant’s analysis of critique; see, pp. xvii-xxxiv.
faculties. Second, it advances and substantially develops Kant’s earlier investigation of the capacities for feelings of beauty and sublimity initiated in his *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime*. Third, it places in close proximity the two previously disparate lines of philosophical research – aesthetics and teleology – that Kant takes up from the work of Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten and Christian Wolff, respectively. As noted in the Introduction, Kant’s juxtaposition of these two lines of research is more than a simple hybridization given their mutual implication in the broader project of Critical philosophy, not least because of their decisive role in naturalizing Moral reason. As we will see in our analysis of the third *Critique*, it is precisely the relation between non-conceptual aesthetic apprehension and the possibility of meaning at issue in this process that permits Kant to reintroduce man’s capacity for Moral reason as the *telos* of nature.

As we noted in the Introduction, Kant’s appraisal of Baumgarten’s aesthetic philosophy in the first *Critique* was certainly less amenable to any separate critique of taste. As Paul Guyer indicates, “In explaining why he felt he could appropriate Baumgarten’s coinage to label his exposition of his theory of our *a priori* knowledge of the properties of space and time, which has nothing to do with the traditional subjects of aesthetics at all,”40 Kant argues,

> The Germans are the only ones who now [1781] employ the word “aesthetics” to designate that which others call the critique of taste. The ground for this is a failed hope, held by the excellent analyst Baumgarten, of bringing the critical estimation of the beautiful under principles of reason, and elevating its rules to a science. But this effort is futile. For the putative rules or criteria are never merely empirical as far as their sources are concerned, and can therefore never serve as *a priori* rules according to which our judgement of taste must be directed, rather the latter constitutes the genuine touchstone of the correctness of the former. For this reason it is advisable again to desist from the use of this term and to save it for that doctrine which is true science.41

According to Guyer’s analysis of this passage, “judgments of taste, even though they make claims about how others can be expected to respond to objects on the

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basis of our own feelings of pleasure (or displeasure) in them, are empirical: they do not rest on any a priori concepts or principles.”

Guyer is thus correct in asserting that “in 1781 Kant no longer thought there could be a systematic philosophical treatment of the principles of feeling and taste, let alone a critique of taste, which if it were to be anything like the critique of pure reason would have to discover foundations for a priori principles of taste.”

Given this limit, Kant would need to discover another way to articulate an a priori principle by which matters of taste could be analyzed without undermining the work of the first Critique or the tripartite separation of the powers of the mind into cognition, feeling, and desire. For our present reading, it is precisely this limit and Kant’s development of the theory of teleology that must be emphasized. Without situating the teleological dimension of the third Critique as a central element of its presentation, our reading would follow the trend of philosophical analysis that neglects the presentation of teleology as an essential component that completes Kant’s Critical philosophy.

Returning to Guyer’s analysis, we concur that for Kant, teleology suggests “an a priori principle about the relation between the human mind and the nature that surrounds it, including other human minds, that can give us confidence in the validity of our judgments without directly giving us new concepts of objects.”

That is, Kant reveals the connection between judgment and teleology in the introduction to the third Critique with “the idea that both judgments of taste and judgments about the purposiveness of natural objects are forms of a hitherto unrecognized kind of judgment, which Kant calls reflecting judgment.”

Guyer sees this development as a fundamental move to establish a the connection between taste and teleology:

While previously he had recognized the ordinary function of judgment as that of subsuming a particular under a universal that is antecedently given

42 Guyer, Editor’s introduction, p. xix.
43 Guyer, Editor’s introduction, p. xix.
44 For the most compelling reading of the concept of presentation [Darstellung] in Kant’s philosophy, as well as in the German philosophical tradition more broadly, see Marth B. Helfer, The Retreat of Representation (New York: SUNY, 1996).
45 Guyer, Editor’s introduction, p. xxi.
46 Guyer, Editor’s introduction, pp. xxi-xxii.
to us, such as a pure concept of in mathematics of a or an empirical concept in scientific classification, he now calls that function ‘determining judgment,’ in order to distinguish it from the quite different case of ‘reflecting judgment,’ in which we are not given a concept under which to subsume a particular but are instead given a particular for which we must seek to find a universal, a concept or rule of some kind that we are not immediately given.\textsuperscript{47}

Thus, the \textit{a priori} principle of ‘reflecting judgment,’ clearly distinguished from that of the \textit{a priori} principles of understanding and reason, “amounts only to the general assumption, supposed to be necessary for guiding and encouraging the conduct of our scientific inquiry, that nature itself has the kind of systemic organization that we seek to find in it.”\textsuperscript{48} It is not only Guyer who stresses the significance of this peculiar principle that emerges in the third \textit{Critique}. Likewise, Rodolphe Gasché, in \textit{The Idea of Form: Rethinking Kant’s Aesthetics}, argues for the importance of this ‘one principle more’ that limits the power of judgment, now “marked by a certain self-effacement, a subservience and a lack of independence.”\textsuperscript{49} Gasché offers the following appraisal of the power of judgment and its restricted autonomy:

\begin{quote}
Compared to determining (or determinant) judgment, which receives its law from the concepts that are given to it elsewhere and which accordingly subsumes the particular, the power of judgment called \textit{merely} reflective has nothing definite to offer the cognitive faculties, and thus appears to be an even less autonomous judgment. It is nothing more than a reflecting power, and seems to be doubly deprived of autonomy, in that it is not an independent cognitive capacity and even lack the power of determining judgment to yield knowledge under the guidance of the understanding. Such ‘merely reflective’ judgments, which include aesthetic and teleological judgments, would thus border on the insignificant.\textsuperscript{50}
\end{quote}

From this perspective, it seems apparent why many commentaries on the third \textit{Critique} have neglected to consider the role of teleology as much as they have focused on the playful and disinterested dimensions of aesthetic apprehension.\textsuperscript{51}

\textsuperscript{47} Guyer, Editor’s introduction, p. xxii.
\textsuperscript{48} Guyer, Editor’s introduction, p. xxv.
\textsuperscript{50} Gasché, \textit{The Idea of Form}, p. 14.
\textsuperscript{51} For an excellent reading of Kant’s aesthetic philosophy that neglects the role of teleology, see, for example, James Kirwan, \textit{The Aesthetic in Kant: A Critique} (London and New York: Continuum, 2004); for the most well-known and influential reading of the play of sublimity, see Jean-François Lyotard,
Nevertheless, we agree with both Guyer and Gasché when we assert the importance of the teleological dimension in the third *Critique*.

This importance can be elaborated more fully by following Kant’s own description of the relation between teleology and taste in the Introduction, where Kant contends,

> the power of judgment provides the mediating concept between the concepts of nature and the concept of freedom, which makes possible the transition from the purely theoretical to the purely practical, from lawfulness in accordance with the former to the final end in accordance with the latter, in the concept of a **purposiveness** of nature; for thereby is the possibility of the final end, which can become actual only in nature and in accord with its laws, cognized ([Critique of the Power of Judgment, Introduction, Section XI, 5:196, p. 82](#)).

Thus, as we must now acknowledge, the relation between judgment and teleology cannot be understated if we are to fully grasp the role of the third *Critique* in the overall project of Critical philosophy. Indeed, as Guyer stresses again,

> In the published introduction, Kant concludes with the claim [...] that the faculty of judgment allows us to bridge the gulf between the legislations and domains of theoretical knowledge on the one hand and freedom on the other. What he means by this is [...] that our disinterested affection for beauty prepares us for the non-self-regarding respect and love for mankind that is required of us by morality; that the exercise of beauty in nature gives us a hint that nature is hospitable to human morality; and that we can only give content to the idea of a purpose of nature that we are led to by our reflection on the purposiveness of organisms by thinking of human moral development as the ultimate end of nature.\(^52\)

It is for this reason that Guyer concludes, “These links between beauty and purposiveness on the one hand and Kant’s moral vision of the place of mankind in the world on the other are the substantive links between aesthetics and teleology that lie behind and give importance to their superficial connection by means of the technical conception of reflecting judgment.”\(^53\) This technical conception of reflecting judgment cannot be read as a simple reiteration of relations prepared in Kant’s prior works; instead, the role of reflective judgment allows for a connective bridge between theoretical knowledge and freedom that is, in a sense, primed by

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52 Guyer, Editor’s introduction, p. xxvii.

53 Guyer, Editor’s introduction, p. xxvii.
the non-conceptual apprehension of aesthetics objects and natural processes. Yet, there is more to this relationship that a mere possibility.

Given Kant’s interest in developing a science of sensation as a move to complete the project of Critical philosophy, the possibility of aesthetic experience must be articulated according to the logic of the first two Critiques, thus locating the a priori condition of this possibility as a binding and irrefutable frame for the experience of beauty, the sublime, and nature more broadly. But, what “hint” does reflective judgment really provide? What is implied in Kant’s relocation of aesthetic apprehension as mode of experience that prepares us for the exercise of Moral reason? The non-conceptual apprehension of aesthetic beauty and natural force is given an a priori principle by the very fact that it is incapable of subsuming empirical experience under any conceptual rubric: that is, our ambiguous aesthetic relations suggest, for Kant, the necessity of meaning that would make them possible. This meaning if of course the purposiveness of nature, by way of each organism and by way of their multitudinous expression, which connects us back to Man and his Moral reason as the necessary and ultimate end of nature. The a priori principle at stake in the analysis of reflective judgment is thus the necessity of or insistence on a purposive existence. Where our conceptual cognition fails to locate meaning, the power of reflective judgment arrives to insist on the subsumption of this ambiguous non-conceptual relationality under a rubric of logical necessity. That is, the facility of non-conceptual apprehension through reflective judgment necessitates the purposive ordering of the faculties to allow the for possibility of meaning through the activity of Moral reason.

With these remarks in mind, let us now turn to two of the most significant readings of Kant within the postwar French philosophical tradition, those of Gilles Deleuze and Jacques Derrida. These readings are important for their elaboration of Kant’s aesthetic philosophy in relation to the broader project of Critical philosophy, but they also suggest the consistency of Derrida and Deleuze’s own philosophical projects. That is, by examining the engagements with Kant staged by Derrida and Deleuze, we can locate the broader theatrical approach to philosophical encounters more generally. For Derrida, Kant’s philosophy is collapsed under the weight of its own transcendental illusions which fail to secure
the inside from the outside, or the work (ergon) from the frame (parergon), and thus we see a ‘signature’ move of deconstructivist logic in Derrida’s encounter with Kant. For Deleuze, Kant’s philosophy is overwhelmed according to its own requirement of the transcendental exercise of the faculties which are unable to guarantee the sanctity of the faculties, and thus we find an emblematic encounter of Deleuzian constructivist ‘buggery.’ In both cases, as we will see below, whether by exacerbating the transcendental illusions of thought or by forcing the transcendental exercise of the facilities, neither Derrida nor Deleuze provoke a consideration of the energies of structure, investment, restriction at stake in the aesthetic-teleological relation of the third Critique. While it is indeed our position that both Deleuze and Derrida provide ample philosophical ballast for a dramatic reconsideration of the Critical project, we will see below that it is Bataille, by way of his staging a confrontation between purpose and experience, who is capable of exploding the Critical apparatus.

(3) THE IMAGE OF THOUGHT: DELEUZE READING KANT

In Difference and Repetition, originally published in 1968, Gilles Deleuze provides a compelling reading of the history of philosophy through his treatment of the ‘Image of Thought.’ In this section, we will examine the eight postulates which constitute the ‘dogmatic image of thought,’ paying particular attention to Kant’s philosophy, as a means to create our first foil against which Bataille’s logic of expenditure will be developed below. The doxa of thinking – the dogmatic image of thought – is articulated through the following eight postulates, which we will examine in detail:

— “(1) the postulate of the principle, or the Cogitatio natura universalis (good will of the thinker and good nature of thought);” (DR 167)

Deleuze begins by examining how every philosophy must seek to establish itself, to find its own beginning, through an elimination of all presuppositions (DR 129). This entails an elimination of objective presuppositions, or the “concepts explicitly presupposed by a given concept” (DR 129), as well as subjective presuppositions, or the “implicit presuppositions contained in opinions rather than

concepts: it is presumed that everyone knows, independently of concepts, what is meant by self, thinking, and being” (DR 129). This presupposition occurs most frequently in pre-philosophical and pre-conceptual discourse in the form ‘Everyone knows that...’ or ‘Everyone can see that...’. Deleuze insists that “Many people have an interest in saying that everybody knows ‘this’, that everybody recognises this, or that nobody can deny it” (DR 130-1) because it acts as a naturalizing element in the claim to knowledge. At the level of philosophical thought, the pure element is described as follows: “This element consists only of the supposition that thought is the natural exercise of a faculty, of the presupposition that there is a natural capacity for thought endowed with a talent for truth or an affinity with the true, under the double aspect of a good will on the part of the thinker and an upright nature on the part of thought. It is because everybody naturally thinks that everybody is supposed to know implicitly what it means to think” (DR 131). However, the assertion that everyone knows implicitly what it means to think rests on the second postulate, a key for the Kantian Critical project — that of the concordia facultatum, or of a common sense that evinces both the good will of the thinker and the upright nature of thought.

— “(2) the postulate of the ideal, or common sense (common sense as the concordia facultatum and good sense as the distribution which guarantees this concord);” (DR 167)

Under the guise of the natural faculty of thought, the dogmatic image presumes an equal distribution of common sense as a universal fact. However, Deleuze contends, “It cannot be regarded as a fact that thinking is the natural exercise of a faculty, and that this faculty is possessed of a good nature and a good will” (DR 132). Deleuze examines the presumption of the identity of the Self in both Descartes and Kant, asserting that the complementary instances of common sense and good sense subtend the possibility of the Identity of the Self in both Cartesian and Kantian thought. “For while common sense is the norm of identity from the point of view of the pure Self and the form of the unspecified object which corresponds to it, good sense is the norm of distribution from the point of view of the empirical selves and the objects qualified as this or that kind of thing” (DR 133-4). These complementary elements — common sense as the
concord of the faculties and good sense as their appropriate comportment toward their proper objects — “constitute the two halves of the *doxa*” (DR 134). They also imply the third postulate: a model of recognition that accounts for the errors in thought as instances of confusion among the faculties. It is not insignificant that while Deleuze’s primary engagement is with Kant, the *intentional* structure that relates subject and object within the project of phenomenology from Husserl to Heidegger has already appeared on the scene in the postulate of the ideal.

— “(3) the postulate of the model, or of recognition (recognition inviting all the faculties to exercise themselves upon an object supposedly the same, and the consequent possibility of error in the distribution when one faculty confuses one of its objects with a different object of another faculty);” (DR 167)

Without ambiguity: “Form will never inspire anything but conformities” (DR 134). For Deleuze, the complacency of the dogmatic image of thought is tied directly to its reliance on the model of recognition because “recognition is insignificant only as a speculative model. It ceases to be so with regard to the ends which it serves and to which it leads. What is recognised is not only an object but also the values attached to an object (values play a crucial role in the distributions undertaken by good sense). In so far as the practical finality of recognition lies in the ‘established values’, then on this model the whole image of thought as *Cogitatio natura* bears witness to a disturbing complacency” (DR 135). For Nietzsche, this is why both Kant and Hegel are considered ‘philosophical labourers’ conditioned by the struggles on the level of recognition. Thus, even though, as Deleuze admits, Kant “seemed equipped to overturn the image of thought” (DR 136), Kant instead proliferated common sense to accord with the number of “natural interests of rational thought” (DR 136) and maintained a respectful comportment through the Critiques: “knowledge, morality, reflection and faith are supposed to correspond to natural interests of reason, and are never themselves called into question; only the use of the faculties is declared legitimate or not in relation to one or other of these interests. Throughout, the variable model of recognition fixes good usage in the form of a harmony between the

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55 As Deleuze will suggest, “Must not the same be said of phenomenology? Does it not discover a fourth common sense, this time grounded upon sensibility as a passive synthesis – one which, even though it constitutes an *Ur-doxa*, remains no less prisoner of the form of *doxa*?” (DR 137).
faculties determined by a dominant faculty under a given common sense” (DR 137). While Deleuze is correct to note that this model of recognition secures the proper harmony of the facilities, it is indeed Bataille’s explosion of their harmony by way of his reversal of the process of investment that, as we will see, overturns their hierarchal subservience to Morality.

— “(4) the postulate of the element, or of representation (when difference is subordinated to the complementary dimensions of the Same and the Similar, the Analogous and the Opposed);” (DR 167)

The logic of recognition thus necessitates the fourth postulate: representation, consisting of “identity with regard to concepts, opposition with regard to the determination of concepts, analogy with regard to judgement, resemblance with regard to object” (DR 137). For Deleuze, “They form quadripartite fetters under which only that which is identical, similar, analogous or opposed can be considered different: difference becomes an object of representation always in relation to a conceived identity, a judged analogy, an imagined opposition or a perceived similitude” (DR 138). Thus, within the world of representation, difference cannot be conceived in itself any more than repetition in itself; that is, under the regime of representation, fundamental to Kantian philosophy, Deleuze insists that the generalities constructed according to the logic of identity, analogy, opposition and similarity foreclose any adequate conception of difference and repetition. Having developed the set of limitations made manifest within the field of representation, Deleuze now moves to examine the conception of thought within the history of philosophy, leading to the postulate of the negative.

— “(5) the postulate of the negative, or of error (in which error expresses everything which can go wrong in thought, but only as the product of external mechanisms);” (DR 167)

Within the regime of representation, the question what provokes or enables thought can only be taken up in relation to ratios of certainty and doubt, with the presupposition that ‘true’ thought is simply a matter of eliminating external mechanisms through a method of logical doubt. Against this presupposition, Deleuze asserts, “there is only involuntary thought, aroused but constrained within
thought, and all the more absolutely necessary for being born, illegitimately, of fortuitousness in the world. Thought is primarily trespass and violence, the enemy, and nothing presupposes philosophy: everything begins with misosophy. Do not count upon thought to ensure the relative necessity of what it thinks. Rather, count upon the contingency of an encounter with that which forces through to raise up and elucidate the absolute necessity of an act of thought or a passion to think” (DR 139). From this position, Deleuze further criticizes the image of thinking that repeatedly champions the form of recognition against the decisive event of an encounter. For Deleuze, the fundamental encounter that “may be grasped in a range of affective tones” can only be sensed. While Plato and Descartes anticipate Kant in presuming the filiation of thought with the true – the “great principle” of a good nature and good desire – the more consequential relation, for Deleuze, occurs between thought and intensity, and is played out at the level of sensibility itself. Thus, “The privilege of sensibility as origin appears in the fact that, in an encounter, what forces sensation and that which can only be sensed are one and the same thing, [...] the intensive or difference in intensity is at once both the object of the encounter and the object to which the encounter raises sensibility” (DR 144-5).

Deleuze emphasizes the necessary engagement with Kant and the order of the faculties in relation to this intensive sensibility. \(^{56}\) “What is most important [...] is that – between sensibility and imagination, between imagination and memory, between memory and thought – when each disjointed faculty communicates to another the violence which carries it to its own limit, every time it is a free form of difference which awakens the faculty, and awakens it as the different within that difference” (DR 145). Following Nietzsche’s reading of Kant (especially in the theory of discordant drives most explicitly developed in *Daybreak*), Deleuze argues that,

The very principle of communication [among the faculties], even if this

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\(^{56}\) For a more complete elaboration of the relation among the faculties, see Gilles Deleuze, *Kant’s Critical Philosophy*, translated by Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999. For a reassessment of Kant’s Critical project more generally, and with a close affiliation to Deleuze’s reading of Kant, see Iain Mackenzie, *The Idea of Pure Critique* (New York and London: Continuum, 2004). As noted above, this reading does not address Kant’s analysis of teleology in the third *Critique*. 
should be violence, seems to maintain the form of a common sense. However, it is nothing of the sort. There is indeed a serial connection between the faculties and an order in that series. But neither the order nor the series implies any collaboration with regard to the form of a supposed same object or to a subjective unity in the nature of an ‘I think’. It is a forced and broken connection which traverses the fragments of a dissolved self as it does the borders of a fractured I (DR 145).

Therefore, both following and undermining Kant, Deleuze suggests that the transcendental operation of the faculties occurs in opposition “to their exercise under the rule of common sense. In consequence, the harmony between the faculties can appear only in the form of a discordant harmony, since each communicates to the other only the violence which confronts it with its own difference and its divergence from the others” (DR 146). Thus, “there are Ideas which transverse all the faculties, but are the objects of none in particular,” and as a result, Deleuze reserves the Kantian term ‘Ideas’ for “those instances which go from sensibility to thought and from thought to sensibility, capable of engendering in each case, according to their own order, the limit- or transcendent-object of each faculty. Ideas are problems, but problems only furnish the conditions under which the faculties attain their superior exercise” (DR 146).

How should we understand the necessity of this detour through the Kantian faculties? It is only when we grasp the role of error in the dogmatic image of thought that we determine the consequences of the transcendental exercise of the faculties. That is, “Not only does thought appropriate the ideal of an ‘orthodoxy’, not only does common sense find its object in the categories of opposition, similitude, analogy and identity, but error itself implies this transcendence of a common sense with regard to the sensations, and of a soul with regard to all the faculties whose collaboration [syllogismos] in relation to the form of the Same it determines” (DR 148, my italics). It is not only the external character of error in the dogmatic image, but the attendant externalities of madness, stupidity and malevolence (as the three additional variable modes of error in the history of philosophy) that shape the image of thought, placing it in relief as the falsities that backform the appearance of the truth.57

57 It is perhaps not surprising that all three of these errors of thought should be, in one way or another, attributed to Bataille. For the most comprehensive account of Bataille’s relation to his critics, see Michel Surya, Georges Bataille: An Intellectual Biography, translated by Krzysztof
— “(6) the postulate of logical function, or the proposition (designation is taken to be the locus of truth, sense being no more than a neutralised double or the infinite doubling of the proposition);” (DR 167)

The postulate of error persists in the postulate of the logical function inasmuch as the process of designation under the form of the proposition again obscures the question of sense. Deleuze suggests that more frequently than errors, teachers find in their students’ homework a morass of “nonsensical sentences, remarks without interest or importance, banalities mistaken for profundities, ordinary ‘points’ confused with singular points, badly posed or distorted problems” (DR 153). This is significant because it demonstrates that the problem of sense and meaning is a matter of production, not a matter of “adequation” (DR 154). Thus, Deleuze iterates: “Every time a proposition is replaced in the context of a living thought, it is apparent that it has exactly the truth it deserves according to its sense, and the falsity appropriate to the nonsense that it implies. We always have as much truth as we deserve in accordance with the sense of what we say” (DR 154). This is consequential for the entire image of thought, especially as it is articulated in Kant, because, as Deleuze insists, “The failure to see that sense or the problem is extra-propositional, that it differs in kind from every proposition, leads us to miss the essential: the genesis of the act of thought, the operation of the faculties” (DR 157). The postulate of the logical function diverts attention away from the genesis and structure of thinking, leading to our belief in a ready-made set of problems that await our solutions, or our Moral reasoning.

— “(7) the postulate of modality, or solutions (problems being materially traced from propositions or, indeed, formally defined by the possibility of their being solved);” (DR 167)

The postulate of modality is emphasized in nearly all of Deleuze’s works, typically stated as a variation on the statement problems get the solutions they deserve.\(^58\) In the chapter under consideration, however, Deleuze provides the most

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\(^58\) Here we also find a clear echo of Marx, who is quoted without citation in the present chapter as follows: “‘Mankind always sets itself only such tasks as it can solve’ – not because practical or
extensive commentary on this element of the dogmatic image of thought. He claims, “A solution always has the truth it deserves according to the problem to which it is a response, and the problem always has the solution it deserves in proportion to its own truth or falsity – in other words, in proportion to its sense” (DR 159). Within the regime of representation, however, “The natural illusion (which involves tracing problems from proposition [the postulate of the logical function]) is in effect extended into a philosophical illusion. The critical requirement is recognised, and the attempt is made to apply the test of truth and falsity to problems themselves, but it is maintained that the truth of a problem consists only in the possibility that it receive a solution” (DR 159). Deleuze maintains that this comportment to problematization is found especially in Descartes and Kant: for Descartes, ‘method’ acts as the means to solve pre-formed problems; for Kant, the question of a transcendental form of possibility acts as the means to determine the legitimate use of the faculties (DR 159). “What is missed is the internal character of the problem as such, the imperative internal element which decides in the first place its truth or falsity and measures its intrinsic genetic power: that is, the very object of the dialectic or combinatory, the ‘differential.’ Problems are tests and selections. What is essential is that there occurs at the heart of problems a genesis of truth, a production of the true in thought. Problems are the differential elements in thought, the genetic elements in the true” (DR 161-2). Thus, Deleuze will argue that the problem retains relations that are at once immanent and transcendent to the solution: “Transcendent, because it consists in a system of ideal liaisons or differential relations between genetic elements. Immanent, because these liaisons or relations are incarnated in the actual relations which do not resemble them and are defined by the field of solution” (DR 163).

Finally, following from his analysis of the problem, Deleuze provides a reading of the dialectic as a perversion of the differential: “Problems are always dialectical. This is why, whenever the dialectic ‘forgets’ its intimate relation with Ideas in the form of problems, whenever it is content to trace problems from speculative problems are only the shadow of pre-existing solutions, but on the contrary, because the solution necessarily follows from the complete conditions under which the problem is determined as a problem, from the means and the terms which are employed in order to pose it” (DR 159). For the original passage from Marx, see the Preface to A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy.
propositions, it loses its true power and falls under the sway of the power of the negative, necessarily substituting for the ideal objectivity of the problematic a simple confrontation between opposing, contrary or contradictory, propositions. This long perversion begins with the dialectic itself, and attains its extreme form in Hegelianism” (DR 164). We will return to this analysis of the dialectic as a mode of expressing differential relations again in our reading of Smithson’s use of the term; presently, it is sufficient to note that Deleuze’s reading of the differential-dialectical relation reiterates again the problem of the genesis of thought, suggesting that, as we noted in the Introduction, Hegel’s philosophy must be read as a reaction to, and exacerbation of, problems that are initiated by Kant.

— “(8) the postulate of the end, or result, the postulate of knowledge (the subordination of learning to knowledge, and culture to method).” (DR 167)

As the eighth and final postulate, Deleuze approaches the process of learning itself, examining two complementary roles of apprenticeship within the exploration of Ideas. He suggests that, “on the one hand, an apprentice is someone who constitutes and occupies practical or speculative problems as such. Learning is the appropriate name for the subjective acts carried out when one is confronted with the objectivity of a problem (Idea), whereas knowledge designates only the generality of concepts or the calm possession of a rule enabling solutions” (DR 164). This dimension of apprenticeship relates the learner to the singularities of the Idea which form a problematic field (DR 165). “The apprentice, on the other hand, raises each faculty to the level of its transcendent exercise” where the transcendental or second power “grasps that which can only be sensed” (DR 165). This education, at the level of the Idea or the transcendental exercise, is indeed an “education of the senses” which defies any unified method of learning, but requires, instead “a violent training, a culture or paideia which affects the entire individual” (DR 165). Thus, the postulate of knowledge within the dogmatic image privileges method as the means to the end of knowledge; learning, however, emphasizes the “involuntary adventure” of culture as a sensibility capable of carrying the faculties to their limit- or transcendent-exercise through the problem (Idea).
Thus, when Deleuze, following Nietzsche, claims that Kant did not “go far enough” within the project of Critical philosophy, he is suggesting that although Kant’s philosophy approaches the questions of Man, World, and God, it is only to further entrench their ideality. That is, by examining the conditions of possible experience (as a transcendent field: what would make experience possible?), Kant neglects the question of the reality of actual experience (the transcendental exercise: how do we experience?). As Land has argued in *The Thirst for Annihilation*, the illusion “through which reason pretends to the transcendence of itself” cannot be separated from modern philosophy following Kant. Land suggests the confusion between the transcendent and the transcendental persists from Marx to Derrida: “Kant describes this confusion as one between conditions of objectivity and objects, which in Marx’s case are producers (labour power) and commodities, in Heidegger’s being and beings, in Derrida’s writing and the sign, etc. Such confusions misconceive the transcendental as the transcendent, performing a gesture that can be described as ‘metaphysics’ (fetishism, ontotheology, logocentrism).”

Similarly, as Deleuze indicates in *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, Kant’s *Critique of Practical Reason* “seems to have confused the positivity of critique with a humble recognition of the rights of the criticised” (NP 89). Moreover, “Kant merely pushed a very old conception of critique to the limit, a conception which saw critique as a force which should be brought to bear on all claims to knowledge and truth, but not on knowledge and truth themselves; a force which should be brought to bear on all claims to morality, but not on morality itself” (NP 89). Deleuze concludes: “we learn here what we had known from the start, that the only object of Kant’s critique is justification, it begins by believing in what it criticises” (NP 90).

Of course, Deleuze recognizes that Kant’s project allegedly intended a different course: “Kant’s genius, in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, was to conceive of an immanent critique. Critique must not be a critique of reason by feeling, by

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60 For an exemplary instance of Nietzsche’s view on this aspect of critique, see Nietzsche, *Writings from the Late Notebooks*, edited by Rudiger Bittner, translated by Kate Sturge, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003; see especially Notebook 34.
experiencing or by any kind of external instance [...] Kant concludes that critique must be a critique of reason by reason itself” (NP 91). However, Deleuze goes on to explain that “Kant does not realise his project of immanent critique. Transcendental philosophy discovers conditions which still remain external to the conditioned [Transcendent Subject as legislator]. Transcendental principles are principles of conditioning and not internal genesis. We require a genesis of reason itself, and also a genesis of understanding and its categories: what are the forces of reason and of the understanding?” (NP 91). The transcendental exercise of the faculties thus orders relations of thought among understanding and reason, legislating according to the idealized propriety of the faculties themselves. However, the ideality of what is proper to each faculty remains, burdening our thought with new thresholds of obedience disguised as reason: “When we stop obeying God, the State, our parents, reason appears and persuades us to continue being docile because it says to us: it is you who are giving the orders. Reason represents our slavery and our subjection as something superior which makes us reasonable beings” (NP 92). This legislative slavery, directed against ourselves, can only be understood as the enduring legacy of Kantian morality.

Turning now to our analysis, initiated above, which suggests that Kant invents the notion of a reflective modality of judgment to enable his incorporation of teleology into the third Critique and thus ground the possibility of Moral reason in the necessary logic of Nature (whether at the level of the internal organization of the organism or at the broader organization of Nature itself implied by all organisms), we can specify how Deleuze’s reading of the image of thought helps us address our central question of Moral investment. By emphasizing Kant’s insistence on the sanctity of the objects of his Critique (whether Man, God, or World), Deleuze demonstrates the fundamentally conservative dimension of the project of Critical philosophy. While this reading remains one of the most important confrontations with Kant’s philosophy in postwar French philosophy, we will see below that Deleuze’s buggery comes too late (post coitum), and thus relies on the operative restrictions that Bataille will attempt to explode prematurely (‘pre coitum’, so to speak), that is, before the investment structure has organized the social practices within which it operates to guarantee its subsumption of meaning
THE FRAME OF THOUGHT: DERRIDA READING KANT

For Derrida, it is Kant’s attempt to frame (parergon) the work (ergon) of philosophy that delimits what escapes both from thought and as thought. We analyze Jacques Derrida’s essay ‘The Parergon,’ (initially published in 1979 and subsequently included in The Truth in Painting, 1987), which established the fundamental paradox in Kant’s concept of Unmittelbarkheit [immediacy], the condition of aesthetic experience (including that of taste, beauty and the sublime): for Derrida, Kant’s dependency on a transfer of the conditions of Practical Reason, imported as the logical support of aesthetic experience, yet formally distinct from them, follows the course of a theoretical mobius strip wherein the parergon which supports the ergon is brought into that very work which it frames as a central Figure. In the following section we will develop a reading of Derrida’s Parergon that advances our question regarding the structure of Moral reason and its reliance on the a priori principle of reflective judgment that anchors Kant’s teleology as the frame within which the possibility of aesthetic meaning is located.

Derrida begins “The Parergon,” following a brief initial framing of his reading by way of references to Heidegger and Hegel, with an appraisal of Kant’s third Critique. The appraisal begins as follows:

On the one hand, Kant declares himself “neither willing nor in a position” to examine whether “common sense” (here reinterpreted as an indeterminate norm, neither conceptual nor intellectual) exists as a constitutive principle

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of the possibility of aesthetic experience, or whether reason, as a regulative principle, commands us to produce (hervorbringen) it for loftier ends. This common sense is constantly presupposed by the Critique, which nevertheless withholds analysis of it. We could demonstrate that this suspense assures the complicity of moral discourse and empirical culturalism. A permanent necessity.\textsuperscript{62}

As we might suspect, the move to demonstrate this complicity with moral discourse is deferred. Instead, we read, “On the other hand, recalling the division of philosophy and all the irreducible oppositions determined in the first two Critiques, Kant projects the plan of a work that will reduce the enigma of aesthetic judgement and fill a crack, a cleavage, an abyss (Kluft)” (P 4). For Derrida, it is the symbolic nature of the bridge, formed by way of the analysis of aesthetic judgement, that requires analogy. That is, “The analogy of the abyss and of the bridge over the abyss is an analogy which says that we require an analogy between two absolutely heterogeneous worlds, a ‘third’ for crossing the abyss, cauterizing the gaping wound, and binding the separation. In brief, a symbol. The bridge is a symbol, it moves from one bank to the other, and the symbol is a bridge” (P 4). The symbolic function of the bridge is what permits the introduction of the grounding or “base” that acts as an intermediary. This is consequential because it is precisely as a mediator that the role of judgment appears in Kant’s third Critique.

According to Derrida, “the critique of pure theoretical reason excludes both reason and desire, desire’s reason and reason’s desire,” and therefore, in the third Critique, “what is basically in question” is nothing other than “the base” (P 5). Derrida then notes that, “Between the two faculties [Understanding and Reason], in effect, an articulate member, a third faculty comes into play. This intermediary, which Kant rightfully calls Mittelglied, middle articulation, is judgment (Urteil). But,” Derrida asks, “what is the nature of the a priori principles of the middle articulation?” (P 5). The peculiarity of this middle articulation and it’s a priori principle is of decisive importance for the presentation, or placement, of art. “Since,” for Derrida, “the Mittelglied also continues the articulation of the theoretical and the practical (in the Kantian sense), we are plunged into a space

which is *neither* theoretical *nor* practical, or rather *both* practical and theoretical. Art (in general) or rather the beautiful, if it takes place, is inscribed here. But this here, this place, declares itself as a place deprived of place” (P 5). That is, it is deprived of place precisely because it is neither practical nor theoretical yet functions as a mediator between these two modes and participates in the symbol economy that allows them both to function as such.

Moving to discuss the proceduralism of the Critical project, Derrida continues, “Critical suspension – the *krinein*, the between-two, the question of whether the theory of judgment is theoretical or practical, regulative or constitutive – is the procedure of the critique,” wherein the pure philosophy of metaphysics is, according to Derrida, not yet possible. In order for it to become a possibility beyond critique, that is, in order to “speak of the relationship between two possibilities (the present possibility of the critique and that to come of metaphysics), Kant proposes a metaphor borrowed from art, which has not yet been discussed, from the technique of architecture, from the architectonic: the pure philosopher, the metaphysician, will have to proceed *like* a good architect, like a good *technites* of edification” (P 7). We will see below how this architectural metaphor, however necessary for Kant’s articulation of his yet-to-come metaphysics, remains a fundamental point of leverage against which Bataille’s sovereign experience will exploit. For Derrida, meanwhile, the insistence on Kant’s balancing act between theoretical and practical concerns is taken up in greater detail. Derrida quotes Kant from the preface:

> A critique of pure reason, i.e., of our faculty for judging in accordance with *a priori* principles, would be incomplete if the power of judgment, which also claims to be a faculty of cognition, were not dealt with as a special part of it, even though its principles may not constitute a special part of a system of pure philosophy, between the theoretical and the practical part, but can occasionally be annexed to either of them in case of need. For if such a system, under the general name of metaphysics, is ever to come into being (the complete production of which is entirely possible and highly important for the use of reason in all respects), then the critique must previously have probed the ground for this structure down to the depth of the first foundations of the faculty of principles independent of experience, so that it should not sink in any part, which would inevitably lead to the collapse of the whole (*Critique of the Power of Judgment*, Preface, 5:168,
Therefore, according to Derrida’s reading of this process of inspection, “The proper level of the critique: the architect of reason excavates, sounds, prepares the terrain, in search of a solid foundation, the ultimate Grund on which all of metaphysics may be erected, but also of roots, of the common roots which branches into the light of day, yet never submits to experience. In this, the critique attempts to descend to buthos, to the bottom of the abyss, not knowing whether it exists” (P 7). While the search for the ground of metaphysics is the work of Critical philosophy, Derrida is correct to assert that this theoretical work is fundamentally more akin to the work of construction than of critique.

As Derrida notes, “A theory of judgment as Mittelglied must be constructed. But there will be ‘considerable difficulties’ (grosse Schwierigkeiten) finding a priori principles peculiar to judgment which, at the same time maintain the theory of empiricism. We can only find a priori concepts in understanding. The faculty of judgment employs these, applies them, but there are no concepts proper to or specifically reserved for it. The only concept that is can produce is empty, as it were, and contributes nothing to knowledge” (P 8). It is, for Kant, precisely these aesthetic judgments that are a “major occurrence of the ‘difficulties’” (P 8). This is because, “Even if aesthetic judgments, as judgments, contribute nothing to knowledge, they arise from the unique faculty of knowledge, which is connected to them according to an a priori principle to pleasure or displeasure. The relationship between knowledge and pleasure is thus revealed in its purity: the is nothing to know. But such is precisely the enigma, the enigmatic (das Rätselhafte) at the heart of judgment” (P 8). The issue of the ‘nothing to know’ is indeed of particular consequence for our broader consideration of the Kantian Critical project because, as well will see in greater detail below, it already suggests the aspect of the infinite – i.e. the nothing – that will challenge the order of the facilities by the very facility with which it is apprehended.

Pursuing Kant’s logic of the aesthetic further, Derrida asks,

\[\text{Note that Derrida quotes another edition and offers only an abridged version of this passage; see “The Parergon,” p. 7.}\]
Why call a judgment of taste aesthetic? Because in order to determine whether something may be said to be beautiful, I do not consult the relation of the representation to the object, with cognition in mind (the judgment of taste offers none), but to the subject and its affect (pleasure or displeasure). The judgment of taste in not a judgment of knowledge, it is not ‘logical,’ but subjective and therefore aesthetic: relation to affect (aisthesis). Every relation of a representation, even a sensible one, can eventually be objective, but never pleasure or displeasure. Certainly aesthetic representations may give rise to logical judgments when they are related by judgment to the object; but when judgment itself is related to the subject, to the subjective affect – which is the case here – it is and can only be aesthetic (P 11).

But this aesthetic relation cannot be between a subject and the elements external to the object; instead, it must exclusively depend on the subject and object relation. For this reason, Derrida claims that it “presupposes a discourse on the limit between inside and the outside of the art object, in this case a discourse on the frame” (P 12). This discourse, as it is played out in Derrida’s essay, is highly architectural, framed by a consideration of the peculiar role of reflective judgment, as discussed above, from which it must depart to move toward the subsequent analysis of ornament. In the distinction between genuine beauty and the ornamentation or framing, Derrida again focuses our attention on Kant’s explanation:

‘Even what is called ornamentation [Zierathen: decoration, ornamentation, adornment] (parerga), i.e. what is only an adjunct, and not an intrinsic constituent in the complete representation of an object, in augmenting the delight of taste does so solely by means of its form. Thus it is with the frames [Einlassungen] of pictures or the drapery of statues, or the colonnades of palaces. But if the ornamentation does not itself enter into the composition of a beautiful form – if it is introduced [simplement appliqué] like a gold frame [goldene Rahmen] merely to win approval for the picture by means of its charm – it is then called finery [parure; Schmuck] and takes away from the genuine beauty’ (P 18).

[Even what one calls ornaments (parerga), i.e., that which is not internal to the entire representation of the object as a constituent, but only belongs to it externally as an addendum and augments the satisfaction of taste, still does this only through its form: like the borders of paintings, draperies on statues, or colonnades around magnificent buildings. But if the ornament does not consist in beautiful form, if it is, like gilt frame, attached merely in order to recommend approval for the painting through its charm – then it is called decoration, and detracts from genuine beauty” (Critique of the Power of Judgment, 5: 226, p. 110-111).]
For Derrida, Kant follows a line from Plato and Aristotle, wherein “Philosophical discourse is always against the parergon. But what is it against” (P 20). Here we see how Derrida postpones the question to foreground the imperative it presupposes. We are thus primed for the following determination: “A parergon is against, beside, and above and beyond the ergon, the work accomplished, the accomplishment of the work. But it is not incidental; it is connected to and cooperates in its operation from the outside” (P 20). This ‘transcendental illusion’ of cooperative functionality between the work and its outside is finally articulated fully as Derrida turns the question of the parergon toward its fundamental relation with the architectural metaphor:

With the example of the colonnade, we encounter the entire problematic of inscription in a milieu, of distinguishing the work from a ground. It is always difficult to determine whether the ground is natural or artificial and, in the latter case, where it is a parergon or ergon. The ground, even if it is contiguous with the work, does not constitute a parergon in the Kantian sense. The natural site chosen for the erection of a temple is obviously not a parergon. Nor is an artificial site: neither the square, nor the church, nor the museum, nor the other surrounding works. But drapery or the column, yes. Why? Not because they are easily detached; on the contrary, they are very difficult to detach. With them, without their quasidetachment, the lack within the work would appear or, what amounts to the same, would not appear. It is not simply their exteriority that constitutes them as parerga, but the internal structural link by which they are inseparable from a lack within the ergon. And this lack makes them the very unity of the ergon. Without it, the ergon would have no need of a parergon. The lack of the ergon is the lack of a parergon of drapery or columns which nevertheless remain exterior to it (P 24).

Yet, this still does not determine how the work (i.e. Beauty) is distinguished from its frame by any de facto designation. Derrida continues:

64 Indeed, it is important to note that Derrida’s articulation of the parergon finds several earlier iterations, albeit with largely different consequences: first, the parergon itself could be reframed with respect to the present discussion as a ‘spatialization’ of his earlier project of grammatology; see Jacques Derrida, Of Grammatology (Corrected Edition), translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997). Second, we can see that in Margins of Philosophy, Derrida anticipates the problem of the parergon with respect to the logic of communication more generally, asking, “But are the prerequisites of a context ever absolutely determinable? Fundamentally, this is the most general question I would like to attempt to elaborate;” see “Signature Event Context,” in Margins of Philosophy, translated by Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), p. 310. It is certainly clear that this “most general question” is an operative strategy in a large number of Derrida’s texts, especially in the essays collected in The Truth in Painting.
The parergon is distinguished from both the ergon (the work) and the milieu; it is distinguished as a figure against a ground. But it is not distinguished in the same way as the work, which is also distinguished from a ground. The parergonal frame is distinguished from two grounds, but in relation to each of these, it disappears into the other. In relation to the work, which may function as its ground, it disappears into the wall and then, by degrees, into the general context. In relation to the general context, it disappears into the work. Always a form on a ground, the parergon is nevertheless a form which has traditionally been determined not by distinguishing itself, but by disappearing, sinking in, obliterating itself, dissolving just as it expends its greatest energy (P 26).

Determined in this way as a relational cipher by which the context, or the work, is thus able to make its appearance, the parergonal frame can be seen to perform its mediation in both directions, as required. And, in this way, Derrida brings the role of the parergon in parallel with that of critique itself: “The Critique is a work (ergon) in several ways; as such, it must center and frame itself, delimit its ground by distinguishing itself, by means of a frame, from a general background. However this frame is problematic” (P 26). Here, at the center of the problem, Derrida notices that the reference to the parergon, in the third Critique, occurs precisely (paragraphs 13 and 24) at the moment at which Kant arrives at the distinction between material and formal judgments; only the latter are constitutive of judgments of taste in the proper sense. It is self-evidently not a question of a formalist aesthetic (it could, from another point of view, be demonstrated that the opposite is the case), but of formality as the space of aesthetics in general, of a “formalism” which, rather than representing a specific system, is confounded with the history of art and aesthetics itself. And formality always implies the possibility of a system of framing which is simultaneously imposed and effaced (P 29).

This cadence of imposition and effacement forms, for Derrida, an irreconcilable aporia at the centre of the Critical project. However, it is inevitable that Kant will have to delimit this categorical frame, and, as Derrida is correct to emphasize, thus relies on the analytic of concepts in the Critique of Pure Reason: “Thus in the course of the final delimitation (the theory of taste as the theory of judgment) Kant applies an analytic of logical judgments to an analytic of aesthetic judgments while at the same time insisting on their mutual irreducibility. He never justifies this framing, nor the restrain it artificially imposes upon a discourse which continuously threatens to exceed its boundaries” (P 30).
By way of a conclusion to our discussion of Derrida’s reading of Kant, we note that, “The frame of this analytic of the beautiful with its four moments was thus provided by the transcendental analytic for the single, unhappy reason that imagination, the essential resource in relation to beauty, may perhaps be linked with understanding, that some understanding may perhaps still reside within it. The relation with understanding, which is neither certain nor essential, provides the frame for the entire discourse and, within it, for the discourse on the frame” (P 31). This reciprocal act of framing left open to a possible relation with understanding completes Derrida’s reading with the playfully vague suggestion that the transcendental illusion, thus conceived, may yield to other forms of pressure. This leaves Derrida to add, once more, his own signature to the work by situating deconstruction within the frame of the very work of the parergon:

Not to force the point, but to describe a certain forcing on Kant’s part, we will say that the entire frame of the analytic of the beautiful functions, with respect to that which determines content or internal structure, like a parergon; it has all the right characteristics: neither simply interior nor simply exterior; not falling to one side of the work, as we might say of an exergue; indispensable to energeia to liberate surplus value because it confines the work (all contracts and first of all the contract of painting presuppose a process of framing; and to be effective here the work of deconstruction cannot dispense with a theory of the frame); summoned and assembled like a supplement because of the lack – a certain “internal” indetermination – in the very thing it enframes. [...] Deconstruction must neither reframe nor fantasize the pure absence of the frame. These two apparently contradictory actions are precisely the systematically indissociable ones of that which is presently deconstructed (P 33).

Several points must be emphasized here. First, if there was any doubt that Derrida’s encounter with Kant in this essay was somewhat tangential to the broader logic of his project of deconstruction, it may now be put to rest. Second, if Deleuze can be said to come too late to the Critical project, as we noted above, it appears that Derrida, in both avoiding the work of reframing and denouncing the attempt to escape the frame as a fantasy, fails to come at all in the interminable coitus of deconstruction (this is, perhaps, a key to the enduring legacy and popularity of the project). However, if our interest is in pre-empting the playful engagement with this aporetic transcendental illusion, we must now turn to Bataille’s analysis. Without meaning to dismiss the tremendous value or
intellectual fecundity of Derrida’s intellectual endeavors, we conclude by adding simply that it is of particular importance for our reading of Bataille that we notice, precisely, how Derrida locates the work of deconstruction within the aporetic frame he constructs through his reading, leaving the question of the Moral implications of Kant’s Critical project and its attendant implications for political order and social composition largely unexamined.

A final note regarding Derrida’s philosophical project of deconstruction is necessary. We must remember that Derrida’s early essay on Bataille, published in *Writing and Difference*, is of particular importance to our present research given its provocation of the questions: how does Bataille’s notion of expenditure reorient the question of aesthetics by placing an emphasis on relations of temporality (conservation as deferral, or, in Derrida’s lexicon, amortization) rather than spatiality? That is, how does the notion of being without interest depart from the spatial concerns of the object and initiate an economics of temporality through the concept of expenditure? Yet, again in this essay Derrida remains all too interested in prolonging the encounter (this time with Hegel) and fails to take account of the fundamental engagement with Kant at stake in Bataille’s energetic-economics. As we signalled in the Introduction, Derrida reads Bataille’s philosophy as primarily a reaction to Hegel (as the title of the essay implies): “What is laughable [in the Hegelian system] is the submission to self-evidence of meaning, to the force of this imperative: that there must be meaning, that nothing must be definitely lost in death, or further, that death should receive the signification of ‘abstract negativity,’ that a work must always be possible which, because it defers enjoyment, confers meaning, seriousness, and truth upon the ‘putting at stake.’ This submission is the essence and element of philosophy, of Hegelian ontologics.”

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While Derrida’s reading of the Bataillean annihilation of Moral amortization is no doubt of interest to the present discussion, it suggests again the work of elaborating and unfolding the aporias of the transcendental illusions of thought by way of an engagement with Hegelianism, and is thus more


indicative of Derrida’s apostolic relation to Kant than it is of use for any more interrogative analysis of Bataille’s betrayal of the Critical project.

(5) INFINITE DIVESTMENT: BATAILLE READING KANT

No metaphor is innocent; and the less it is contrived the less it is innocent.
Its self-evidence is the ground floor where thought can safely walk in its sleep.
– Denis Hollier, Against Architecture

With these two looping and seemingly divergent tangential lines (that might, indeed, infinitely pass over each other as the transcendental illusions of thought engendered in Kant’s philosophy pass by the transcendental exercise of the faculties that seek to overcome their prescribed orbit) established, we may now return to the infinite centre of the diagram of Critical philosophy: that is, the intersection of the aesthetic and the teleological. As we have noted above, for Deleuze, the logic of a simultaneously expressive (by way of his Spinozism) and a constructivist philosophy (by way of his development of transcendental empiricism) allows for an overcoming of the Critical project after the fact, or, from behind, in keeping with the Deleuzian project of philosophical buggery. For Derrida, the aporetic paradox of the transcendental illusion of thought, particularly in the cipher of the parergon, enables the particularly protracted engagement with Kantianism by way of the development of a deconstructive reading. Both Derrida and Deleuze demonstrate that the practice of grounding and the practice of exercising the faculties ultimately betrays their required distinction, whether this is articulated as a difference in degree or a difference in kind. The implications of the Critical project and its Moral commitments, while interrogated in these respective readings, seem to endure. The question, turning to Bataille, is how the operative strategies by which such a process of investment in the Critical apparatus might be animated to undermine their philosophical purchase before they have taken hold. That is, we must examine how Bataille initiates a more severe and destructive line of escape with the question of how the (Moral) economy ever came to be restricted. If this question was of interest only as an academic exercise, and if the concerns of the above discussions played out solely within the controlled and prescribed platforms of scholarly debate, the significance of this architecture of restriction would be of little consequence.
However, it is precisely because the necessarily restrictive logic of investment in the Moral economy and its naturalization have such dramatic and enduring effects on questions of social organization, resource extraction, consumptive activity, and political life that this process of restriction is of primary importance.

How is this process of restriction articulated by Bataille? First, from his early essays to his later works, Bataille is loathe to accept the cleanliness of any metaphor of grounding. If Moral reason finds its ground in the ambiguous and non-conceptual apprehension of aesthetic objects and natural forms of sublimity, and is thus primed for the necessity of purpose, Bataille is unflinching in his insistence on the *baseness* of the ground. If the Kantian ground is one that is inspected for a pure but passive fertility within which the arborescent model of Moral reason can take its roots, Bataille sees all growth from this base ground as a sign of the interminably corrupted filth of the earth, forever infecting the ideality of philosophical reason with its ineradicable rot, decay, and filth. As Bataille writes in “The Language of Flowers,” “nothing contributes more strongly to the peace in one’s heart and to the lifting of one’s spirits, as well as to one’s loftier notions of justice and rectitude, than the spectacle of fields and forests, along with the tiniest parts of the plant, which sometimes manifest a veritable architectural order, contributing to the general impression of correctness. No crack, it seems – one could stupidly say no quack – conspicuously troubles the decisive harmony of vegetal nature.”

However, “in order to destroy this favorable impression, nothing less is necessary than the impossible and fantastic vision of roots swarming under the surface of the soil, nauseating and naked like vermin” (VE 13). Bataille then extends this perspective to include its philosophical commitments:

Roots, in fact, represent the perfect counterpart to the visible parts of a plant. While the visible parts are nobly elevated, the ignoble and sticky roots wallow in the ground, loving rottenness just as leaves love light. There is reason to note, moreover, that the incontestable moral value of the term *base* conforms to this systematic interpretation of the meaning of roots: what is *evil* is necessarily represented, among movements, by a movement of high to low. That fact is impossible to explain if one does not assign moral meaning to natural phenomena, from which this value is taken,

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precisely because of the striking character of the appearance, the sign of the decisive movements of nature (VE 13).

Here it is all but impossible to not recall Kant’s own insistence on the aesthetic apprehension of natural forms, whether at the level of the forest or the individual organism, as the key sign that permits the introduction of the category of reflective judgment, thus enabling the claim that an a priori necessity of purposive activity is invariably located in nature. From Bataille’s perspective, Kant has carefully selected the elements within the field of vision where the image of “the tiniest parts of the plant, which sometimes manifest a veritable architectural order” ground the Critical project in the telos of nature as Moral reason: purposive, meaningful, upright, high. “There can be no doubt,” Bataille then remarks with a coy subversion, “the substitution of natural forms for the abstractions currently used by philosophers will seem not only strange but absurd. It is probably fairly unimportant that philosophers themselves have often had to have recourse, though with repugnance, to the terms that derive their value from the production of these forms in nature, as when they speak of baseness” (VE 14). That is, in order to impose a Moral judgment on the high and low, and on the noble and the base, philosophy must be grounded in the very stuff it cannot but detest: the lowly earth, an endless ebullition of rot and decay.

It is Bataille’s concluding remarks in this brief essay that bring us to the second aspect of his encounter with restriction. If the first restrictive dimension is the element of selection that lauds the high and noble by way of privileging this apparent form of nature over the hidden and dark aspect of decay beneath the ground (and thus troubles the metaphorical-founded drive of philosophical systems), it is the extension of the metaphor of baseness (and its Moral derivatives) that then subverts the fundamental restriction from the opposite angle: “The substitution, moreover, threatens to carry one too far: it would result, in the first place, in a feeling of freedom, the free availability of oneself in every sense, which is absolutely unbearable for the most part, and the troubling contempt for all that is still – thanks to miserable evasions – elevated, noble, sacred ... Don’t all these beautiful things run the risk of being reduced to a strange mise en scène, destined to make sacrilege more impure?” (VE 14). That is,
without recourse to the exemplary purposiveness of upright natural form – the aesthetic apprehension of which allows the imposition of Kant’s Moral reason as the telos of nature and thus the restriction of the general economy of energies – the abyss of undetermined freedom would exacerbate the ambiguity of life and its investment in Moral structures as such. Indeed, it is this very strange and dangerous freedom which we will pursue according to the logic of an aesthetics of expenditure.

The activity of expenditure – as an activity exceeding the structures of purposive, and thus recuperative investment – returns us to the epigraph that began this chapter: “Humanity is, at the same time — through industry, which uses energy for the development of the forces of production— both a multiple opening of the possibilities of growth, and the infinite faculty [facilité infinie] for burnoff in pure loss.”68 This concept of the ‘infinite faculty’ can be read as an amplification of tension between the facility of the cognitive apprehension of aesthetic objects without concepts and the faculty of judgment (as discussed above in relation to Kant’s third Critique). This tension between ease and work unfolds the problem of purposive action that will guide the remainder of the dissertation.

With regard to the question of restriction more specifically, while our most immediate vernacular associations would elicit considerations of spatial distribution, there remains a hint within the etymological sense of the term (i.e. “re-”) that might also suggest a going back, a drawing back, that could be read in terms of time as well space. That time, for us, is the time of investment. It is precisely the strangeness of a freedom disconnected from purpose and meaning, a natural freedom that undermines the Critical reliance on the upstanding and the noble with the inclusion of the base and the rotten, that is in question. This is because the freedom of Moral reason relies on an investment, and one that is particularly temporal in terms of its operative restrictions: the project of Critical philosophy is not simply the grounding and manifestation of the Critical apparatus, but the investment such as a project invites. That is, the projected dividends it promises on this investment: a meaningful and purposive existence,

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complete with a sound Moral basis for actions and the quaint peace of mind guaranteed by rich returns. Life is thus turned into a pension plan that rewards obedient investment with the elusive value of purpose. Is it even possible to evade such a pyramidal scheme with some prohibitive gesture?

Turning to the work of Rebecca Comay, we recall how Derrida’s project of writing under erasure takes a highly spatialized form in his essay “The Parergon,” and thus replays the critique of presencing in Heidegger, who, in following Kant’s prohibition of the Image as Icon, enables the prohibition itself to act as the iconographic image. Noting Marx’s ‘intransigent’ Kantianism, Comay asks, “Does not the very bifurcation between the ‘realm of necessity’ and the ‘realm of freedom’ reproduce the essential critical distinction between theoretical and practical reason?” Comay unfolds the consequences of this opening question with the following interrogative series: “How can a materialist prohibition against images be enunciated? Is there not something profoundly contradictory about the very representation of the law forbidding representations of the future? Would not the law inevitably transgress itself in its very pronouncement? Would it not, indeed, incite the very iconophilia that it prohibits – this according to the irreducible imbrication of law with desire, proscription with enjoyment – and thus undermine itself in its own enactment?” Comay is clear about the stakes of such a discussion, noting that, “The point is not simply formal or logical, nor is the issue quaintly theological. It exposes a risk that affects every radical politics. For the very renunciation of images threatens precisely to once more determine the future as a tabula rasa or blank slate receptive to the arbitrary projections of the present day. ‘Homogeneous empty time’ would be reinstated. The old ‘geometrical conception of the future’ – Georges Bataille’s expression – would be reestablished.” Indeed, it is not simply the iconographic prohibition in Heidegger, or Derrida, that is at stake here. The associative function of the icon,

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whether natural or monumental, is of concern because it enables the localizable investment within a particular (i.e. restrictive) order, aligning value with purpose according to its varying social logics. Bataille’s concern with the “geometrical conception of the future” is therefore more specifically related to the causal promise of an order that proceeds from ideality to realization. His is neither a prohibition on the image of purpose nor an attempt to reorient its frame of restriction, but an interrogation of its baseness, its ground, through the question of value and its political, social, and moral implications. This, as we learn from Comay, is of particular relevance for considerations of architecture as a practice and as a metaphor for the systematic projections of radical politics.

Architecture has, at least since Vitruvius, been defined as more than mere building, and architecture as a practice is uniquely placed on the horizon of culture between the two sides of the third Critique: while architecture is unquestionably purposive, its other existence, as an aesthetic construction that exceeds the requirements of building, suggests a certain enigmatic connection between an aesthetic ambiguous pleasure and a purposive end. Certainly, it is not without interest that the polysemic operations of the referent ‘architecture’ are legion. As Hollier has sagaciously explained:

The “jobs” taken on by the word “architecture” certainly have more import than its meaning. When architecture is discussed it is never simply a question of architecture; the metaphors cropping up as a result of these jobs are almost inseparable from the proper meaning of the term. The proper meaning itself remains somehow indeterminate, which is all the more surprising since it is associated with jobs that are strikingly clear and urgent. Architecture refers to whatever there is in an edifice that cannot be reduced to building, whatever allows a construction to escape from purely utilitarian concerns, whatever is aesthetic about it. Now this sort of artistic supplement that, by its addition to a simple building, constitutes architecture, finds itself caught from the beginning in a process of semantic expansion that forces what is called architecture to be only the general locus or framework of representation, its ground. Architecture represents a religion that it brings alive, a political power that it manifests, an event that it commemorates, etc. Architecture, before any other qualifications, is identical to the space of representation; it always represents something other than itself from the moment that it becomes distinguished from mere building.72

This is because, “There is consequently no way to describe a system [or, as

72 Denis Hollier, Against Architecture, pp. 31-2.
Bataille would say, a ‘project’] without resorting to the vocabulary of architecture.” In the word, as in the activity, both decision and ambivalence, interest and disinterest, purpose and purposeless seem to occupy seemingly opposing rooms within the same polysemic house as a certain decisive ambiguity.

It is indeed worth mentioning here that Smithson shares this criticism, at least with respect to the relation between architectural projections and their analogy to economic planning: in an interview with Alison Sky (published posthumously in *On Site #4*, 1973, edited by Sky and Smithson before his death), Smithson contends, “There is an association with architecture and economics, and its seems that architects build in an isolated, self-contained, ahistorical way. They never seem to allow for any kind of relationships outside of their grand plan. And this seems to be true in economics too” (RSCW 309). The plan, whether as blueprint as or as brokerage, suggests a denial of the more general economy of energy within which such projective investments grow their returns by way of their insulated operations. It is for this reason that Bataille attempts to explode the logic of investment through an imperative to consider our ‘explosions of energy’ as intensive expenditure.

In his preparatory notes for *The Accursed Share* (*La Parte maudite*, included as ‘L’Économie A La Mesure De L’Univers’ in volume seven of the Gallimard *Oeuvres complètes*), Bataille suggests the fundamental comportment of the human within the constellation of energy that is the universe. In the section ‘L’homme en tant que réponse au problème de la dépense,’ the imperative of ‘a voice from nowhere’ gives an emphatic place to the ‘difficult simplicity’ of Man’s ‘part’ (i.e. expenditure) within the whole:

Au surplus, la disette actuelle est la conséquence d’une débauche d’énergie. Il est difficile sans doute de dire simplement: «Si vous travaillez, c’est que vous ne sauriez, sans cela, que faire des sommes d’énergie dont vous disposez. Vous pouvez envisager de travailler moins, mais vous ne pouvez cesser le travail et vous reposer. Vous n’êtes, et vous devez le savoir, qu’une explosion d’énergie. Vous n’y changerez rien. Toutes ces œuvres humaines autour des vous ne sont elles-mêmes qu’un débordement d’énergie vitale. Du fait que vous disposez de toutes les ressources du monde, puisqu’elles ne peuvent sans fin servir à s’étendre, il vous les faudrait dépenser activement, sans autre raison qu’un désir que vous

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This passage is only one of many iterations of the notion of expenditure found in Bataille. Yet, regardless of where the concept is reiterated, it is undoubtedly tied to an articulation of the idea of the human. Thus, in his *Theory of Religion*, Bataille states unequivocally: “A basic problem is linked to the very idea of philosophy: how to get out of the human situation.” Therefore, if the goal of *The Accursed Share* is to help lift the curse that plagues humanity, it is important to stress that the curse confronted by the notion of expenditure is always a specifically human problem. Following Stoekl's analysis in *Bataille's Peak*, we must stress that expenditure is a human activity precisely because it only has meaning in relation to other human activities (i.e. conservation), and as such retains the position of humanity (while forcefully annihilating the residual elements of the Subject) by avoiding an undifferentiated relation between humans and the energy of the universe (VE 118).

In this sense, we can argue that Bataille’s concept of expenditure operates between the two poles of a naïve vitalism of pure energetic release and the Critical philosophical project that marks Man as the measure of nature. Between these two poles, humanity is faced with its relation to both the upright and the rotten, the noble and the filthy, the measured and the decadent. Yet, this is never taken

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74 Georges Bataille, *Oeuvres complètes VII*, pp. 15-16; Allan Stoekl translates part of this passage as follows: “You are only, and you must know it, an explosion of energy. You can’t change it. All these human works around you are only an overflow of vital energy. ... You can’t deny it: the desire is in you, it’s intense; you could never separate it from mankind. Essentially, the human being has the responsibility here [a la charge ici] to spend, in glory, what is accumulated on the earth, what is scattered by the sun. Essentially, he’s a laughter, a dancer, a giver of festivals.” This is clearly the only serious language” (Stoekl, *Bataille’s Peak*, p. 190). It is important to stress again that the voice who speaks this ‘only serious language’ is not Bataille, but a voice from nowhere.


76 For an argument against the (conservative/capitalist) reading of Bataille that suggests his concept of expenditure is realized in contemporary consumer culture, see Stoekl, p. 58. Emphasizing the non-utilitarian dimension, Bataille will also claim, “Man’s return to himself [to the impossible] cannot be confused with those who claim to grasp intimacy as one grasps a loaf of bread or a hammer” (AS1 140). In an early formation, Bataille writes (as we noted above), “Now it is necessary to reserve the use of the word expenditure for the designation of these unproductive forms, and not for the designation of all the modes of consumption that serve as a means to the end of production,” ‘The Notion of Expenditure,” VE 118.
up as a fact that reduces humanity to a simple energetic relay because it is only within the human condition that the conservation and storage of energy becomes a question of social composition and political organization. We will see in greater detail in Chapter 2 how the exosomatic consumptive patterns of human activity further distinguish or qualify the alleged vitalism in Bataille’s philosophy. Presently, the question of how that highly privileged form of conservation – architecture – retains the ambiguity of purpose must be analyzed.

As Stoekl suggests, “Architecture in itself is not oppressive; both the Incas and the Aztecs erect giant, solid temples. What varies is the setting and use of the temple in the city.” Or, as Bataille himself makes explicit: “Their science of architecture enabled them to construct pyramids on top of which they immolated human beings” (AS1 46). In contrasting the open air celebration of sacrifice of the Aztecs with the closed and hidden sites of Inca rituals, Bataille emphasizes the conservation of energy through architectural works is open to both regulative and restrictive functions (as in the Inca) and the explosive and precarious expenditure of energy (as in the Aztec rituals). What is at stake in such organizations of energy is both social and epistemological, relying on rituals of investment and promises of order.

The reliance on forms of energetic conservation that guarantee specific forms of social order (obedience) and specific rewards (returns on the investment) is, for Bataille, the condition of servility: “I think that knowledge enslaves us, that that the base all knowledge there is a servility, the acception of a way of life wherein each moment has meaning only in relation to another or others that will follow it.” Knowledge is servile in the sense that it relies on a ground which is as false and indefensible as it is base and filthy. That is, its restriction cannot be sustained. The ability for any projective investment to secure profitability requires a distinction from the general economy that is untenable: restricted economies can only flourish in those ephemeral moments of rigid obedience, as a bubble momentarily distributes surface tension in a restricted economy of energy before bursting. For Bataille, “The error is obvious: What is before me is never anything

77 Stoekl, Bataille's Peak, p. 97.
78 Bataille, The Unfinished System of Nonknowledge, p. 129.
less than the universe; the universe is not a thing and I am not at all mistaken when I see its brilliance in the sun. But if the sun is hidden I more clearly see the barn, the field, the hedgerow. I no longer see the splendour of the light that played over the barn; rather I see this barn or this hedgerow like a screen between the universe and me” (AS1 57). The barn, as primitive architectural form, can only stand as object, as a conservation, when the relentless energetic source that makes it possible is restricted, hidden by the atmospheric conditions equally affected by its brilliance. The restriction of energy is made clear as Bataille later admits, “It is perhaps the thing that a building is, but the thing that a barn really is adapted to the gathering in of the crops: It comes down to the physical qualities that were given to it, measuring the costs against the anticipated advantages, in order to subordinate it to that use” (AS 132). How then is this conservation of solar energy indicative of Bataille’s cosmic economics and their implication for social and political life?

Bataille offers the following reversal of the political economy of scarcity: “I will begin with a basic fact: The living organism, in a situation determined by the play of energy on the surface of the globe, ordinarily receives more energy than is necessary for maintaining life; the excess energy (wealth) can be used for the growth of a system (e.g., an organism); if the system can no longer grow, or if the excess cannot be lost without profit; it must be spent, willingly or not, gloriously or catastrophically” (AS1 21). As we will see in greater detail in Chapter 2, for Bataille the catastrophic spending of energy is closely related to the prerequisite conservation of energy (through nuclear weaponry, for example) and is thus connected to his disgust for politics more generally. Presently, due to the fact that regardless of the human attempts to conserve a surplus of energy through modalities of purposive conservation, energy must be spent, Bataille insists, “I insist on the fact that there is generally no growth but only a luxurious squandering of energy in every form! The history of life on earth is mainly the effect of a wild exuberance; the dominant event is the development of luxury, the production of increasingly burdensome forms of life (AS1 33).” He continues in the following section,

The eating of one species by another is the simplest form of luxury. [...]

The least burdensome form of life is that of a green micro-organism (absorbing the sun’s energy through the action of chlorophyll), but generally vegetation is less burdensome than animal life. [...] the luxury of death [the killing and eating of other animals] is regarded by us in the same way as that of sexuality, first as a negation of ourselves, then – in a sudden reversal – as the profound truth of that movement of which life itself is that manifestation (AS1 33-35).

Thus, Bataille contends,

On the surface of the globe, for *living matter in general*, energy is always in excess; the question is always posed in terms of extravagance. The choice is limited to how the wealth is to be squandered. It is to the *particular* living being, or to limited populations of living beings, that the problem of necessity presents itself. But man is not just the separate being that contends with the living world and with other men for his share of resources. The general movement of exudation (of waste) of living matter impels him, and he cannot stop it; moreover, being at its summit, his sovereignty in the living world identifies him with this movement; it destines him, in a privileged way, to that glorious operation, to useless consumption. If he denies this, as he is constantly urged to do by the consciousness of a *necessity*, of an indigence inherent in separate beings (which are constantly short of resources, which are nothing but eternally *needy* individuals), his denial does not alter the global movement of energy in the least: The latter cannot accumulate limitlessly in the productive forces; eventually, like a river into a sea, it is bound to escape us and be lost to us (AS1 23).

It is this problem of escape that is of primary importance. Will expenditure be oriented toward the purposeless forms of cultural activity that maintain a relation to the general economy by emphasizing the tenuous modes of restriction that govern the social consumption of energy? Or, will expenditure be deferred through processes of conservation that amass greater and greater potentials of energy in the militaristic forms of weaponry all too familiar to Bataille following 1945? This fundamental question of energy and its expenditure through the social and cultural formations will be pursued in greater detail through our reading of Smithson and Bataille in the chapters to follow. Presently, we turn our attention to an additional set of concepts that further situate the concept of expenditure in relation to human autonomy and aesthetics: servitude and sovereignty.

(6) SERVITUDE & SOVEREIGNTY: THE NEGATIVE MIRACULOUS

Bataille offers the following confrontation with Kantian philosophy by describing the stakes of a sovereignty unbounded by utility: “There is not even, in
this world, a way of thinking that escapes servitude, an available language such that in speaking it we do not fall back into the immutable rut as soon as we are out of it: how can we imagine, in spite of Kant, an ethics that does not commit itself, that does not place us in the service of some means? Our inclinations do not alter this circumstance in the least” (AS2 380). That ‘our inclinations do not alter this circumstance in the least’ is particularly problematic, given Bataille’s insistence on escaping the bondage of utility and thus lifting the curse of excess through expenditure. However, Bataille reframes the problem again as follows, “Whether or not there is a judicious order of things is not the ultimate question either. But will man serve that order? Will he get meaning and value from it? Or will that order serve him, in that way that food and roofs do? Will man have, beyond the judicious order, a sovereign life, one that is problematic, useless and dangerous, deriving meaning only from itself and decidedly tragic?” (AS2 385). That is, sovereignty confronts its finitude not in the Heideggerian sense (following Kant) of a presencing of decision, but as the infinite confrontation with an always absent purpose. Sovereignty is, for Bataille, well beyond the limited horizon of Morality. Thus, for Bataille, sovereignty is articulated as the life of the negative miraculous – the miracle of death – which relentlessly serves to remind us that life can only ever come to nothing:

The most remarkable thing is that this negative miraculous, manifested in death, corresponds quite clearly to the principle stated above, according to which the miraculous moment is the moment when anticipation dissolves into NOTHING. It is the moment when we are relieved of anticipation, man’s customary misery, of the anticipation that enslaves, that subordinates the present moment to some anticipated result. Precisely in the miracle, we are thrust from our anticipation of the future into the presence of the moment, of the moment illuminated by a miraculous light, the light of the sovereignty of life delivered from its servitude (AS2 207).

To live aesthetically, that is, without conceptual recourse to necessity as a guarantee of any purposive end, is to live one’s existence through the interrogative practice of expenditure. To live this interrogative (post-Critical) practice aesthetically: an aesthetics of expenditure. Bataille continues, “That which counts is

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79 For an especially broad consideration of conceptions of sovereignty and animality in the Western tradition, see Jacques Derrida, The Beast and the Sovereign, Volume 1, translated by Geoffrey Bennington (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2009).
there each time that *anticipation*, that which binds one in activity, the meaning of which is manifested in the reasonable *anticipation* of the result, dissolves, in a staggering, unanticipated way, into NOTHING” (AS2 211).80

Notably, this leads directly into Bataille own “schema” of sovereignty. This schematization, seemingly mocking Kant’s restriction of the faculties with every line, reaches its crescendo with the following description:

Laughter, tears, poetry, tragedy and comedy – and more generally, every art form involving tragic, comic or poetic aspects – play, anger, intoxication, ecstasy, dance, music, combat, the funereal horror, the magic of childhood, the sacred – of which sacrifice is the most intense aspect – the divine and the diabolical, erotism (individual or not, spiritual or sensual, corrupt cerebral or violent, or delicate), beauty (most often linked to all the forms previously enumerated and whose opposite possesses an equally intense power), crime, cruelty, fear, disgust, together represent the forms of effusion which classical sovereignty, recognized sovereignty, undoubtedly does not conjoin in a complete unity, but which virtual sovereignty would, if we were to succeed in attaining it (AS2 230).

The note to this passage admits that in the unity of this virtual sovereignty “the object of the contradictory effusions dissolves into NOTHING and *silence reigns*” (AS2 441). This silence is not one of inaction but of Moral annihilation: it is the ‘ought’ that is silenced by the dissolution of contradiction. Not only Hegel’s ‘absolute knowing’, but Kant’s entire Critical project is here rendered impossible before its investment structure can begin to order the world and its inhabitants into servile processes governed by restricted Reason. If, as we saw above, the reliance on an image of upright and noble Nature is undercut by Bataille’s emphasis on the baseness that grounds all Nature, here Nature’s end is revealed not as the filth of the earth, but as the complete entropic subsumption of purpose, that is, as nothing.

Bataille’s engagement with Kant’s Critical project and its reliance on illusory epistemological values is again evinced in ‘The Congested Planet’:

Knowledge is the agreement of the organism and the environment from which it emerges. Without knowledge, without the identity of the organism, and without this agreement, life could not be imagined. What therefore is

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80 As Jean-Luc Nancy explains, “‘Sovereignty is NOTHING.’ Which is to say that sovereignty is the sovereign exposure to an excess (to a transcendence) that does not present itself and does not let itself be appropriated (or simulated), that does not even give itself — but rather to which being is abandoned”; Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, p. 18.
the organism in the world, if not the unconsidered flight of a possible into the heart of the impossible that surrounds it? Developing this idea, knowledge strives to restore the impossible (the unforeseeable) to the possible (the foreseeable). Through knowledge, this hazardous flight is changed into a wise calculation: calculation is only possible by giving its possibility a fundamental value (*Unfinished System* 222).

This project by which knowledge attempts to restrict its impossibility by anticipating, through calculation, the impossible and purposeless general economy within which it is forever contained is precisely the project of Critical philosophy. It is a project of *knowing*. To give purpose to the impossible would be, for Kant, the realization of metaphysics. This realization, the end of the Critical project, would thus sanctify the order of Moral reason as the realization of a purposive Nature, and further reduce all freedom and autonomy to the servile obedience of this restricted Moral economy. Confronting this attempted restriction, and at odds with all restriction by the force of sovereign action, is the artist: “The artist is NOTHING in the world of things, and if he demands a place there, even if this only consisted in the right to speak or in the more modest right to eat, he follows in the wake of those who believed that sovereignty could, without being surrendered, have a hold on the world of things” (AS2 257). The image of the sovereignty of the artist in the world of things cannot but redirect our attention to Smithson, to whom we now turn as we conclude the present chapter.

Like Bataille, Smithson would locate Kant’s (proto-phenomenological) designation of the ‘thing’ (i.e. the isolation of the ‘art object’) as an especially enduring aspect of modernity, an aspect which all his work would attempt to annihilate. In one particularly vitriolic attack on the post-Kantian art critic Michael Fried, published in the essay, ‘A Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects,’ 1968, Smithson’s dismissal is complete and unrepentant:

The traces of a weak naturalism cling to the background of [Anthony] Caro’s *Prima Luce*. A leftover Arcadia with flowery overtones gives the sculpture the look of some industrial ruin. The brightly painted surfaces cheerfully seem to avoid any suggestion of the ‘romantic ruin,’ but they are on closer investigation related to just that. Caro’s industrial ruins, or concatenation of steel and aluminium may be viewed as Kantian ‘things-in-themselves,’ or be placed into some syntax based on So and So’s theories, but at this point I will leave those notions to the keepers of ‘modernity’ (RSCW 104).
In conversation with Denis Wheeler (1969-70), Smithson would similarly indict Kant’s philosophical legacy: “I can’t really talk about objects either because that’s like a philosophical set-up that sort of thing, you know, has run down over the last two hundred years out of Kant and all the rest of that. And we accept that. Even words like ‘space’ and ‘time’ and all that” (RSCW 213-14). This attack on the accepted conceptual Kantian baggage of modernity is precisely the context within which we must confront a work like Smithson’s *Nonsite, Oberhausen, Germany, 1968* [fig. 1].

*Nonsite, Oberhausen* is comprised of a series of five steel containers, each increasing in height by linear geometrical intervals toward the wall of the gallery, accompanied by five maps with photodocumentation of the industrial sites from which the contents of the containers were retrieved. The contents of the linearly perforated steel bins are chunks of slag, the waste product of the refining of steel. According to Hobbs, Smithson’s art is “about the present and concerns the hopelessness of understanding life through systems, the absurdity of orthodox forms of rationality, and the meaninglessness of life and art when viewed from a universal vantage point. This futility is aptly underscored in such a work as *Nonsite, Oberhausen, Germany*, in which steel bins are fabricated to hold the waste by-products accumulated in making them.”

The work, “embodies a dialectic between industrially produced steel containers and slag — the waste by-product of the steel-refining process” (RSS 113). Hobbs concludes that “filling a steel bin with the industrial sludge resulting from steel refining belabours the gratuitous, manifests at best a specious unity, and belies the piece’s rationality. In Oberhausen Nonsite the underlying premises of mass production are short-circuited” (RSS 115). While the confrontation with Kant’s allegedly *a priori* necessity of purpose elicited by non-conceptual aesthetic apprehension will play out in various ways in the chapters to follow, here we can already identify the force of Smithson’s practice and its resonance with Bataille’s philosophy: the value of productive work is, in *Nonsite, Oberhausen*, empirically distinguished from waste (that is, the steel container and the slag remain distinct) while this very distinction calls into question the abstract or cognitive capacity to distinguish work from

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81 Please see “Appendix of Images” for all works with Figure numbers in bold.
waste. Utility and luxury collide, interrogating the viewer and her capacity to locate the distinction.

The aesthetic object for Smithson is thus emptied of meaning and purpose by the reiteration of the purposive construction which it doubles, as both waste and its ultimate, entropic realization. Rust never sleeps. To overcome the sentimental attachment to purpose is thus to direct the question of disinterest away from the problem of the object, as in Kant, toward the problem of time itself:

I grant, in a fundamental way, that we know nothing beyond what is taught by action with a view to satisfying our needs. What action teaches undoubtedly goes beyond the purposes of the action: we may even say science, acquired in practice, by means of practice, that it is, or at least can be, disinterested. But science is always subject to the primacy of the future over the present. [...] Hegel saw very well that, were it acquired in a thorough and definitive way, knowledge is never given to us except by unfolding in time. It is not given in a sudden illumination of the mind but in discourse, which is necessarily deployed in duration (AS2 202).

Thus, the projective structure of all epistemological commitments, including those articulated by Kant (to whom Hegel is here responding), forms, for Bataille, an investment structure which cannot but deplete the (aesthetic) experience of the present (i.e. the sovereignty of experience) by siphoning its potential into a yet-to-come, after the present. It is in this way that servility is guaranteed by the judicious ordering of the present as a site of investment for the realization of some purposive future.

For Bataille, “To know is always to strive, to work; it is always a servile operation, indefinitely resumed, indefinitely repeated. Knowledge is never sovereign: to be sovereign it would have to occur in a moment. But the moment remains outside, short of or beyond, all knowledge. We know regular sequences of time, constants; we know nothing, absolutely, of what is not in the image of an operation, a servile modality of being, subordinate to the future, to its concatenation in time. We know nothing absolutely, of the moment” (AS2 202). It is precisely this fleeting, momentary, and ultimately aesthetic experience we will attempt to locate through the reciprocal elucidation of Bataille’s philosophy and Smithson’s artistic practice.
CHAPTER 2
THE POLITICS OF DISGUST

I’m interested in the politics of the Triassic period.
— Smithson

(1) INTRODUCTION: POLITICAL CRISIS

By 1970, it is clear that Smithson, already an accomplished artist with several “periods” of work behind him, had read Georges Bataille. Indeed, in a piece published in Artforum, September 1970, titled “Art and the Political Whirlpool or the Politics of Disgust,” Smithson evokes Bataille in response to the following symposium question:

A growing number of artists have begun to feel the need to respond to the deepening political crisis in America. Among these artists, however, there are serious differences concerning their relations to direct political actions. Many feel that the political implications of their work constitute the most profound political action they can take. Others, not denying this, continue to feel the need for an immediate, direct political commitment. Still others feel that their work is devoid of political meaning and that their political lives are unrelated to their art. What is your position regarding the kinds of political action that should be taken by artists?

While the question inevitably positions every respondent within a set of easily assumed categories, Smithson’s refusal of this performed political taxonomy is as unapologetic as it is severe: “My ‘position’ is one of sinking into an awareness of global squalor and futility. The rat of politics always gnaws at the cheese of art. The trap is set. If there’s an original curse, then politics has something to do with it. Direct political action becomes a matter of trying to pick poison out of boiling stew. The pain of this experience accelerates the need for more and more actions” (RS134).

While Smithson’s reference to an original curse that is politics already anticipates Bataille’s attempt to lift the “curse” in La Part maudite, Smithson’s

84 Robert Smithson Collected Writings, p. 134; October would devote an entire issue to a similar survey question regarding the current war in Iraq, see October 123, Winter 2008.
rhetoric throughout the remainder of his response repeatedly suggests his reading of Bataille. This is especially clear in his description of the political crisis in question: “From a deeper level of ‘the deepening political crisis,’ the best and the worst actions run together and surround one in the inertia of a whirlpool. The bottom is never reached, but one keeps drooping into a kind of political centrifugal force that throws the blood of atrocities onto those working for peace. The horror becomes so intense, so imprisoning that one is overwhelmed by a sense of disgust” (RS134). Turning to questions of violence, Smithson continues, “politics thrives on cruel sacrifices. [...] The political system that now controls the world on every level should be denied by art. Yet, why are so many artists now attracted to the dangerous world of politics? Perhaps, at the bottom, artists like anybody else yearn for that unbearable situation that politics leads to: the threat of pain, the horror of annihilation, that would end in calm and peace” (RS 135). Then, noting the distinction between primitive sacrifices which “were supposed to extract life from death” and modern sacrifices which have “become a matter of chance and randomness”, Smithson notes the importance of William Golding’s Lord of the Flies in Abbie Hoffman’s Revolution for the Hell of It: “Life is swollen like Piggy and this is disappointing, the clean world of capitalism begins to stink, “the sexual channels are also the body’s sewers” (George [sic] Bataille), nausea and repugnance bring one to the brink of violence” (RS135). The passage attributed to Bataille is itself taken from Erotism, where the line is followed by St. Augustine’s earlier assessment of the somatic prison: “Inter faeces et urinam nascimur.” Bataille translates Augustine’s appraisal of the body: “we are born between faeces and urine.” Bataille would make a similar claim with greater force, albeit from an apparently opposing direction, in his alternate history of eroticism included in volume two of La Part maudite: “One day this living world will pullulate in my dead mouth.” As we already noted with respect to Bataille’s ‘The Language of Flowers,’ not all of nature stands upright, and all that does relies on the surrounding rot and decay.

85 Bataille, Erotism, pp. 57-58.
It is also worth noting that Smithson signals his reading of Bataille in one of the four interviews conducted by Denis Wheeler between 1969 and 1970. Asked by Wheeler about forces are made to confront each other in his work and produce a release of force resulting from the encounter, Smithson replies, “Well, that’s what I talk about in the beginning with sacrifice of matter as a kind of very primordial idea. Not a human sacrifice, but there’s a disjunction. And that disjunction releases a certain kind of awareness. And this is what George [sic] Bataille in his book called *Death and Sensuality* points out. The disjunction was what was so liberating to the primitives. But to us, the disjunction becomes almost disgusting; this revulsion enters into it” (RSCW 230). This disjunction is clearly one, for Bataille, that marks the relation between the restricted economies of human scale and their energetic relation with the general economy at the scale of the universe, suggesting an awareness of the porosity and precarity of the former within the experience of sacrifice that signals the latter. It is not at all surprising that Smithson would reference the disgust and revulsion of contemporary societies when faced with this energetic truth, especially in the context of the political “crisis” that frames his comments.

From the point of view of a broader social history, it is important to note that Smithson was not alone in expressing disgust with the question of politics. Richard Serra’s contribution to the symposium offers a macabre solution to the draft with a lone quote from “Section XII. Employment with a Legally Established Law Enforcement Agency,” which detailed two possible exemptions from military service. Serra’s response is sly but unequivocal: if you don’t want to kill people in Vietnam, you can become a police officer to exempt yourself from service and stay at home to kill people in America. Likewise, Ed Ruscha’s statement is highly sceptical about grafting political concerns, or political resistance, on to artistic practice: “What can finally be accomplished by not doing things? […] I don’t think an artist can do much for any cause by using his art as a weapon.” Thus, while we do not suggest that Smithson was alone in his bleak refusal of the question of political art, his affinity with Bataille through the notion of expenditure and its

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88 Ibid., p. 38.
political valences is an especially significant turn toward a political economy of energy and its social and political implications.

In this sense, Smithson is also distinguished from other artists of the period whose activities were more directly focused on labour and gender-oriented questions of equity in the art world. As Lucy R. Lippard has noted, “In 1969/70, a number of artists were talking like this [purists] and endless discussions took place in the bars and meetings of the AWC (Art Workers’ Coalition) meetings that Smithson infrequently and inactively attended.”89 With his disinterest in the political activities of the AWC, compounded by his dismissive comments about politics more generally, as stated in the symposium, Smithson’s political affiliations would appear, at least at first glance, as somewhat more idiosyncratic, if not entirely nihilistic, than those privileged by the AWC. As we read in the epigraph at the beginning of this chapter, Smithson’s position is especially enigmatic: “I’m interested in the politics of the Triassic period.”90

In “The Crystal Land,” of 1966, Smithson suggests some of the sedimentary compositions at stake in such a politics:

Brian H. Mason, in his fascinating booklet, Trap Rock Minerals of New Jersey, speaks of the “Triassic sedimentary rocks of the Neward series,” which are related to those of the Palisades. In these rocks one might find: ‘actinolite, albite, allanite, analcime, apatite, anhydrite, apophyllite, aurichalcite, axinite, azurite, babingtonite, bornite, barite, calcite, chabazie, chalcocite, chlorophyrite, chlorite, chrysocolia, copper, covellite, cuperite, datolite, epidote, galena, glauberite, goethite, gmelinite, greenockite, gypsum, hematite, heaulandite, hornlende, laumontite, malachite, mesolite, natrolite, opal, orpiment, orthoclase, pectolite, prehnite, pumpellyite, pyrite, pyrolusite, quartz, scolecite, siderite, silver, sphalerite, sphene, stevensite, stilbite, stilpnomelane, talc, thaumasite, thomsonite, tourmaline, ulexite’ (RSCW 8).91

The inorganic thrust of Smithson’s political affiliation is clear in his catalogue of

91 For a further discussion of the politics of the Triassic period, see the third stratum – the Triassic – in ‘Strata, A Geophotographic Fiction,’ (RSCW pp. 75-77; originally in Aspen, no. 8, Fall – Winter 1970-71, edited by Dan Graham). Similarly, in his discussion with Heizer and Oppenheim, Smithson explains, “I wrote an article recently entitled ‘Strata’ covering Precambrian to the Cretaceous periods. I dealt with that as a fiction. Science works, yes, but to what purpose? Disturbing the grit on the moon with the help of billions of dollars. I’m more interested in all aspects of time. And also in the experience you get at the site, when you’re confronted by the physicality of actual duration. Take the Palisades non-site: you find trolley tracks embedded in the ground, vestiges of something else. All technology is matter built up into ideal structures. Science is a shack in the lava flow of ideas. It must all return to dust. Moondust, perhaps” (RSCW 249).
This affinity, as well as additional relations concerning entropy, expenditure, aesthetics, and geological time, can be clearly read through other work from the 1960s, including Smithson’s earlier collage Untitled (Venus with Reptiles), 1963 [fig. 2.1], and his stacked sculpture Glass Stratum, 1969. The Venus collage includes 14 separate rough cut outs of images of reptiles oriented with more or less interest around a centrefold nude figure – reminiscent of a 1960s Playboy model – whose calm yet depthless repose and accentuated breasts suggest a contemporary Venus under the gaze of the agents of geological time as opposed to her usual cherubs, or, perhaps, a contemporary Olympia, now herself enslaved by geological forces. While this collage is indeed an early work that borders on Smithson’s own claims to artistic maturity, it nonetheless suggests an important break with the traditional configuration of the nude within the history of European aesthetic sensibilities. The nude is certainly one of the more enduring traditions within the history of European painting, and it is here undermined through both the use of popular magazine imagery as a non-painterly substitution and the reptilian relation of the framing. The nude, now rendered as more popular and pornographic than aesthetic or painterly, is consumed in her restricted referential context by this reptilian swarm more closely affiliated with geological time than art historical progress within European painting. If the nude here is not entirely consumed, her sanctity, whether as aesthetic figure or popular model, is threatened by a time scale that far exceeds the human. If we accept the geological referent suggested by the reptilian frame, it is clear that Smithson’s preference for Triassic politics is an attempt to break with the limited horizon of European aesthetics and its concrescence in the form of Modernism criticism (via Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried).

The sculptural work Glass Stratum, 1969 [fig. 2.2] elicits similar referents with respect to historical time and the elimination of its apparent evidence. The work is, according to Hobbs, one of a series of works of the period experimenting with aspects of layering and stratification. “Smithson’s layerings of mirrors and glass are reminiscent of the regular layered planes occurring in such crystals as mica. But even though the visual configurations of these glass sculptures are ordered and rational, the pieces have an underlying nonvisual structure that is
disordered and random” (RSS 87). That is, “Because the sculptures are made of glass – the artist stresses the frozen-liquid nature of this material in the cool green color of Glass Stratum – the ordered layering is antithetical to the irregular molecular structure of the material. By using glass, Smithson subverts the presumed order his sculpture exhibits: the rational becomes irrational; systems conflict; and a calm, discreet chaos prevails” (RSS 87). Within this seemingly ordered chaos of repeated glass planes Smithson also seems to balk at notions of transparency or clarity regarding the processes of stratification themselves. If Modernist architecture privileged the glass façade as a sign of progressive transparency and openness, Smithson’s stacking of glass planes renders such claims to progress optically inaccessible and thus denies the viewer the satisfaction of evidentiary judgment.

However de-politicized, apolitical, or even nihilistic as this view of history (and, by implication, human agency) may sound, as we will see Smithson’s commitment to the politics of the Triassic period aligns with his broader project of an ‘abstract geology’ which moves through various iterations in the chapters on seriality, sedimentality, monumentality and meandering to follow. Presently, we will turn to Bataille’s ‘Theoretical Introduction’ to The Accursed Share to examine the complementary articulation of a politics of disgust and an aesthetics of expenditure that follows from Bataille’s analysis of economy at the scale of the universe.

(2) THE CURSE

In the Preface to The Accursed Share, Bataille explains the comical aspect of trying to describe his work in progress, suggesting the radical revisioning of the economic processes he was attempted to describe as completely at odds with more fashionable Marxian notions: “I had to try in vain to make clear the notion of a ‘general economy’ in which the ‘expenditure’ (the ‘consumption’) of wealth, rather than production, was the primary object” (AS1 9). In keeping with his disgust for the promissory aspect of philosophical work, Bataille writes, “No one can say without being comical that he is getting ready to overturn things: He must overturn, and that is all” (AS1 10). How the ‘curse’ might be overturned is then, at
least in part, left to the interest of the reader. In what may be the most startling analogy in any of his writing, Bataille provocatively suggests,

If one has the patience, and the courage, to read my book, one will see that it contains studies conducted according to the rules of a reason that does not relent, and solutions to political problems deriving from a traditional wisdom, but one will also find in it this affirmation: *that the sexual act is in time what the tiger is in space.* The comparison follows from considerations of energy economy that leave no room for poetic fantasy, but it requires thinking on a level with a play of forces that runs counter to ordinary calculations, a play of forces based on the laws that govern us. In short, the perspectives where such truths appear are those in which more general propositions reveal their meaning, propositions according to which *it is not necessity but its contrary, ‘luxury,’ that presents living matter and mankind with their fundamental problems* (AS1 11-12).

Here we find one of the most important points to be unfolded in the section below: contrary to the logic of scarcity at the basis of political economy, how is it that Bataille can argue that luxury, or an excess of energy, is the fundamental problem of humankind? Bataille raises the stakes of this question with the following rhetorically charged assertion: “I insist on the fact that, to freedom of mind, the search for a solution is an exuberance, a superfluity; this gives it an incomparable force” (AS1 14). This force, as we will see more clearly in our reading of the ‘Theoretical Introduction,’ is produced and amplified by the interrogative drive of the concept of expenditure.

In what is the first of many reversals of accepted notions about economics and energy, Bataille, in ‘The Dependence of the Economy on the Circulation of Energy on the Earth,’ begs the question: “Shouldn’t productive activity as a whole be considered in terms of the modifications it receives from its surroundings or brings about in its surroundings? In other words, isn’t there a need to study the system of human production and consumption within a much larger framework?” (AS1 20). That is, the restricted and localized economies of human scale require a much broader and more general context of energetic flows within which their imposition of restrictions might be understood. Of course, further questions arise as a means to provoke this decisive encounter: “Thus the question arises: Is the general determination of energy circulating in the biosphere altered by man’s activity? Or rather, isn’t the latter’s intention vitiated by a determination of which it is ignorant, which it overlooks and cannot change?” (AS1 21).
But what, specifically, does Bataille mean by this question? He is quick to respond: “I will give an inescapable answer. Man’s disregard for the material basis of his life still causes him to err in a serious way. Humanity exploits given material resources, but by restricting them as it does to a resolution of the immediate difficulties it encounters (a resolution which it has hastily had to define as an ideal), it assigns to the forces it employs an end which they cannot have. Beyond our immediate ends, man’s activity in fact pursues the uselessness and infinite fulfillment of the universe” (AS1 21). From this assertion of the uselessness of the universe, Bataille goes on unfold the logic of expenditure.

The first principle that Bataille sets out, noted above in Chapter 1, beckons reiteration given the forceful reversal of assumed notions about energy and scarcity (and this is especially the case because the moment of articulation occurs in the destitution of the postwar period in France): “I begin with a basic fact: The living organism, in a situation determined by the play of energy on the surface of the globe, ordinarily received more energy than is necessary for maintaining life; the excess energy (wealth) can be used for the growth of a system (e.g., an organism); if the system can no longer grow, or if the excess cannot be completely absorbed in its growth, it must necessarily be lost without profit; it must be spent, willingly or not, gloriously or catastrophically” (AS1 21). As noted above, this catastrophic expenditure is no doubt that of the nuclear bomb, which requires a dramatic conservation of energy to facilitate destruction. The investment in such structures (and their attendant organization of society) is problematic not only for the dangers they pose to human life, but also because of the presumptions regarding the economics of energy which ‘ground’ their construction.

Under the title ‘The Poverty of Organisms or Limited Systems and the Excess Wealth of Living Nature,’ Bataille then suggests that the human presumption of the purpose of development prevents the recognition of a broader consideration of the flows of energy and their ultimate denial of progress: “Minds accustomed to seeing the development of productive forces as the ideal end of

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92 It is important here to note: “Infinite is in opposition to both the limited determination and to the assigned end” (AS1 191). This aspect of the infinite will remain fundamental in our encounter with post-Kantian aesthetics in the remainder of the dissertation.
activity refuse to recognize that energy, which constitutes wealth, must ultimately be spent lavishly (without return), and that a series of profitable operations has absolutely no other effect than the squandering of profits” (AS1 22). That is, “To affirm that it is necessary to dissipate a substantial portion of energy produced, sending it up in smoke, is to go against judgments that form the basis of a rational economy” (AS1 22). He continues, “When one considers the totality of productive wealth on the surface of the globe, it is evident that the products of this wealth can be employed for productive ends only insofar as the living organism that is economic mankind can increase its equipment. This is not entirely – neither always nor indefinitely – possible” (AS1 22).

Bataille then moves to address the question of restricted and general economies directly:

Economic science [...] does not take into consideration a play of energy that no particular end limits: the play of living matter in general, involved in the movement of light of which it is the result. On the surface of the globe, for living matter in general, energy is always in excess; the question is always posed in terms of extravagance. The choice is limited to how the wealth is to be squandered. It is to the particular living being, or to limited populations of living beings, that the problem of necessity presents itself. But man is not just the separate being that contends with the living world and with other men for his share of resources. The general movement of exudation (of waste) of living matter impels him, and he cannot stop it; moreover, being at the summit, his sovereignty in the living world identifies him with this movement; it destines him, in a privileged way, to that glorious operation, to useless consumption. If he denies this, as he is constantly urged to do by the consciousness of a necessity, of an indigence inherent in separate beings (which are constantly short of resources, which are nothing but eternally needy individuals), his denial does not alter the global movement of energy in the least: The latter cannot accumulate limitlessly in the productive forces; eventually, like a river into the sea, it is bound to escape and be lost to us (AS1 23).

It is worthwhile to pause here in our reading of Bataille to position the question of economy more broadly within philosophical discourse. While we have noted above the significance of economic considerations for both Kant and Bataille, it is of course Aristotle who initiates the discussion of economy within the Western philosophical tradition. For Aristotle, it is the house (the oikos) that is the primary unit of management for human affairs. Similarly, a nest, a den, or a coral reef function as the scale of territoriality within which organisms exist in a dynamic
exchange with their milieu. Increasing in scale, the forest, the river, and the ocean form the territories and thus house an ever greater degree of exchange of energy, all the way to the broadest and most general energetic economy of the biosphere. When considered in their localized and territorial form, these economies of energetic exchange are restricted in such a way that goals can be established and ends are purposeful. At the scale of a general economy, what Bataille is arguing is that the question of purpose, the goal of activity, can only be understood as a squandering of energy, or the efflorescence of forms of life which unfold differential patterns of energy that constitute the differentiated organisms and environments.

Yet, the accumulation and conservation at the level of human activity continues, and, according to Bataille, “Incomprehension does not change the final outcome in the slightest. We can ignore or forget the fact that the ground we live on is little other than a field of multiple destructions. Our ignorance only has this incontestable effect: It causes us to undergo what we could bring about in our own way, if we understood” (AS1 23). An amor fati of expenditure: for Bataille, there is a choice – a choice that is fundamentally one of social organization – that human beings face with respect to the consumption of excess energy. Bataille insists, “For if we do not have the force to destroy the surplus energy ourselves, it cannot be used, and, like an unbroken animal that cannot be trained, it is this energy that destroys us; it is we who pay the price of the inevitable explosion” (AS1 24). By the end of WWII, the use of the atomic bomb had demonstrated to the world that destruction made possible through the massive buildup (conservation) of energy, and the threat of these weapons and their destructive force was indeed without question.

This inescapable logic of war continued, of course, as a result of competing political interests and their respective modes of conservation – indeed, it is exactly this conservation of force that made the postwar war Cold. Notably, this conservation is taken up with great urgency by Antonin Artaud in his postwar writings. For Artaud, the organization of society is oriented “with a view to all the planetary wars which might later take place, and which would be intended to
demonstrate” superiority “by the overwhelming virtues of force.” And, like Bataille, Artaud is loathe to describe the confusion between the restricted political economies of the Cold War and the ‘higher laws’ of energetic excess: “in an age of a mechanized science lost among its microscopes, to speak of the higher laws of the world is to arouse the derision of a world in which life has become a museum” (AASW 359).

Returning to Bataille, we continue to follow his analysis in The Accused Share, noting, “For if we are not strong enough to destroy, on our own, excessive energy, it cannot be used; and, like a healthy animal that cannot be trained, it will come back to destroy us, and we will be the ones who pay the costs of the inevitable explosion” (AS 24). The inevitable explosion – global nuclear holocaust as guaranteed under a plan of Mutually Assured Destruction – emerges as a result of a politics of energetic conservation, of stockpiling, with the result that all politics are “poisoned” (to borrow a term repeatedly used by Smithson in relation to politics). Again, Bataille argues, “We need to make a principle of the fact that sooner or later the sum of excess energy that is managed for us by a labor so great that it limits the share available for erotic purposes will be spent in a catastrophic war” (AS2 188). Because erotism always steals the energy that is being conserved for war, the avoidance of conservation by way of erotic or aesthetic expenditure “can only be done in defiance of politics” (AS2 191). As we will see below, despite the many attempts to read Smithson within a ‘restorative’ ecological context, his artist practice is much closer to Bataille’s concept of expenditure than it is to any logic of conservation or sustainability.

Bataille then states the terms of his analysis regarding the possibility of deferring catastrophe explicitly: “We can express the hope of avoiding a war that already threatens. But in order to do so we must divert surplus production, either into the rational extension of a difficult industrial growth, or into unproductive works that will dissipate an energy that cannot be accumulated in any case. This raises numerous problems, which are exhaustingly complex. One can be sceptical of arriving easily at the practical solutions they demand, but the interest they hold is unquestionable” (AS 25). If we consider the art works of Robert Smithson as

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exemplary of the expenditure of this excess, they might thus be read as alongside Bataille as decisively political. That is, regardless of the dramatic portrait of violence and sacrifice that Bataille offers in his first volume of *Le Part Maudite*, it is indeed an argument for *peace by other means*. Because conservation is a mode of accumulation that requires, by its logic, interminable destruction (this is evident from a philosophical point of view at least as early as Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right*), the only politics that offers a way out of the ordering forms of conservation and the necessity of (nuclear) war is a counter-violence of purposeless cultural expenditure. Bataille concludes the ‘Theoretical Introduction’ with a stark warning followed by a rhetorical return to his opening metaphor: “Woe to those who, to the very end, insist on regulating the movement that exceeds them with the narrow mind of a mechanic who changes a tire” (AS1 26). This attempt to restrict or control an energetic economy within the confined logic of conservation is, for Bataille, not only arrogant but impossible. This is because, regardless of any systems for conservation and productive growth, the capacity to utilize excess energy without loss is beyond the scope of human activity. For Bataille, the only alternative, as we will see in greater detail below, is to hasten the burn off of this excess energy through cultural, or aesthetic, practices of expenditure.

(3) PATTERNS OF CONSUMPTIVE ENERGY

Bataille develops several important points of his theory of general economy by situating his position within a broader series of considerations, primarily those of biochemical growth. For Bataille, “That as a rule an organism has at its disposal greater energy resources than are necessary for the operations that sustain life (functional activities, and, in animals, essential muscular exercises, the search for food) is evident from functions like growth and reproduction. Neither growth nor reproduction would be possible if plants and animals did not normally dispose of an excess” (AS1 27). This disposal of excess, as the source of

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94 As Bataille suggests, somewhat more obscurely, in the “Post-Scriptum” to *The Unfinished System*: “Only violent thought coincides with the disappearance of thought. But it demands a meticulous relentlessness and it yields to violence — its contradiction — only in the end and insofar as, becoming itself, against itself, violence releases it from the indolence wherein it endured. […] Violence is bound to the movement of thought that leaves no loophole” (*Unfinished System*, p. 207). Or, again, in *Erotism*: “there is nothing that can conquer violence” (E 48).
all growth, is entirely related to the wealth of solar energy available within the biosphere. Thus, following Bataille, we note that “I will speak briefly about the most general conditions of life, dwelling on one crucially important fact: Solar energy is the source of life’s exuberant development. The origin and essence of our wealth are given in the radiation of the sun, which dispenses energy–wealth–without any return. The sun gives without ever receiving” (AS1 28).

Bataille’s description of this non-reciprocal gift of solar energy finds a complementary articulation through the empirical data of contemporary scientific scholarship. According to Eicke Weber, director of the Fraunhofer Institute for Solar Energy Systems, in Freiburg, Germany, “The total power needs of humans on Earth is approximately 16 terawatts. (A terawatt is a trillion watts). [...] In the year 2020, it is expected to grow to 20 terawatts. The sunshine on the solid part of the earth is 120,000 terawatts. From this perspective, energy from the sun is virtually unlimited.” That is, approximately 6000 times more energy from the sun hits the terrestrial surface of the earth than is used by human beings. Thus, as Bataille argues, “The immediate limitation, for each individual or each group, is given by the other individuals or groups. But the terrestrial sphere (to be exact, the biosphere), which corresponds to the space available to life, is the only real limit” (AS1 29). Yet, the variable effects of pressure in the particular and localized environments of energetic economies remain to be considered.

Bataille addresses the question regarding the pressures of growth, writing, “In a sense, life suffocates within limits that are too close; it aspires in manifold ways to an impossible growth; it releases a steady flow of excess resources, possibly involving large squanderings of energy. The limit of growth being reached, life, without being in a closed container, at least enters into ebullition: Without exploding, its extreme exuberance pours out in a movement always bordering on explosion” (AS1 30). But, “Supposing there is no longer any growth possible, what is to be done with the seething energy that remains? To waste it is obviously not to use it. And what, what we have is a draining away, a pure and simple loss, which occurs in any case: From the first, the excess energy, if it cannot be used for growth, is lost” (AS1 31). Bataille then explains that this loss can

never be understood in strict terms as *useful*, yet it is always considered according to *acceptability* – that is, as a differential consideration of various forms of loss, some of which are deemed more acceptable than others. That is, the social organization and its Moral order have an operative role in determining the value of such losses of excess energy. From a more contemporary biopolitical perspective, it is clear that the value of certain losses (i.e. the loss of liquidity within the banking system as the growth of the housing bubble reaches its limit) are rendered acceptable, while other losses (i.e. the loss of a stable climate as a result of the human production of greenhouse gases), and their consequences, are deferred (conserved) until their apparent loss can be reordered as profitable.

Regardless of the Moral and political orders which sanction certain forms of loss while prohibiting others, two effects of pressure are evident: extension and luxury. Bataille explains the effect of extension with a particularly elegant analogy which we quote at length:

Imagine an immense crowd assembled in the expectation of witnessing a bullfight that will take place in a bullring that is too small. The crowd wants badly to enter but cannot be entirely accommodated: Many people must wait outside. Similarly, the possibilities of life cannot be realized indefinitely; they are limited by the space, just as the entry of the crowd is limited by the number of seats in the bullring. A first effect of the pressure will be to increase the number of seats in the bullring. If the security service is well-organized, this number is limited precisely. But outside they may be trees and lampposts from the top of which the arena is visible. If there is no regulation against it, there will be people who will climb these trees and lampposts. Similarly, the earth first opens to life the primary space of the waters and the surface of the ground. But life quickly takes possession of the air. To start with, it was important to enlarge the surface of the green substance of plants, which absorbs the radiant energy of light. The superimposition of leaves in the air extends the volume of this substance considerably: In particular, the structure of trees develops this possibility well beyond the level of the grasses. For their part the winged insects and the birds, in the wake of the pollens, invade the air (AS 31-32).

However, this extension is only the first effect; squander follows: “the lack of room can have another effect: A fight may break out at the entrance. If lives are lost the excess of individuals over the number of seats will decrease” (AS1 32). Still, the metaphor is inadequate in that it fails to indicate the radically disproportionate distribution of pressure: “Real pressure has different results: It puts unequal organisms in competition with one another, and although we cannot say how the
species take part in the dance, we can say what the dance is” (AS1 33). Indeed, this ‘real pressure’ may be read within the tradition of Western political philosophy, dating back at least to Plato, as the very movement which makes politics possible. As is well-known, the transition from the end of Book 2 of Plato’s Republic, where an equitable distribution of resources limits the ‘city of sows,’ to the founding of the City of Speech in Book 3 relies on the agreement between Glaucon and Adeimantus that the competition for greater ‘relishes’ is the engine driving all forms of conquest, military organization, and resource capture. Taking our lead from Bataille’s description of pressure, we might say that the dance, as politics, is one where the suggestion that a more luxurious life is possible acts as the driving force of a political order that then attempts to deliver, whether by controlling the means of production (communism), by equitable redistribution (socialism), or by the promotion of individual achievement (capitalism), a greater degree of luxury for a greater number of individuals. In this sense, the disgust with politics shared by Bataille and Smithson is a disgust with the illusory forms of conservation that govern the articulation of political life in the latter half of the 20th century.

Returning once again to Bataille’s analysis, we note that “the unevenness of pressure in living matter continually makes available to growth the place left vacant by death” (AS1 33). The section then ends with Bataille’s emphatic statement: “I insist on the fact that there is generally no growth but only a luxurious squandering of energy in every form! The history of life on earth is mainly the effect of wild exuberance; the dominant event is the development of luxury, the production of increasingly burdensome forms of life” (AS1 33). This phrase – “increasingly burdensome forms of life” – is of decisive importance for understanding the logic of expenditure in Bataille’s philosophy because it forces a consideration of evolutionary development as a response to a problem of energy surplus and not, as so often assumed, scarcity. By emphasizing the dynamics of energy consumption from the point of view of excess, Bataille can then argue for an understanding of eating, death, and sexuality within the broader logic of luxurious expenditure.
For Bataille, “The eating of one species by another is the simplest form of luxury” because the “least burdensome form of life is that of a green micro-organism (absorbing the sun’s energy through the action of chlorophyll), but generally vegetation is less burdensome than animal life. Vegetation quickly occupies the available space. Animals make it a field of slaughter and extend its possibilities in this way; they themselves develop more slowly” (AS1 33-34). Death “constantly leaves the necessary room for the coming of the newborn, and we are wrong to curse the one without whom we would not exist” (AS1 34). Like sexuality, for Bataille, death “is the profound truth of that movement of which life is the manifestation” (AS1 35). Yet, the common understanding would suggest that sex is, strictly speaking, necessary. That is, sex, from the point of view of the species, is a matter of utility. Bataille’s response is again unequivocal: “For these animals sexual reproduction is the occasion of a sudden and frantic squandering of energy resources, carried in a moment of to the limit of possibility (in time what the tiger is in space). This squandering goes far beyond what would be sufficient for the growth of a species” (AS1 35). Indeed, the flamboyant play of sexual seduction and engagement is not limited to the human species; it is in this sense that sexuality, for Bataille, is never reducible to a matter of pure utility.

Before turning to Bataille’s analysis of luxurious human extensions of energy resulting from varying pressures in the section ‘Extension Through Labor and Technology, and the Luxury of Man,’ we should pause on a distinction that absolutely fundamental to any consideration of consumptive energy. Luis Fernandez-Galiano’s Fire and Memory offers a particularly valuable approach to distinctions of consumptive energy and how they might be addressed empirically. Drawing on the work of the American biophysicist Alfred Lotka (1880-1949), Fernandez-Galiano makes a distinction between endosomatic (or endometabolic) consumptive energy, whose ratio of expression (i.e. energy ‘used’) to content (i.e. energy consumed) cannot exceed a ratio of 2:1, and exosomatic (or exometabolic) consumptive energy, whose ratio of expression to content within human societies

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96 For an excellent explanation of the distinction between sexual selection and species selection, as well as a compelling argument for why all animals are ‘affectively’ sexy, see Elizabeth Grosz, Chaos, Territory, Art: Deleuze and the Framing of the Earth (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), especially pp. 25-62.
reaches, on average, 300:1. Indeed, the human capacity for the use of energy 1000 or more times greater than that consumed metabolically, through “heating, transportation, food preparation, air conditioning, building and maintaining dwellings, and information dissemination” means that human activities facilitate the expenditure of energy with a far greater intensity, and with far greater consequences, than any activities pursued by other forms of life. The value of the distinction between these two forms of consumptive energy is that, first, it allows us to locate all forms of activity exceeding the endosomatic ratio as ‘cultural’ in that they are in excess of the required energy for species life (this would include the excessive sexual energies that exceed the metabolic ratio). Second, the distinction gives a forceful empirical meaning to the Bataille’s curse. While the first point is somewhat obvious, it nevertheless places in strong relief questions revolving around nature-nurture or nature-culture debates. The second point is of greater consequence for our present argument in that all exosomatic activity can be understood as a series of cultural practices which foster or inhibit forms of social organization through varying levels of acceptability. The relation between these two points is decisive: beyond any recourse to ‘natural’ narratives, exosomatic consumptive activity is both social and excessive; its purpose is outside of and well beyond any natural purpose or telos, and, thus, clearly at odds with any attempt to ground (as in the project of Critical philosophy) cultural practices within a natural continuum.

With these important distinctions regarding consumptive energy in mind, we return to Bataille, who reminds us that “human activity transforming the world augments the mass of living matter with supplementary apparatuses, composed of an immense quantity of inert matter, which considerably increases the resources of available energy” (AS1 36). Again, the curse is an especially human problem: “just as the herbivore relative to the plant, and the carnivore relative to the herbivore, is a luxury, man is the most suited of all living beings to consume intensely, sumptuously, the excess of energy offered up by the pressure of life to conflagrations befitting the solar origins of its movement” (AS1 37). Yet, despite

the human position of being ‘most fit,’ it is clear that the expenditure of this excess energy is again tied to questions of social organization, leading to either glory or catastrophe.

(4) THE PARADOX OF JUSTICE & FREEDOM

Catastrophe or glory; justice or freedom. Bataille admits that the antinomies he develops here are not the most obvious nor the most palatable: “This truth is paradoxical, to the extent of being exactly contrary to the usual perception” (AS1 37). But just how is it that Bataille can suggest that justice, the most lauded of human concepts (beyond even deconstruction), is a cipher for energetic-economic investments in conservation that are, in a perceptible form of social slow-motion, highly catastrophic?

Without having anything against justice, obviously, one may be allowed to point out that here the word conceals the profound truth of its contrary, which is precisely freedom. Under the mask of justice, it is true that general freedom takes on the lackluster and neutral appearance of existence subjected to the necessities: If anything, it is a narrowing of limits to what is most just; it is not a dangerous breaking-loose, a meaning that the word has lost. It is a guarantee against the risk of servitude, not a will to assume those risks without which there is no freedom (AS1 38).

The mask of justice: the neutralization of risk through the investment in necessity. This cutting indictment of social order demands that we face an all too often obscured intensive reality; namely, that the risk of servitude is not one that can be subsumed by probabilities or calculative tricks. It is a permanent and ineradicable risk. All political orders which promise a justice of necessity are, for Bataille, elaborated as the enemies of freedom. It is, of course, easy to play games of substitution with these two terms: the modern political party system seems to draw much of its strength from them. And, without question, the suffering resulting from these reductive political fallacies is real. Still, for Bataille, suffering, in this sense, is an especially political reality precisely because it helps constitute and, simultaneously, is constituted by, the forms of energetic restriction and conservation required by restricted economies. That is, “There can be anguish only from a personal, particular point of view that is radically opposed to the general point of view based on the exuberance of living matter as a whole. Anguish
is meaningless for someone who overflows with life, and for life as a whole, which is an overflowing by its very nature" (AS1 39). Accordingly, Bataille’s ‘solutions of general economy’ are stated as follows:

> what general economy defines first is the explosive character of this world, carried to the extreme degree of explosive tension in the present time. A curse obviously weighs on human life insofar as it does not have the strength to control a vertiginous movement. It must be stated that the lifting of such a curse depends on man and only on man. But it cannot be lifted if the movement from which it emanates does not appear clearly in consciousness (AS1 40-41).

What exactly Bataille means here by ‘consciousness’ is somewhat ambiguous; however, the considerations that might be a part of lifting the curse would seem to include, among other things: the consideration of how and by what criteria one “selects” or “restricts” the economy under examination; the consideration of the limits and values these sets of criteria imply; the consideration of scales of interaction and varying temporal relations among ‘economies’ and their various impacts, dependencies, and positive feedbacks; and, finally, the important consideration of attending to how the problem under examination is formed: that is, the formation of the problem within the field of predetermined restricted economies often eclipses potential solutions that one might unfold by beginning from a more general economic perspective. All of these considerations are decidedly social in terms of implication and consequence. We will now return to Smithson’s art practice and his marked antagonism with ‘the establishment’ to further investigate the annihilation of economic restriction and its attendant epistemological and Moral commitments.

(5) NO VALUES, NO EPISTEMOLOGY

It is not only politics but philosophy that Smithson admonishes in order to

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98 Notably, in his essay on Bataille, Jean-Luc Nancy re-evaluates these terms and suggests the fundamental tension of the curse is primarily between community and society: “Society was not built on the ruins of a community. It emerged from the disappearance or the conservation of something – tribes or empires – perhaps just as unrelated to what we call ‘community’ as what we call ‘society.’ So that community, far from being what society has crushed or lost, is what happens to us — question, waiting, event, imperative — in the wake of society”; see Jean-Luc Nancy, The Inoperative Community, edited by Peter Conor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), p. 11. This is because, “For Bataille, as for us all, a thinking of the subject thwarts a thinking of the community”; Nancy, p. 23. For a more complete elaboration of Nancy’s attempt to think the Mitsein of community against the subjective limitations of Dasein, see especially Jean-Luc Nancy, Being Singular Plural (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000).
distinguish his art practice: “I’m really not interested in philosophy. I’m interested completely in art” (RSCW 209). Similarly, in an essay titled “The Establishment” (1968), he explains his counter-political position: “The notion of an establishment seems to be a social fairytale, a deadly utopia or invisible system that inspires an almost mythical sense of dread – it is a ‘bad dream’ that somehow consumed the world. I shall postulate The Establishment as a state of mind – a deranged mind, that appear to be a mental City of Death” (RSCW 97). This state of mind has since become, in the last 40 years, a global apartheid that forms the planetary City of Death. Attempts to disrupt the advances of this city grow ever more absurd and isolated, as Smithson already understood: “Organizations seems to grow more and more crackpot with all their ‘activist’ demonstrations. Techniques of ‘social’ duplication make it impossible to get near anything that even slightly resembles ‘a government’ – it is the decomposition of decomposition” (RSCW 97-8). With a forceful resonance for the present and its intolerable horror, Smithson concludes, “The Establishment is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake” (RSCW 99).

Still, the Establishment in City of Death is all too asleep and comfortable in its global slumber to be disturbed by the realities and finitude of death. Smithson is equally provocative in ‘A Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects,’ 1968 (originally published in Artforum, September 1968), arguing that

Sadism is the end product of nature, when it is based on the biomorphic order of rational creation. The artist is fettered by this order, if he believes himself to be creative, and this allows for his servitude which is designed by the vile laws of Culture. Our culture has lost its sense of death, so it can kill both mentally and physically, thinking all the time that it is establishing the most creative order possible (RSCW 107).

While Smithson would not mention the work of Bataille explicitly until a year later, this passage suggests a clear familiarity with Bataille’s writings. Even without this assertion of familiarity, it is clear that for Smithson, the ‘biomorphic order of rational creation’ is operative solely as an enemy: servitude is here the subservience to the set of cultural practices that cannot but avoid the realities of death through an investment in Moral consumptive practices. And what, for Smithson, is the role of the artist in this milieu of the Establishment?

I’m just saying that that’s the way it is. Artists are not apolitical. And artists are either being used to support another kind of political value, and if
they're dumb enough to think they are on a cloud or something, that is supporting, actually supporting. In other words, that’s their opiate. Their purity is their opiate, the reward they get. While the external value structure is ripping them off, at the same time they are telling them how pure they are. I mean religion functioned that way, too (RSCW 265).

Smithson’s disgust with the ‘reward’ offered by artists’ purity is clear: like the Moral order sanctioned by religion, the artistic order which serves politics can only provides an illusory sense of value. Similarly, in the unpublished essay ‘A Refutation of Historical Humanism,’ Smithson asks, “Do we really need the petty histories that have been turned out by critics who can’t see past their own personal problems?” His response is unequivocal:

It is time for artists to turn away in disgust from all the excuses that self-opinionated criticism has promoted. What is needed is an art that refutes all the gratuitous rewards and values. No more puny experiences, humble pie, or aspirations to work or craft. No value at all! The wisdom of ‘blood, sweat and tears’ is just another indulgence, another submission to the fraud of self-expression by way of self-criticism. Misery means nothing. Recovery of value through misery is no solution. Action is the source of all misery, but how many people will accept that? Tragedy is a cheap trick, or at best the classical illusion. The artist must stop being a guilty scapegoat for a world full of slap-happy religious attitudes (RSCW 336).

He continues,

Art is not redeeming, it contains no self-evident value. Most statements by artists today are in the first person. Until these ‘I’-centred statements are abolished – artists will continue to be judged according to some critic’s personal notion of history. The artist should be an actor who refuses to act. His art should be empty and inert. Self-expression must be voided. Art should eliminate value, not add to it. ‘Value’ is just another word for ‘Humanism’ (RSCW 337).

Again, Smithson’s condemnation of the self-evidence of value is in keeping with Bataille’s philosophical project. In fact, his attack on the fallacies of humanist self-expression is amplified through his attack on the isolated ‘thing’ that is the art-object. In this sense we can see Smithson’s rejection of both subject-driven considerations and object-oriented approaches following an analogous logic to that of Bataille in the Theory of Religion: “The destruction of the subject as an

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99 Smithson here is influenced by a number of intellectuals challenging the humanism of the period, including Alain Robbe-Grillet, who Smithson quotes frequently in his own essays. See especially Alain Robbe-Grillet, For a New Novel, translated by Richard Howard (Freeport, New York: Books for Libraries Press), especially “Nature, Humanism, Tragedy,” pp. 49-76.
individual is in fact implied in the destruction of the object as such” (Theory of Religion, 104). The destruction of the isolated ‘thing’ as art-object is seen, for example, in the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden permanent collection catalogue, which includes the following description of Smithson’s Gyrostasis, 1968 [fig. 2.4]: “The title GYROSTASIS refers to a branch of physics that deals with rotating bodies, and their tendency to maintain their equilibrium. The work is a standing triangulated spiral. [...] One could consider it as a crystallized fragment of a gyroscopic rotation, or as an abstract three-dimensional map that points to the SPIRAL JETTY, 1970 in the Great Salt Lake, Utah. GYROSTASIS is relational, and should not be considered an isolated object” (RSCW 136; my emphasis). The relationality of Smithson’s artistic works is certainly far removed from more recent consideration of relational aesthetics; however, what should be emphasized about his remarks is the insistence on his attempt, prevalent in nearly all of his work during this period, to force the viewer of the artistic work to confront the broadest context of its articulation – the rotation of spherical mass, that is, a planetary context.

This need to confront the isolation of the object is again fundamental for Smithson in his piece “Cultural Confinement,” 1972, where he contends, “Museums, like asylums and jails, have wards and cells – in other words, neutral rooms called ‘galleries.’ A work of art when placed in a gallery loses all its charge, and becomes a portable object or surface disengaged from the outside world” (RSCW 154). This is because, for Smithson, “The museums and parks are graveyards above the ground – congealed memories of the past that act as a pretext for reality. This causes acute anxiety among artists, in so far as they challenge, compete, and fight for the spoiled ideals of lost situations” (RSCW 156). Yet, the lost situation is, for Smithson, also an indelible aspect of the creative process of making. Smithson’s Drawing of a detail of Gyrostasis, 1967 [fig. 2.3] suggests that this self-consuming inorganic form is extracted from “twelve tangential triangulated shapes in descending order” which are “selected to form the sculpture that represents an abstraction of cartographic procedures, and to create a network of isosceles triangles spiralling around an unidentified void that

100 Smithson wrote the description in 1970; it was published in the Hirshorn Museum and Sculpture Garden Catalogue, 1974.
might well represent an ‘entropic pole’” (RSS 97). The articulation of this logic by way of the sculptural work is the expression of its loss, and an iteration of its impossibility. A similarly entropic logic can also be identified in Smithson’s earlier and somewhat more playful collage, *Untitled (Hexagonal Center)*, 1963 [fig. 2.5], which utilizes the same hexagonal order that is operative in *Gyrostasis*. The center of this earlier iteration is reserved for a hexagonally-cropped section of the famous nude portrait of Gabrielle d'Estrees and the Duchesse de Villars. Thus, as we saw above with *Untitled (Venus with Reptiles)* [fig. 2.1], Smithson’s playful depiction of the nude, again through a comic reduction, returns the representation of physical bodies to an infinite inorganic line within which they are framed. Where *Gyrostasis* presents this inorganic entropic force more abstractly, the comic dimension of *Untitled (Hexagonal Centre)* suggests the laughable aspect of art historical considerations when placed against this entropic frame.

However, what is laughable here is not simply the laudatory considerations of aesthetic representation within the European history of the nude, but also the specifically epistemological element that has been tied to this painterly form of representation. If the privilege afforded to the art object is historically tied to its aesthetic value beyond utility, it is precisely the question of the recuperation of this aesthetic as a useful cultural object that is at stake in knowing it. That is, as Bataille asserts, “beyond any conditions for doing or making, knowledge finally appears as a deception in relation to the question that impels it” (*On Nietzsche* 47). Indeed, a similar admonishment of epistemology is operative in *The Accursed Share*: “We could not reach the final object of knowledge without the dissolution of knowledge, which aims to reduce its object to the condition of subordinated and managed things. The ultimate problem of knowledge is the same as that of consumption. No one can both know and not be destroyed; no one can both consume wealth and increase it” (AS 74). Yet, Bataille reminds us that, “ultimately it is not ruination, let alone death, it is joy that the pursuit of ruination attains in the festival. We draw near to the void, but not in order to fall into it. We want to be intoxicated with vertigo, and the image of the fall suffices for this” (AS2 109). The aesthetic can here be understood as the approach toward the nothingness of the object, toward it entropic force, not as a nihilistic pursuit of
destruction but instead as a means of intensifying the engagement with the ambiguous and undecided moment of aesthetic apprehension. Without the guarantee of necessity issued *a priori* in Kant’s formulation of aesthetic apprehension in Kant, Bataille can thus insist on the ecstatic revelry in vertiginous confusion as the realization of an aesthetic moment beyond recuperation: that is, without succumbing to a nihilistic line, Bataille suggests the explosive attraction of an aesthetics of expenditure.

Following from this notion of aesthetics, we can see how Bataille, especially in *The Accursed Share*, moves to annihilate the promissory denotations of both subject and object:

> We can keep this much in mind: that in the embrace the object of desire is always the totality of being, just as it is the object of religion or art, the totality in which we lose ourselves insofar as we take ourselves for a strictly separate entity (for the pure abstraction that the isolated individual is, or thinks he is). In a word, the object of desire is the *universe*, in the form of she who in the embrace is its mirror, where we ourselves are reflected. At the most intense moment of fusion, the pure blaze of light, like a sudden flash, illuminates the immense field of possibility, on which these lovers are subtilized, annihilated, submissive in their excitement to a rarefaction which they desired (AS2 116).

The desire for the object within an aesthetic comportment (that is, beyond any conceptual subsumption) cannot but annihilate the subject of desire as much as the object of desire. The true end is neither unification, nor progress, nor sublimation; it is nothing, disappearance, death. In the *Theory of Religion*, Bataille goes on to explain the problem of teleology and its attendant illusory promise of continuity: “What a ‘true end’ reintroduces is the continuous being, lost in the world like water is lost in water: or else, if it were a being distinct as a tool, its meaning would have to be sought on the plane of utility, of the tool; it would no longer be a ‘true end’”; therefore, “Only a world in which the beings are indiscriminately lost is superfluous, serves no purpose, has nothing to do, and means nothing: it only has a value in itself, not with a view to something else, this other thing for still another and so on” (*Theory of Religion* 29). A world that permits aesthetic apprehension, even when it is circumscribed with the most conservative of articulations, must therefore admit its superfluity. Thus, by annihilating the investment structure of Kant’s Moral reason, Bataille finds a line of escape that
avoids the prison of purpose and the apathy of nihilism: the tension between reason and experience exacerbates the ambiguity of value while insisting on experiential intensification through expenditure. Beyond the limitation of necessity: freedom; beyond the limitation of any politics of conservation: culture.

(With all this said, we are loathe to admit, even parenthetically, that Bataille’s emancipatory and thus quasi-religious ambitions are inexorable despite our best efforts to circumvent them. The following passage – one that is not without a particularly comical aspect made possible only in moments unrestrained hubris – will suffice: “Denis Hollier records that ‘whenever he was encouraged to talk about Bataille, [Michel] Leiris liked to describe a conversation in which [Bataille] had succumbed, in all seriousness, to calculating his own chances of being awarded the Nobel Prize: the peace prize (for La Part maudite), of course, not the prize for literature (for Madame Edwarda).” Admittedly, then, while our interest is keyed to the interrogative post-Critical aspects of the concept of expenditure, we acknowledge that Bataille’s own elaboration of the concept was certainly not developed as a gift beyond all reciprocity or recognition.)

(6) COLLABORATING WITH ENTROPY

By way of a conclusion, we will now turn our attention to Smithson’s collaborative ‘work’ with entropy. Against the ecological drive of the 1960s and 70s, Smithson developed a far more cynical view of ‘nature,’ not least because of his inclusion of geological time (i.e. the ‘inorganic’) within his conception of nature. While this engagement with ‘nature’ is discussed in greater detail in the following chapter, presently it is important to note that Smithson’s engagement with death, as an entropic material reality, helps provide his work with its varying referential form as well as its decisive force. In this context, we note that, in an interview from 1970, Smithson claims,

Scattering is vitalistic. It doesn’t confront the area of death, or swinging back and forth between life and death. Most people just overlook one for the other – either death-directed or life-directed. The life-directed thing upsets the balance. This is one of the problems of the ecological thing.

because they are doing more to unbalance – someone who gives up eating meat because he is afraid that eating it will cut down the life of the earth; but you have to eat, so that death depends on life and life depends on death. The view of the earth polluting itself out is a death fear (RSCW 239).

As life collaborates with death to feed the living, and death, therefore, similarly collaborates with life, Smithson attempts a collaboration with entropy. In an interview in 1971, Smithson suggests,

Geology has its own kind of entropy, that has to do with sediment mixtures. Sediment plays a part in my work. Unlike Buckminster Fuller, I’m interested in collaborating with entropy. Some day I would like to compile all the different entropies. All the classifications would lose their grids. Levi-Strauss has a good insight; he suggested we change the study of anthropology into ‘entropology.’ It would be a study that devotes itself to the process of disintegration in highly developed structures. After all, wreckage is often more interesting than structure. At least, not as depressing as Dymaxion domes. Utopian saviours we can do without (RSCW 257).

Thus, while structuralism maintains its fidelity to the object, and utopianism reiterates its faith in the subject, Smithson pursues a promiscuous collaboration with the destructive force of entropic collapse. Again, we must insist that this pursuit is not one of nihilistic reaction, but, as in Nietzsche, and as in Bataille, one that recognizes the erasure of value as the prerequisite to the articulation of another order, to an order that might be less intolerable than the present.

Returning to our point of departure at the beginning of this chapter, we remember that Smithson’s disgust with politics is located precisely in the articulation of the restricted field of political responses, all of which deny the broader context within which they are possible. Smithson’s disgust is a disgust with false choices. Like Smithson, Bataille loathes the promissory illusions of restricted economies and their attendant political orders. In the following chapters we will consider four complementary strategies shared by Bataille and Smithson which demonstrate how the thermogonal and geological commitments at stake in their respective philosophical and artistic works suggest the potential of glorious expenditures that might avert catastrophic conservation. This is taken up in the chapters that follow through various strategic operations of seriality, sedimentality, monumentality, and meandering. Each of these strategic approaches will be shown to foreground the tension between restricted and
general economies by way of both theoretical/conceptual and material/artistic expressions; and, all by way of an aesthetics of expenditure. To emphasize the consequence of the illusory depiction of closed (i.e. restricted) systems, we return to Smithson’s response to the political crisis in “Art and the Political Whirlpool or the Politics of Disgust” that opened this chapter, echoing his concluding appraisal:

Perhaps the moon landing was one of the most demoralizing events in recent history, in that the media revealed the planet Earth to be a limited closed system, not unlike the island in *Lord of the Flies*. As the Earth thickens with blood and waste, as the population increases, the stress factor could bring “the system” to total frenzy. Imagine a future where eroticism [erotism] and love are under so much pressure and savagery that they veer toward cannibalism. When politics is controlled by the military, with its billions of dollars, the result is a debased demonology, a social aberration that operates with the help of Beelzebub (the pig devil) between the regions of Mammon and Moloch (RSCW 135).
CHAPTER 3
SERIALITY

Actuality is when the lighthouse is dark between flashes: it is the instant between past and future: the gap at the poles of the revolving magnetic field, infinitesimally small but ultimately real. It is the interchronic pause when nothing is happening. It is the void between events.

— George Kubler

A day will come when, by means of similitude relayed indefinitely along the length of a series, the image itself, along with the name it bears, will lose its identity.

— Michel Foucault

(1) INTRODUCTION: CRYOSPHERIC

John Perreault’s essay “Union-Made: Report on a Phenomenon,” first published in Arts Magazine, in March, 1967, addresses the “new kind of art” which has gained “supremacy in the past year.”102 According to Perrault, “The event that most clearly brought this new Minimalist tendency into public focus – a style exemplified by the works of Judd, Morris, Forrest Myers, Tom Doyle, Sol Le Witt and many others – was the Jewish Museum’s ‘Primary Structures’ show of sculpture.”103 Notably, the 1966 ‘Primary Structures’ exhibition also included Smithson’s Cryosphere, 1966. While Smithson is named only a few times in Perrault’s review of minimalism, his early sculptural works are certainly a key to understanding both the development of and departure from minimalist sculpture (indeed, it is Smithson who is pictured with the 10 workers of the Arko Metal Products factory in the two page opening spread under the title ‘A Minimal Future?’).104

Before turning to examine more closely Smithson’s work included in the ‘Primary Structures’ exhibition, it is first important to understand Perrault’s reading of the so-called ‘minimalist impulse.’ In this analysis, Perrault contends:

103 Ibid.
"The materials involved (and the new industrial materials employed by the Minimalists represent a great breakthrough for sculpture, freeing it not only from the pedestal, the chisel and the casting procedure, but from the blow-torch as well) are completely subservient to the intent of the composition. The artist is once removed from the actual execution of the work, so that the automatism of the artist's hand does not interfere with the rationalism of the readymade or manufactured units involved. The composition or anti-composition itself is often mathematically derived, modular, or based on permutations of geometric elements. There is, therefore, an automatism of geometry and necessary efficiency rather than of materials or pre-rational expression."\(^\text{105}\) Far from the 'pre-rationality' of any abstract expressionism, and equally distant from the purification of the medium through its protracted interrogation (say, for example, in the Frank Stella paintings of this period), Perrault locates the minimalist impulse in alliance with non-artistic modes of fabrication. This mathematics of industrial fabrication allowed a repetition of the work that was previously unimagined and largely unexamined. It is in this sense that Perrault contends, "If the work is segmented (Smithson, Judd and others), the components are non-relational. They are usually exact repetitions or repetitions based on rather simple permutations, and are not related to each other in any traditional compositional, 'adjusted' way, but are related to the work as a whole".\(^\text{106}\) This question of how the "work as a whole" is conceived in Smithson's sculptural of the period begs the question: is there a phenomenological or Gestalt impulse behind the work? That is, despite its distance from both psychic-expressionistic and materially-expressive modalities of production, was Smithson's sculptural work simply an alternative way of staging the encounter between the viewer and the whole, and thus easily subsumed within a post-Kantian phenomenological reading well-adapted to sculptural work more closely allied with defenders of the Modernist tradition (Anthony Caro, for example, among many others)?

\(^{105}\) Ibid, p. 29.
The simple answer is, of course, that Smithson’s was a break with this object-oriented tradition and its aesthetic commitments from the earliest works of the 1960s to the last earthworks and reclamation proposals. Indeed, the anti-phenomenological impulse is evident early on in Smithson’s description of Cryosphere, 1966 [fig. 3.1], which invites the viewer to “Invent your eyes.” Published in the catalogue for ‘Primary Structures,’ it reads, in part:

BLOCK ENCODEMENT #1
010010010010010010 x 12 M = 72 (1) + 144 (0)
1. 010010010010010010 is the tentative sequence for the placement of the six solid hexagonal modules.
2. Each module has 12 mirror surfaces (12 M).
3. 6 modules are visible.
4. 12 modules are invisible.
5. 72 mirror surfaces are visible.
6. 144 mirror surfaces are invisible.
7. 66 2/3% of the entire work is invisible.
8. Invent your sight as you look. Allow you eyes to become an invention.
9. Color by Krylon Inc. [...] (RSCW 38).

The invention of the viewing subject as a constitutive element of the work indeed suggests a distance from the phenomenologically-driven commitments of other Minimalist artists. This is not least because the reductive move that would privilege the direct encounter with the object-work is naively committed to a pre-existing viewing subject of experience (i.e. a phenomenological subjectivity). Smithson’s Cryosphere does not suggest such an encounter; instead, he stages an abstract serialization that amplifies the tension between the abstract/cognitive and empirical/sensory components of subjectification. Reading the work thus unfolds a tension made possible by the denial of any ‘readymade’ spectator/viewer: this position is challenged by the division of the viewer’s relation to the work (empirical and abstract) that allows the tension of the piece of operate transversally (on the side of the constitutive viewing subject, or, not simply on the side of the object-work). In this sense, we agree emphatically with Hobbs when he writes: “Smithson was not, strictly speaking, a Minimalist. He used the vocabulary of Minimalism — clean geometric forms, industrially fabricated parts, the look of objectivity, and the appearance of rationality — as a means of undercutting simple-minded logic and as a way of pointing out the weaknesses of systems and networks” (RSS 13). He adds, addressing the crystalline image of the Cryosphere,
that “the energy is reduced to such a point that ice can be regarded as water’s entropic state. The idea of ice crystals and low temperatures is appropriate to the cool green sculptures in terms of both their color and their inertness. If Minimal art was considered cool at, then Smithson punned the hip term ‘cool’ by making sculpture that manifested a low-temperature crystalline form indicative of entropy” (RSS 65). Smithson’s crystalline and serial cool must therefore be distinguished from other minimalist works. While many scholarly studies blur the distinction between the Minimal and the serial, our investigation of the logic of the serial, unfolded in the remainder of this chapter, will attempt to situate seriality as a key moment both philosophically (that is, between structuralism and poststructuralism) and art-historically (that is, between Minimalism and post-Minimalist/Conceptual art).

One final note is necessary before turning our full attention to the serial: we will return, at the end of this chapter, to Bataille’s relation to seriality and its linguistic valences. Presently, it is important to signal that the notion of general economy, developed in Bataille’s writing, did indeed impact the generation directly following his own, and can indeed be seen to influence the work of Deleuze, Derrida, and Foucault. Yet, these three figures would take a much longer detour through the linguisticality of experience and subjectivity proffered by French structuralism which, on all accounts, remained distant from Bataille’s intellectual trajectory. Thus, while our investigation of Bataille’s relation to Smithson will loop around the question of the serial, it is in this chapter that we see the most divergent trajectory between the two figures. This divergence, however, enables them to arrive, despite the varying distances of their journey, at the terminal of language as heap, as we will see below.

(2) SERIAL TIME

Prior to our consideration of the poststructuralist turn, by way of the serial, we must begin with George Kubler’s The Shape of Time, originally published in 1962, as it clearly helps situate the serial dimension of Smithson’s work in the late 1960s. Smithson cites Kubler in several essays and interviews during this period, and, indeed, a close reading of Kubler’s The Shape of Time suggests it was
a key text influencing the serial logic developed in Smithson’s sculpture.\textsuperscript{107} Of particular interest is the second chapter, ‘The Classing of Things,’ wherein Kubler explicitly takes up questions of sequence and seriality. In the section ‘Serial Position, Age, and Change,’ Kubler outlines his “rules of series,” as follows:

Every succession may be stated in the following propositions: (1) in the course of an irreversible finite series the use of any position reduces the number of remaining positions; (2) each position in a series affords only a limited number of possibilities of action; (3) the choice of an action commits the corresponding position; (4) taking a position both defines and reduces the ranges of possibilities in the succeeding position. Stated differently: every new form limits the succeeding innovations in the same series.\textsuperscript{108}

Before turning our attention to Smithson’s sculpture as a material correlate to this strangely Borgesian science of the series, we will follow Kubler’s analysis through to his consideration of systematicity and duration. Kubler goes on to explain that, “Our procedure is rather to recognize the recurrence of a need in differing stages of its gratification, and the persistence of a problem throughout various efforts to solve it. Every need evokes a problem. The juncture of each need with successive solutions lead to the conception of a sequence” (ST 55). Noting how this conception of the series is more “labile” than those anchored in biological metaphors, Kubler moves on to a discussion of the ‘systematic age’:

We need here to study the nature of durations. To speak of sequences or series, that is, of specified needs and their successive stages of satisfaction, is to mark a variety of durations. No duration, however, can be discussed save in respect to its beginning, middle, and end, or to its early and late moments. In one duration, we are agreed that “late” cannot precede “early.” Hence we may speak of the systematic age of each item in a formal series according to its position in the duration (ST 55).

While Kubler then suggests that “[e]asily recognized properties mark the systemic age of any item, once we have identified its series” (ST 55), it is the subsequent development of the “idea of simultaneity” that is of the greatest consequence with respect to any consideration of time, and its expression as temporality. According

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\textsuperscript{107} For a developed and important discussion of George Kubler’s influence on Robert Smithson, see Pamela M. Lee’s \textit{Chronophobia: On Time in the Art of the 1960s} (Cambridge and London: MIT Press, 2006), pp. 218-257.
\end{flushleft}
to Kubler, “The idea of simultaneous existence of old and new series occurs at every historical moment save the first. At that totally imaginary moment, and only then, were all the efforts of men in the same systemic age. From the second instant of historical time, two kinds of behaviour have been possible. Ever since then, most actions are ritual repetitions and very few are unprecedented” (ST 56). If, for Kubler, the irreversibility of time is given to us through the repetitive actions of cultural (as history), the potential reversibility of series within which cultural is evaluated is of no less importance. Kubler’s concept of ‘actuality’ is here quite close to the Deleuzian theory of the ‘event’ (that is, despite his terminological inversion), as we will see in greater detail below. As we noted in the epigraph to this chapter, for Kubler, “Actuality is when the lighthouse is dark between flashes: it is the instant between past and future: the gap at the poles of the revolving magnetic field, infinitesimally small but ultimately real. It is the interchronic pause when nothing is happening. It is the void between events” (ST 57). That the interchronicity of the ‘in-between’ opens the gap for thought to bleed into its sensory apprehension – the very anxiety of non-conceptual aesthetic apprehension discussed by Kant in the third Critique – is, for Kubler, the instant of reality that is repeatedly given and lost in the play of seriality.

Smithson’s Alogen #2, 1966 [fig. 3.2] suggests one striking and complementary iteration of the serial as it plays out in his sculpture of the late 1960s. Hobbs explains that “The Alogons, which diminish in size from one vantage point, were intended to be a concrete section of the infinity of reflections that occur when an object is positioned between a pair of parallel mirrors” (RSS 20). Hobbs continues, “In 1966 Smithson designed three groups of stepped pieces that he names Alogen. In each of the works, he created a distinct contrapunctual mathematical system with the linear equation ordering each individual unit and the quadratic equation that the units manifest as a group. Individually the parts appear static, while the group looks dynamic because of the illusion of a sweeping arc” (RSS 66). As Smithson explains, “Ambiguities are admitted rather than rejected, contradictions are increased rather than decreased — the alogos undermines the logos” (RSCW 113). Here, the multiplication of contradiction occurs by way of the manifestation of the serial production: the divergence
between the linear and quadratic equations suggests an operative differential tension more than an idealized dialectic. Hobbs continues, “The Alogons, according to Smithson, are deliberately inert and static; they are testimonies to entropy because they absorb the viewer’s active vision and yield nothing in return except their own emptiness. He thought of them as diminishing mirror reflections made manifest. The sculptures, which appear to recede into a vanishing point, warp real gallery space and make it appear illusionistic. The Alogons, those ‘null structures and surfaces’ empty vision of meaning; the dully appear to the logical but in fact conflate logic, rendering it illogical and meaningless” (RSS 69). Again, the guarantee of aesthetic meaning and the Moral value it supports (in the Kantian sense) is rendered illogical through the conflation or overlapping of two divergent series: their logical order is undermined by the clear visual referent to multiple equations, neither of which is privileged in the piece.

Smithson further explains the Alogons in his conversation with Denis Wheeler, emphasizing that “The dialectic is established but the coordinates always tend to be incommensurable in an absurd situation – or go back to my early intuition, back to what is known as the Alogon. Alogon is something that suspends rationality, that’s indicated in some of the earlier pieces. There are three Alogon works, and that’s sort of the break with logic, the break with gestalt. In other words, you’re into this area of dedifferentiation that Ehrenzweig talks about where the gestalt becomes something else. The entropic aspect comes in” (RSCW 199). This break with any Gestalt wholeness, and the annihilation of logic by entropy together suggest the power of the serial as a force that betrays both phenomenological considerations of subjectivity and structuralist considerations of objective processes. Let us know examine in greater detail the philosophical articulation of the serial, before returning to a more detailed engagement with Smithson’s sculpture.

(3) ‘RECOGNIZING’ SERIALITY

Before emphasizing the movement of structuralism to poststructuralism in the philosophy of Gilles Deleuze, wherein the series is for poststructuralism what contradiction was for the project of dialectics, it is worth noting briefly the influence
of one of Deleuze’s contemporaries – Michel Foucault – on Smithson’s artistic practice. By 1971, Smithson would also show several signs of the influence of Foucault's philosophy on his writing, and, as we will see below, on this sculptural production. The brief essay ‘Art and Dialectics’ begins with an epigraph from *Madness and Civilization*: “Language is the first and last structure of madness” (RSCW 370). Following a short rhetorical staging of the theoretical argument he is about to deploy, Smithson goes to explain his theory of dialectics:

Dialectics is not only the ideational formula of thesis – antithesis – synthesis forever sealed in the mind, but an on-going development. Natural forces, like human nature, never fit into our ideas, philosophies, religions, etc. In the Marxian sense of dialectics, all thought is subject to nature. Nature is not subject to our systems. The old notion of “man conquering nature” has in effect boomeranged. As it turns out the object or thing or word “man” could be swept away like an isolated sea shell on a beach, then the ocean would make itself known. Dialectics could be viewed as the relationship between the sea and the ocean. Art critics and artists have for a long time considered the shell without the context of the ocean (RSCW 371).

This essay, written for a book which was finally not published, suggests a clear familiarity with Foucault’s work, already available in translation, *The Order of Things* having appeared in English in 1970. Despite Smithson’s poetic move to the question of art production and criticism, the passage echoes with a Foucauldian resonance: Foucault ends the *Order of Things* with the joyful adumbration: “...man would be erased, like a face drawn in the sand at the edge of the sea.”

If there is any doubt about the influence of this text on Smithson’s work, another essay written around 1971, “Art Through the Camera’s Eye,” makes Foucault’s presence even more explicit: “As it turns out, ecology is the latest notion of humanized nature, or what used to be called "naturalism." Confidence in "human nature" has gone sour, the unproblematic sense of being human in the midst of a naive anthropomorphic pantheism leaves mother nature wading through polluted rivers. But how human is a flood or a hurricane? Surely, they are just as menacing as machines used wrongly. Just when the Positivist thought he had made it, the Cartesian Spectre comes back to haunt us. Michel Foucault has gone so far as to say that "man" like "God" will disappear as an object of our

knowledge” (RSCW 375). Of course, as in the passage above, Smithson turns this reference to Foucault toward his own end: “Hopefully ‘objects’ themselves will disappear, ‘specific’ or otherwise. Abstraction like nature is in no way reassuring. Things-in-themselves are merely illusions” (RSCW 375).

It should be stressed again that this provocation of the viewer and this attempt to question the illusion of a unified perspective, cannot be subsumed within the phenomenological tradition that was a clear influence on the artistic works produced by many of Smithson’s contemporaries (especially those by Robert Morris and Donald Judd). Instead, Hobbs is correct to insist: “Smithson did not wish to put viewers in the role of phenomenological investigators; he was not attempting to establish a primacy of experience in which viewers are thrown back on themselves to decide if the austere shapes before them are merely objects or sculptures” (RSS 98). While we will limit our consideration of Smithson’s critical distancing from phenomenology until later in our discussion, it is indeed important to note presently that Foucault’s erasure of man is arguably due to his development of a serial logic unmistakable in both The Order of Things and The Archaeology of Knowledge. In the former text, Foucault unfolds the logics of grammar, biology and economy as series with singular histories, however mutually determined and refined, that have been mistakenly seen as a whole, that is, as the History of Man. Attending to these contingent histories both above and below the scale of Man, Foucault famously suggests that the disappearance of man provides a space (the space of the empty square, no doubt, as we will see below) for thought to again take place. With respect to the latter text, Foucault’s introduction to the Archaeology insists on the necessity of asking “questions of another type” which rely not on presumed totalities but instead develop a strategic serialism: “which strata should be isolated from others? What types of series should be established? What criteria of periodization should be adopted for each of them? What system of relations (hierarchy, dominance, stratification, univocal determination, circular causality) may be established between them? What series of series may be established?” (AK 4). The magisterial project of Foucault’s performative self-interrogation in the Archaeology is thus driven by a commitment to thinking through and augmenting the conception of seriality that
both produces and undermines the historical formation of knowledge.

Of course, it is well known that it was not Michel Foucault, but his contemporary and previous thesis student, Jacques Derrida, who, during his presentation to the 1966 Johns Hopkins colloquium on “The Language of Criticism and the Sciences of Man,” announced the “end of structuralism” with the suggestion that an “event” had occurred within the history of the structure. The presentation, “Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences,” published a year later in Writing and Difference, contends that “the entire history of the concept of structure, before the rupture of which we are speaking [the event], must be thought of as a series of substitutions of centre for centre, as a linked chain of determinations of the centre” (WD 279). This play of substitutions across the series is echoed in many of the other essays included in Writing and Difference in reference to a diverse range of figures and philosophical themes, and it is indeed operative in the two other books published by Derrida in 1967, Speech and Phenomena and Of Grammatology. While it is impossible to catalogue the development and operationalization of seriality in all these works, it will suffice presently to indicate that the serial is an evident, albeit underesteemed, strategy that subtends a large portion of Derrida’s early writing.

Turning now to Deleuze, the development of serialism is certainly evident in both of the major texts published in the late 1960s. The Logic of Sense (published in French in 1967) is, in fact, written as a development or movement through thirty-four “series,” each of which takes up an element of the relation among sensation, thought, and language. Difference and Repetition (published in French in 1968) also relies heavily on a serial progression. This is especially evident in Deleuze’s reading of Kant and the communication among the faculties. For Deleuze, “What is most important [...] is that – between sensibility and imagination, between imagination and memory, between memory and thought – when each disjointed faculty communicates to another the violence which carries it to its own limit, every time it is a free form of difference which awakens the faculty, and awakens it as the different within that difference” (DR 145). Further, as we have seen above, Deleuze argues,

The very principle of communication [among the faculties], even if this
should be violence, seems to maintain the form of a common sense. However, it is nothing of the sort. There is indeed a serial connection between the faculties and an order in that series. But neither the order nor the series implies any collaboration with regard to the form of a supposed same object or to a subjective unity in the nature of an ‘I think’. It is a forced and broken connection which traverses the fragments of a dissolved self as it does the borders of a fractured I (DR 145).

Therefore, following Kant, the transcendental operation of the faculties occurs in opposition “to their exercise under the rule of common sense. In consequence, the harmony between the faculties can appear only in the form of a discordant harmony, since each communicates to the other only the violence which confronts it with its own difference and its divergence from the others” (DR 146). Thus, Deleuze’s attempt to escape the philosophical problem of representation in Difference and Repetition depends on a serialization of the faculties which denies the universal attribution of any propriety or hierarchy to their relations.

This way out of the problem of representation is, for Deleuze, dialectical. This is because, as we saw in part in Chapter 1, for Deleuze the dialectic is a perversion of the differential: “Problems are always dialectical. This is why, whenever the dialectic ‘forgets’ its intimate relation with Ideas in the form of problems, whenever it is content to trace problems from propositions, it loses its true power and falls under the sway of the power of the negative, necessarily substituting for the ideal objectivity of the problematic a simple confrontation between opposing, contrary or contradictory, propositions. This long perversion begins with the dialectic itself, and attains its extreme form in Hegelianism” (DR 164). As Smithson also makes clear in the passage quoted above (from ‘Art and Dialectics’), the dialectical force of his artworks goes nowhere, and they are certainly beyond recuperation by any negativity. It is exactly by way of the logic of a markedly non-Hegelian (non-dialectical) dialectics that Deleuze offers the most decisive break with ‘dialectics,’ by demonstrating that contradiction is a mere illusory effect within a serialized field of differential relations.

Indeed, among all the complementary trajectories of the serial developed by Derrida, Foucault, and Deleuze at the end of the 1960s, the theoretical strategy of serialism, most relevant to our discussion of Smithson is most explicitly developed by Deleuze in an essay written in 1967, and published in 1973 as “A
quoi reconnait-on le structuralisme?” in the last volume of François Châtelet’s *Histoire de la Philosophie, Vol. 8: Le XXe siècle*. This text is perhaps the most ironic work that Deleuze produced. It develops his logic of the upward movement of ironic fidelity that subverts the law in the works of Marquis de Sade (against the downward movement of humorous subversion in Leopold von Sacher-Masoch) in an attempt to “recognize” structuralism. The text, written in an almost comic adherence to encyclopaedic conventions and structuralist principles of organization, offers seven criteria of recognition drawn primarily from the works of Claude Levi-Strauss, Jacques Lacan, Louis Althusser, and Michel Foucault (not Roland Barthes).

By emphasizing the ambivalence inherent in the order of the symbolic, Deleuze opens the possibility for his subsequent analysis of the positional and differential character of structural analysis, leading to his distinction between modes of differenciacion and differentiation. For Deleuze, these initial four criteria still fail to elucidate the “other half” of structuralism because the process of signification itself depends on a movement among structures of varying scales and spheres of influence. Therefore, the criteria of the serial must be included as a necessary element of structuralist theory because it functions as the operative logic of selection and delimitation of the primary series and its interactions with other (secondary) series. Yet, in the next criteria, that of the “empty square” or “object = x”, Deleuze explains that “we could only establish an order of linear causality from one structure to another by conferring on the object = x in each case the type of identity that it essentially repudiates” (HDW 188). That is, although the interstitial can be determined, it cannot be assigned within either series without undermining its operative character. Because the structure must imply several series (it must signify), the determination of the primary series (which is the primary signification (Signifier) and determines the signified of the other series) relies on an interstitial field of influence afforded by the ‘empty

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110 Charles Stivale notes, citing McMahon, that “perhaps Deleuze’s reluctance to reprint this essay during his life [it was eventually reprinted in Gilles Deleuze, *Desert Islands and other Texts, 1953-1974*, translated by Michael Taormina and edited by David Lapoujade (New York: Semiotext(e), 2002), pp. 170-192] or to see it appear in translation arose from a sense that the irony and monstrosity that he enjoyed producing were not sufficiently emphatic or evident in this reinterpretation of structuralism,” *The Two-Fold Thought of Gilles Deleuze*, p. 266.
square’ or the ‘object = x’ — that is, the interstitial moment or point of coincidence between series. For any series to intersect with another, they must share this interstitial moment of coincidence that cannot be said to properly belong to either of the series: its determination cannot be assigned. Thus, the ‘empty square’ creates an opening within the logic of the structure for the ‘structuralist hero’ to move from ‘subject to practice.’ We will endeavor to take up these criteria in greater detail, showing Deleuze’s logic of serialism as a movement through, if not the amor fati of, structuralism.

Deleuze begins with a simple series of questions that form the problem of his inquiry: “How do the structuralists go about recognizing a language in something, the language proper to a domain? What do they discover in this domain? We thus propose only to discern certain formal criteria of recognition, the simplest ones, by invoking in each case the example of cited authors, whatever the diversity of their works and projects” (HDW 171). We will examine the development of these criteria in turn to demonstrate how Deleuze unfolds the project of structuralism from the inside, injecting it with a necessary movement to force it beyond itself.

First Criterion: The Symbolic. For Deleuze, “The first criterion of structuralism [...] is the discovery and recognition of a third order [in addition to the imaginary and the real], a third reign: that of the symbolic” (HDW 171). The emergence of an order in addition to that of the real and the imaginary has a profound effect on the mobility of thought because it short circuits any immediate ideological claim that would objectively distinguish real conditions from imaginary claims of false consciousness. Therefore, “the first criterion consists of this: the positing of a symbolic order, irreducible to the orders of the real and the imaginary, and deeper than them” (HDW 173).

Second Criterion: Local or Positional. Given the discovery of this third order of the symbolic, Deleuze then asks: “What does the symbolic element of the structure consist of? [...] it cannot be defined either by preexisting realities to which it would refer and that it would designate, nor by the imaginary or conceptual contents that it would implicate, and which would give it signification” (HDW 173). That is, the symbolic complicates the logic of the signifier-signified
relation, oscillating between the two functions but never decisively claimed by either. “In short, places in a purely structural space are primary in relation to the things and real beings that come to occupy them, primary also in relation to the always somewhat imaginary roles and events that necessarily appear when they are occupied” (HDW 174). Thus, Deleuze suggests that for Althusser, subjects are actually ‘places,’ located in a “topological and structural space defined by relations of production” (HDW 174). Following from this criterion are several key consequences: “First of all, if the symbolic elements have no extrinsic designation nor intrinsic signification, but only a positional sense, it follows necessarily and by right that sense always results from the combination of elements that are not themselves signifying [...] sense is always a result, an effect: not merely an effect like a product, but an optical effect, a language effect, a positional effect.” Further, “The second consequence is structuralism’s inclination for certain games and certain kinds of theater, for certain play and theatrical spaces” (HDW 175).

**Third Criterion: The Differential and the Singular.** Deleuze then goes on to argue that symbolic relations, arranged according to a local or positional topology, can only be “established between elements that have no determined value themselves, and that nevertheless determine each other reciprocally in relation: thus $ydy + xdx = 0$, or $dy/dx = -x/y$” (HDW 176). Because these differential relationships determine the value of corresponding elements in the structure, the “process of a reciprocal determination is at the heart of a relationship that allows one to define the symbolic nature” (HDW 176). However, it is not only the differential relationships, but the distribution of singularities which characterize them, that is of consequence. That is, “The reciprocal determination of symbolic elements continues henceforth into the complete determination of singular points that constitute a space corresponding to these elements. The crucial notion of singularity, taken literally, seems to belong to all the domains in which there is structure” (HDW 177). It is for this reason that Deleuze can claim: “Every structure presents the following two aspects: a system of differential relations according to which the symbolic elements determine themselves reciprocally, and a system of singularities corresponding to these relations and tracing the space of the structure” (HDW 177).
Deleuze uses Althusser’s reading of Marx to illustrate his point:

the relations of production are determined there as differential relations that are established not between real men or concrete individuals, but between objects and agents which, first of all, have a symbolic value (object of production, instrument of production, labor force, immediate workers, immediate nonworkers, such as they are held in relations of property and appropriation). Each mode of production is thus characterized by singularities corresponding to the values of the relations. And if it is obvious that concrete men come to occupy the places and carry forth the elements of the structure, this happens by fulfilling the role that the structural place assigns to them (e.g., the “capitalist”), and by serving as supports for the structural relations (HDW 178).

It is clear from this example that Deleuze is attempting, however coyly, to follow the logic of structural Marxism to the letter, and is thus already pushing it beyond itself by interrogating every requirement it might take for granted.

Fourth Criterion: The Differenciator, Differenciation. This is perhaps the most difficult of the criteria Deleuze sets out to analyze because it anticipates the actual-virtual distinction that would become so fundamental for his later works. However, following only the ‘most obvious’ aspects of structuralism, Deleuze can already claim that, “Every structure is an infrastructure, a microstructure. In a certain way, they are not actual. What is actual is that in which the structure is incarnated or rather as what the structure constitutes in its incarnation” (HDW 178). Following Proust, Deleuze suggests that the virtual is “real without being actual, ideal without being abstract” (HDW 179). He clarifies that need for this distinction with tremendous precision: “What is it that coexists in the structure? All the elements, the relations, and relational values, all the singularities proper to the domain considered. Such a coexistence does not imply any confusion, nor any indetermination, for the relationships and differential elements coexist in a completely and perfectly determined whole. Except that this whole is not actualized as such. What is actualized, here and now, are particular relations, relational values, and distributions of singularities; others are actualized elsewhere and at other times” (HDW 179). This problematic element of actualization calls for a logical distinction between the structure as such and its field of influence (actualization) at any given historical moment: “We must
therefore distinguish between the total structure of a domain as an ensemble of virtual coexistence, and the substructures that correspond to diverse actualizations in the domain. Of the structure as virtuality, we must say that it is still undifferenctiated, even though it is totally and completely differentiated” (HDW 179). That is, while differenctiation occurs on the plane of the actual, differentiation occurs at the level of the virtual. Again, though with a more oblique reference to Althusser, Deleuze makes his point, “An economic structure never exists in a pure form, but is covered over by the juridical, political, and ideological relations in which it is incarnated. One can only read, find, retrieve the structures through these effects” (HDW 181).

Fifth Criterion: Serial. At this point, Deleuze will turn the screw irreversibly:

All of the preceding, however, still seems incapable of functioning, for we have only been able to define half of the structure. A structure only starts to move, and become animated, if we restore its other half. Indeed, the symbolic elements that we have previously defined, taken in their differential relations, are organized necessarily in a series. But so organized, they relate to other series, constituted by other symbolic elements and by other relations [...]. The question of knowing if the first series forms a basis and in which sense, if it is signifying, the others only being signified, is a complex question the nature of which we cannot yet assess. One must state simply that every structure is serial, multiserial, and would not function without this condition (HDW 182).

While Deleuze postpones the question of the determination of the primary series, his move here is nevertheless decisive. For any structure to have effects, it must effect something. That something is the heterogeneous but immanent series with which the structure, itself serial, interacts.

This is because the “determination of a structure occurs not only through a choice of basic symbolic elements and the differential relations into which they enter, nor merely through a distribution of the singular points that correspond to them. The determination also occurs through the constitution of a second series, at least, that maintains complex relations with the first” (HDW 183). Whether the first series is designated as kinship, process, class or the unconscious, we must ask: “what keeps the two series from simply reflecting one another, and henceforth identifying each of their terms one to one? [...] Indeed, the terms of each series are in themselves inseparable from the slippages [décalages] or
displacements that they undergo in relation to the terms of the other. [...] the displacement is properly structural or symbolic: it belongs essentially to the places in the space of the structure, and thus regulates all the imaginary disguises of being and objects that come secondarily to occupy these places” (HDW 183).

We should pause on this fifth criterion to note that Deleuze’s *Logic of Sense* develops a very similar argument regarding the role of the serial, particularly in the “Sixth Series on Serialization.” Here, Deleuze notes that “we are confronted with a synthesis of the heterogeneous; the serial form is necessarily realized in the simultaneity of at least two series.”111 That is, “Every unique series, whose homogeneous terms are distinguished only according to type or degree, necessarily subsumes under it two heterogeneous series, each one of which is constituted by terms of the same type or degree, although these terms differ in nature from those of the other series (they can of course differ also in degree)” (LS 36-7). It is for this reason that, for Deleuze, “The serial form is thus essentially multi-serial. This is indeed the case in mathematics, where a series constructed in the vicinity of a point is significant only in relation to another series, constructed around another point, and converging with, or diverging from, the first” (LS 37). Deleuze turns to literature, not mathematics, however, to demonstrate the logic of the serial, evinced in the works of Edgar Allan Poe (as read by Lacan), James Joyce, Alain Robbe-Grillet, Raymond Roussel, Pierre Klossowski, and Witold Gombrowicz. It is to set up this discussion that Deleuze asks, “Is this to say that the constitution of series is surrendered to the arbitrary?” (LS 37), responding, in part, with his claim that, “when we extend the serial method – in order to consider two series of events, two series of things, two series of propositions, or two series of expressions – homogeneity is only apparent: it is always the case that one series has the role of the signifier, and the other the role of the signified, even if these roles are interchanged as we change points of view” (LS 38). That is, the serial logic is neither arbitrary nor homogeneous in its capacity for designation, and this is precisely because “the terms of each series are in perpetual relative displacement in relation to those of the other” (LS 39).

However, what must be stressed in this respect is that “[t]his shift or displacement is not a disguise covering up or hiding the resemblances of series through the introduction of secondary variations in them. This relative displacement is, on the contrary, the primary variation without which neither series would open up onto the other” (LS 40). That is, as we will see with respect to the empty square in the sixth criterion below, the ambiguous relation between the series, by way of “an extremely mobile empty place” is not accidental, but essential to the anexact interaction among series.

*Sixth Criterion: The Empty Square [La case vide].* We are now in a position to determine the form of interaction characteristic of the series. Deleuze suggests, borrowing from Lacan, that the empty square, or object = x, is the objective point of tension between the series. Thus, he contends, “Such an [eminently symbolic] object is always present in the corresponding series, it traverses them and moves with them, it never ceases to circulate in them, and from one to the other, with an extraordinary agility. [...] The series in each case are constituted by symbolic terms and differential relations, but this object seems to be of another nature” (184). That is, “It is “eminently” symbolic, but precisely because it is immanent to the two series at once” (184). It is immanent to two series at once because, “Distributing the differences through the entire structure, making the differential relations vary with its displacements, the object = x constitutes the differenciating element of difference itself” (186). It is now possible for Deleuze to answer his own question regarding the determination of the primary series, first posited in the criterion of the serial: “we could only establish an order of linear causality from one structure to another by conferring on the object = x in each case the type of identity that it essentially repudiates” (188). This is not some structural aporia, however, since in “each structural order, certainly, the object = x is not at all something unknowable, something purely undetermined; it is perfectly determinable, including within its displacements and by the mode of displacement that characterizes it. It is simply not assignable: that is, it cannot be fixed to one place, nor identified with a genre or species” (188).

*Final Criterion: From Subject to Practice.* In titling this criterion the final, rather than the seventh, criterion Deleuze is already suggesting the movement
within structuralism beyond itself. In fact, with the paradox of the empty square, Deleuze seems to suggest that structuralism, by its own ambition, moves beyond itself to consider far more than the *structure*. This is because “Structuralism is not at all a form of thought that suppresses the subject, but one that breaks it up and distributes it systematically, that contests the identity of the subject, that dissipates it and makes it shift from place to place, an always nomad subject, made of individuations, but impersonal ones, or of singularities, but preindividual ones” (190). And, here, in the final criteria, he relates this move to Foucault: “This is why Foucault can say: “It is no longer possible to think in our day other than in the void left by man’s disappearance. For *this void does not create a deficiency; it does not constitute a lacuna that must be filled in. It is nothing more and nothing less than the unfolding of a space in which it is once more possible to think* ” (HDW 190).

Following from Foucault’s assessment, Deleuze suggests two “great accidents of the structure”: “Either the empty and mobile square is no longer accompanied by a nomad subject that accentuates its trajectory, and its emptiness becomes a veritable lack, a lacuna. Or just the opposite, it is filled, occupied by what accompanies it, and its mobility is lost in the effect of a sedentary or fixed plentitude” (HDW 190). That is, philosophy can lament the elements of agency and autonomy that are challenged by structuralism, or it can dogmatically rush to fill the void of this humanist agency with primary significations which foreclose the possibility of thought (i.e. Oedipus, again; fetishism, again). But these aspects of philosophy, and of thought, are not external to thinking:

This is why what we were earlier calling accidents does not at all happen to the structure from the outside. On the contrary, it is a matter of an “immanent” tendency, of ideal events that are part of the structure itself, and that symbolically affect its empty square or subject. We call them “accidents” in order to better emphasize not a contingent or exterior character, but this very special characteristic of the event interior to the structure insofar as the structure can never be reduced to a simple essence (HDW 191).

Thus, Deleuze posits the possibility of the “structuralist hero: neither God nor man, neither personal nor universal, it is without an identity, made of
nonpersonal individuations and preindividual singularities. It assures the breakup [l’éclatement] of a structure affected by excess or deficiency; it opposes its own ideal event to the ideal events we have just described. For a new structure not to pursue adventures that again are analogous to those of the old structure, not to cause fatal contradictions to be reborn, depends on the resistant and creative force of this hero, on its agility in following and safeguarding the displacements, on its power to cause relations to vary and to distribute singularities, always casting another throw of the dice” (HDW 191). The peculiarity of this statement, given the articles position as an encyclopedia entry on structuralism and philosophy, should not be forgotten. And, in a laudatory estimation of the structuralist project, now serialized to the point of its self-overcoming, Deleuze concludes, “For structuralism is not only inseparable from the works that it creates, but also from a practice in relation to the products it interprets. Whether this practice is therapeutic or political, it designates a point of permanent revolution, or of permanent transfer” (HDW 191).

Emerging from Deleuze’s fidelity to the structuralist project is perhaps his most monstrous child, produced not from the buggery of a single author, but instead from an orgy of blockages and slippages that form the base of an impossible structuralism. Deleuze advocates a serialization of structure as a means of overcoming the double-bind of positivism and determinism within the structuralist project. Deleuze is indeed too generous an apprentice to suggest that any structuralist could ever claim that there is only one series, and instead admits that the determination of the primary series on the secondary series with which it intersects must therefore rely on a necessary coincidence that is indeed determinable, but therefore also unassignable. Because the ‘object = x’ cannot be shown to belong properly or solely to one series — if it did, there would be no logic of determination and no need to explain the effects of signification — the determination of the primary series is neither conclusive nor exhaustive. Instead, any determinations among series necessarily initiate recombinatory multiplications as the fidelity to structuralist principles and primary significations gives way to promiscuous interactions on varying planes of signification.
From a teratological point of view, Deleuze’s ironic intervention in this text produces a mutation from within the structuralist project, making the “post-structuralist hero” less the monstrous Oedipal progeny of structuralism than a mirror image of a static position that requires the addition of movement to find itself, as one would gesture to a fun house mirror to recognize the distorted image as one’s own. Indeed, for Deleuze, finding oneself within the project of structuralism, that is, locating and selecting the objects of structuralist research, requires by necessity a positional movement among divergent series whose combinatory logic defies any primary chain of signification and, as a matter of course, any final determination of the signified. However monstrous an image for other practitioners of structuralism, Deleuze’s ironic question a quoi reconnait-on le structuralisme? initiates a positive evaluation of the philosophical commitments that subtend structuralist research by the very act of making them explicit. That is, by foregrounding the constituent forces and the aggregate of problems at play in its varying modes of intellectual engagement, Deleuze evaluates the potential of structuralism according to its own standards (criterion, from Gk. kriterion “means for judging, standard,” from krites “judge”).

One further point regarding Deleuze’s response to Kant is necessary before turning to Derrida’s reading. Deleuze’s Nietzsche and Philosophy, particularly in the section entitled ‘Critique,’ where Deleuze addresses Nietzsche’s ‘development’ of Critical philosophy, is of particular importance here because it further illustrates how Deleuze augments the Kantian principles of critique. As Deleuze argues, in the Critique of Practical Reason, Kant “seems to have confused the positivity of critique with a humble recognition of the rights of the criticised.” Moreover, “Kant merely pushed a very old conception of critique to the limit, a conception which saw critique as a force which should be brought to bear on all claims to knowledge and truth, but not on knowledge and truth themselves; a force which should be brought to bear on all claims to morality, but not on

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morality itself” (NP 89).\footnote{For an exemplary instance of Nietzsche’s view on this aspect of critique, see Friedrich Nietzsche, 
\textit{Writings from the Late Notebooks}, edited by Rudiger Bittner, translated by Kate Sturge, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003; see especially Notebook 34.} Deleuze concludes: “we learn here what we had known from the start, that the only object of Kant’s critique is justification, it begins by believing in what it criticises” (NP 90).

Of course, Deleuze recognizes that Kant’s project intended, or at least claimed to intend, a different course: “Kant’s genius, in the \textit{Critique of Pure Reason}, was to conceive of an immanent critique. Critique must not be a critique of reason by feeling, by experiencing or by any kind of external instance [...] Kant concludes that critique must be a critique \textit{of reason by reason itself}” (NP 91). However, Deleuze goes on to explain that

Kant does not realise his project of immanent critique. Transcendental philosophy discovers conditions which still remain external to the conditioned [Transcendent Subject as legislator]. Transcendental principles are principles of conditioning and not internal genesis. We require a genesis of reason itself, and also a genesis of understanding and its categories: what are the forces of reason and of the understanding? (NP 91).

As we saw above, the transcendental exercise of the faculties thus orders relations of thought among understanding and reason, legislating according to the idealized propriety of the faculties themselves. However, the ideality of what is proper to each faculty remains, burdening our thought with new thresholds of obedience disguised as reason: “When we stop obeying God, the State, our parents, reason appears and persuades us to continue being docile because it says to us: it is you who are giving the orders. Reason represents our slavery and our subjection as something superior which makes us reasonable beings” (NP 92).

Thus, from the point of view of consequences, “[t]he point of critique is not justification but a different way of feeling: another sensibility” (NP 94). Here Deleuze echoes Nietzsche’s own affirmation of this relation: “we have to \textit{learn to think differently} - in order, at last, perhaps very late on, to attain even more: to feel differently.”\footnote{Friedrich Nietzsche, \textit{Daybreak: Thoughts on the Prejudices of Morality}, edited by Maudemarie Clark and Brian Leiter, translated by R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), ~103, p. 60.} According to Deleuze, this ‘feeling differently’ is divorced as much from the truth claims made available within a religious or moral comportment as
it is from epistemology: “Morality is the continuation of religion by other means; knowledge is the continuation of morality and religion by other means” (NP 98). Again, as we already noted above, this passage emphasizes Nietzsche’s transition from an epistemological framework to an ontology of relations in a decisive refusal of any epistemic constrains on ethical life.

Thus, for Deleuze, Nietzsche’s ontological drive is a thought of and in life, a life, as Deleuze would later say of his own. In Nietzsche and Philosophy, he seems to lean toward a Spinozist reading of the indefinite article: “does not critique, understood as the critique of knowledge itself, express new forces capable of giving thought another sense? A thought that would go to the limit of what a life can do, a thought that would lead life to the limit of what it can do?” (NP 101). Or, as Deleuze says in Pure Immanence, Nietzsche’s concern with the unity of life and thought is that of a complex unity: “Modes of life inspire ways of thinking; modes of thinking create ways of living. Life activates thought, and thought in turn affirms life.”

Thus, thought carried beyond critique offers an affirmation of thinking life over knowledge, and therefore makes knowledge a residual effect of a more primary activity: learning.

It is through the transformative pedagogy of art that “appearance no longer means the negation of the real in this world but this kind of selection, correction, redoubling and affirmation” (NP 103), and a new image of thought becomes possible. Here Deleuze reminds us again of the dangerous assumptions of the dogmatic image of thought that has dominated the history of philosophy: thinkers both love and want the truth; thinkers are diverted from the truth by forces foreign to thought; and, all thinkers need to think well and truthfully is a proper method (i.e. a transcendent universal that grounds the transcendental activity of thought). However, Deleuze contends, “there is no truth that, before being a truth, is not the bringing into effect of a sense or the realisation of a value. Truth, as a concept, is entirely undermined. Everything depends on the value and sense of what we think. We always have the truths we deserve as a function of the sense of what we conceive, of the value of what we believe” (NP 104). It is for this reason that both Nietzsche and Deleuze will claim that all thinking is a process of selection and

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evaluation, indebted as much to forgetting as it is to memory. Again, this process is connected to the artistic practice of construction: “... our highest thoughts take falsehood into account; moreover, they never stop turning falsehood into a higher power, an affirmative and artistic power that is brought into effect, verified and becomes-true in the work of art” (NP 105). This is especially the case in the serial works produced by Smithson.

This protracted discussion of the serial is not meant solely as a philosophical engagement: instead, our aim is to locate the serial as a strategy that overcomes the limits of structural analysis in philosophy, as well as the limits of minimalist sculptural work in artistic practice. In this sense, our reading of the transition from structuralism and poststructuralism differs in emphasis from the reading Eleanor Kaufman develops in her essay “Lévi-Strauss, Deleuze, and the Joy of Abstraction.” Here Kaufman contends that “structuralism and poststructuralism might be distinguished by a difference of tone, or more precisely a different relation to the anxiety bound up with excessive attention to form. Though both are preoccupied with structure or form at the expense of human content – there is a strong continuity in the theory of the inhuman being developed – the structuralist desiring mechanism is still one that privileges a grounding in content, whereas the poststructuralist one is more at ease, if not joyful, in the abandonment of such claims.”¹¹⁶ After introducing a further point of distinction between the concrete and the abstract, Kaufman contends that “if anything could be said to distinguish it [poststructuralism] from structuralism, the ‘poststructuralist turn’ is centrally bound up with nonreciprocity, pure gift, desire that cannot be returned to simple use or need.”¹¹⁷ While much could be said regarding the allegedly C-A-C (concrete-abstract-concrete) logic of structuralism and its reversal to a A-C-A logic in poststructuralism, the main point of distinction to be addressed regarding our present work is that the serial logic in both Deleuze and Smithson permits a movement of permanent reversibility that denies privilege to either the abstract or the concrete. For Deleuze, the move from subject to practice requires an attention that is constantly provoked (i.e. permanent

¹¹⁷ Ibid, p. 452.
revolution/transfer) by the movement of the empty square, as discussed above, and is thus simultaneously virtual and actual; for Smithson, to whom we now turn our attention, a similar tension between abstraction and concrescence will be located in his serial sculptural works.

(4) PLUNGING, VANISHING & LEANING

The aesthetic apprehension of the art object, ambiguous and non-conceptual, is indeed antagonized by Smithson in his exhibition of Alogon #2 [fig. 3.2] and Plunge, 1967 [fig. 3.3] at the Dwan Gallery in 1966. While the viewing subject is typically entitled to occupy the empty cube of the gallery and thus determine the series (as the Signifier of aesthetic meaning), Smithson, by the juxtaposition of these two works, manages to force the viewer into the position of the empty square, uncertain of how to pursue or sustain the logic of illusionistic perspective within his divergent series of sculptural works. At once empirically-confusing and abstractly illusionistic, Smithson confronts the viewer with an impossible tension between the given concrete works and their abstract logic, where the former cannot explicate the latter, but the latter must be implied for the former to make sense. Far from implying any a priori necessity of meaning, Smithson’s sculpture and the aesthetic apprehension which they provoke is unresolved and necessitates nothing: we only find increasing obstruction in our search for a necessary and determinate meaning.

Like his Alogon #2, discussed above, Smithson’s Plunge already demonstrates an explicit logic of the serial through the repetition of a series of ten painted steel units arranged in a geometrical progression of diminishing scale. Hobbs has suggested that, “The dissolution of the commonly perceived space-time continuum suggests a breakdown in the three-dimensional scheme of things and points to a possible fourth dimension, for one must take the plunge into a different dimension in order to perceive the sculpture in its various manifolds” (RSS 72). However, the illogical provocations of the material illusions created by

118 For an alternative and compelling reading of the role of the serial, see Briony Fer, The Infinite Line: Re-making Art After Modernism (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2004); see especially pp. 27-46. For a reading of the serial contrasted with the progressive, particularly in relation to Smithson’s sculpture of this period, see Lawrence Alloway, “Robert’s Smithson’s Development,” Artforum 11, No. 3, (November 1972), p. 53
Alogon and Plunge were further emphasized by their placement during exhibition at the Dwan Gallery [fig. 3.4]: “Plunge was paired with Alogon #2. Although the pieces faced each other, they were positioned in reverse ascending and descending order. In this way Smithson played on the three-dimensional perspective that the pieces manifest. If one appears to recede into space, the other becomes larger. The artist thus hints at a game of perspective which he then upsets; he makes the gallery space illusionary and then he reaffirms its reality” (RSS 72). If, as we have argued above, the serial can be understood as the operative element that enables the turn to poststructuralist and postminimalist work in philosophy and artistic practice respectively, Smithson’s use of the serial can indeed be seen as provoking the abstract illusion of perspective as much as it affirms the concrete materiality of the work. In this sense, again, our interest in this dynamic is distinguished from Kaufman’s approach by our insistence that the abstract-concrete tension enabled by the serial remains, and must remain, unresolved.

If the exhibition strategy that brought together Alogon #2 [fig. 3.2] and Plunge [fig. 3.3] placed the viewer in an impossible three-dimensional perspective that confuses the viewing centre (as a judging subject), Smithson’s Pointless Vanishing Point, 1967 would further call into question what is at stake in this evidentiary positionality. Pointless Vanishing Point presents a section of an exploded three dimensional linear perspective. For Hobbs, “Pointless Vanishing Point represents a solidification of the orthogonals of traditional line ar perspective into the stair-stepped lines that terminate before converging. The sculpture presents a no longer useful concept of vision” (RSS 98). He continues, “According to Smithson, it deals with a schema that is no longer believable, an idea frozen time, just as his sculpture appears frozen or immobilized in space. In this sculpture, perspective is literalized, made concrete, and rendered useless” (RSS 98). In the eponymous and unpublished text authored by Smithson, he explains the logic of the piece as follows:

The binocular focus of our eyes converges on a single object and gives the illusion of oneness, so that we tend to forget the actual stereoscopic structure of our own two eyes or what I will call ‘enantiomorphic vision’ – that is seeing double. [...] My first physiological awareness of perspective
took place when I built the *Enantiomorphic Chambers*. In this work, the vanishing point is split, or the centre of convergence is excluded, and the two chambers face each other at oblique angles, which in turn causes a set of three reflections in each of the two obliquely placed mirrors. A symmetrical division into two equal parts is what makes it enantiomorphic; this division also exists in certain crystal structures (RSCW 359).

We will return to the evidentiary implication of *Enantiomorphic Chambers* in Chapter 5 below. Presently, two additional aspects of *Pointless Vanishing Point* must be emphasized: first, according to Hobbs, “Although sculptures such as *Pointless Vanishing Point* appear to be Minimalist works, they are actually involved with concepts far removed from Minimalism,” not least because of their departure from the ‘presencing’ of form at stake in the phenomenologically-driven works of Sol LeWitt and Robert Morris in the same period (RSS 98). Again, the role of the serial and its capacity to exacerbate the tension between the cognitive (conceptual) and the empirical/aesthetic (non-conceptual) is a key to the success of Smithson’s sculptural works as much as it is the decisive element distinguishing them from minimalist works. Second, and of perhaps greater importance, is Smithson’s confrontation in this work with the art historical force of linear perspective and its implications on the social and political order of Europe, and beyond. From Brunelleschi’s 15th century demonstrations of geometrical perspective would emerge an idealization of the cityscape as a form that ought to be ordered according to a rational logic grounded in the perspectival symmetry and geometrical perfection of perspective. From the French formal garden to Schinkel’s *Bildung*-oriented institutional architecture, we can find the influence of perspective as a linear and geometrical order imposed on the city. It is in this context that Smithson’s dismissal of perspective in *Pointless Vanishing Point* should be considered: far from achieving the ideality of harmonious geometrical order promised by perspective, the social order of the built (perspectival) environment is rendered pointless. That is, the achievement of order is undermined by an anarchic selection of the process, a section of meaning made three dimensional in a sculptural annihilation of the guarantee of meaning promised by perspectival geometicality and its various historical iterations.

*Pointless Vanishing Point* also shares a formal resemblance with the sculptural work *Leaning Strata*, 1968 [fig. 3.6], although the geological
implications of the latter develop an even more ambiguous relation to history. *Leaning Strata* is indeed one of Smithson’s most complicated sculptural pieces of the period in that the logic of its design (at the level of cognition) is all but impossible to discern despite the empirical force of the work as one determined by some form of geometrical logic. According to Hobbs, of the three existent drawings that anticipate the work, the second drawing “contains a circle roughly divided along its circumference into 35 sections. (Most likely the artist intended 36 divisions which would provide regular ten-degree intervals.) Radiating from the center of the circle are lines that extend beyond the circumference and terminate on a straight line running perpendicular to them” (RSS 103). This puzzling depiction of the work is “cleared up, however, in the third drawing which shows a profile view of *Leaning Strata*. The lower grid appears three-dimensional as orthogonals and transversals articulate a diagrammatic view of perspective. The circle appears to be a cartographic configuration [...]. Smithson here again conflates two systems for representing space – perspective and cartography – in an uneasy alliance. The sculpture is another ‘alogon,’ a physical manifestation of cognitive dissonance, in which illogicality results from two logical systems coming into conflict with one another” (RSS 103). Perhaps this coming together can be read as a productive disjunction, where two series intersect in the same figure that cannot be said to be proper to either system, and thus as a materialization of the object = x we have considered above. Indeed, as Hobbs suggests, “The title *Leaning Strata* suggests a geologic configuration, a syncline or anticline, perhaps even a portion of a fault” as “the murky terminus of overlapping, but nonaligned, spatial schemata” (RSS 103:4).

The leaning of *Leaning Strata* can also be productively juxtaposed with the leaning, or support, of the frame that centres the blocks of text in the Smithson’s magazine piece titled “Quasi-Infinities and the Waning of Space” [fig. 3.5]. The opening lines of Smithson’s puzzling essay already suggest, in 1966, the limitations of language: “Around four blocks of print I shall postulate four ultramundane margins that shall contain indeterminate information as well as reproduced reproductions” (RSCW 34). The text here leans on the margins as much as the margins lean back on the text, creating a spatialized and stratified
tension that relieves language of any idealized pretensions. According to Pamela M. Lee’s analysis in *Chronophobia*, “the four-page article is structured around four text columns, each graphically quarantined by a thick black border. Yet what is literally peripheral to these sections is by no means marginal to the work. The notes and images to the piece swirl dizzyingly around the language blocks, as if to offset their semantic authority. Vying for the attention of the reader, they dramatize the flipping between word and image that recurs throughout Smithson’s art.” Having established Smithson’s various serial-sculptural strategies that undermine the aesthetic apprehension of the object as necessitating an *a priori* indication of purpose, we will now develop our analysis in greater detail to explore how this serial tension is exacerbated with respect to language itself.

(5) A RUN THAT IS DOGGING

For the 15 issues published during 1929-1930, Bataille would edit the periodical *Documents*, including its idiosyncratic “Critical Dictionary,” with Michel Leiris, among others. Of particular interest regarding the question of language, metaphor and series, which appears somewhat adjacent to Bataille’s consistent emphasis on inassimilable materiality, is Leiris’s dictionary entry on “Metaphor.” The entry reads:

METAPHOR. – (From the Greek, a *transfer*) is a “figure by which the mind applies the name of one object to another, because of a shared characteristic that allows them to be set beside one another and compared.” (Darmesteter). Nevertheless, it is hard to know where metaphor begins and ends. An abstract word is formed by the sublimation of a concrete word. A concrete word, which designates an object only by one of its qualities, it itself hardly more than a metaphor, or at the very least a figurative expression. Moreover, to designate an object by an expression to which it corresponds, not figuratively but actually would necessitate knowing the very essence of that object, which is impossible, since we can know only phenomena, and not things in themselves.

Not only language, but the whole of intellectual life is based on a game of transpositions, of symbols, which can be described as metaphorical. On the other hand, knowledge always proceeds by comparison, which connects all known object to one another in relations of interdependency. Given any two among them, it is impossible to determine

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which is designated by the name proper to it and is not a metaphor of the
other, and vice versa. A man is a moving tree, just as much as a tree is a
man who has put down roots. In the same way, the sky is a rarefied earth,
the earth a denser sky. And if I see a dog running, it is just as much the run
that is dogging.

Even this article is metaphorical.120

Like the *smile without a cat* made popular by Lewis Carol, the *run that is dogging*
indicates that metaphorical relationality is, and can only be, the investment in a
share of likeness. This likeness, articulated across a longer chain of connectivity,
disconnection, and disjunction, is what allows the first apprehension of the series
to take place. But, its place, its capacity to hold a place in thought, is also the
metaphoric and associative amplification of the elements of the series themselves.
It is in this sense that the ‘object = x’ can be seen to become stratified and
multiplied into various layers of interacting and overlapping meaning, into a
geology of language, or, as Smithson would have it, *printed matter*. The limit of
seriality is thus the varying depth of its prerequisite sedimentality.

To summarize the distinction between Bataille’s evasion of the structural
dynamics of language and the poststructuralist movement through these very
dynamics, we should first admit that, as is well-known, the movement from
structuralism to poststructuralism, even when read according to the logic of
serialization, is heavily indebted to a linguistic analysis. This is indeed the case for
all three of the major philosophical figures associated with French
poststructuralist thought: 1) Derrida’s neologism “*difference*”, as both the
movement of temporal deferring and spatial differing (non-identity), which makes
it the very (transcendental) condition of possibility of real difference, is
fundamentally a confrontation with the ideality of transcendental illusions
operative in the structure of language itself; 2) Foucault’s argument for a *historical
a priori* (against Kantian transcendence) attends to historical conditions of
experience as constructions that necessarily govern both experience and social
order as they differ in and across historical time, with a focus on the statement
and its discursive operativity; 3) Deleuze’s ontological project, which locates the
ontological engine of difference within the complexity of the concept of repetition,
and thus outside the representational parameters of analogy, is developed

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through a serial strategy often entangled with linguistic considerations. In every case, the logic of serialized structure is multiplied beyond itself through a strategy of recombinatory analysis (trace, discourse, repetition) that undermines the presumed primacy of signification (the transcendent) by interstitially redistributing the operative logic of the structure within itself, or immanently within the series.

Bataille’s refusal to engage the with the illusionistic ideality of language is, by comparison, complete and uncompromising. The entire project of heterology and its emphasis on base materialism is thus understood as an obstacle not only to idealism, but to language itself as the recuperative function that allows thought to claim its sovereignty in the world of things. Thus, with reference again to Leiris, we agree that, for Bataille, “Both human and nonhuman, the elements involved overlap, less in terms of some general symbolism than through personal associations [...] and by way of a curious dialectic of Nature, reducing the universe to a cycle of terms each of which would be only a reverberation of another or its transposition onto another register; a world become a dictionary where the meaning of words fades away since all of them are defined by one another.”

There is no need to languish in the aporias of communicative deficiency, since, as Bataille asserts in the opening line of ‘The Solar Anus,’ “It is clear that the world is purely parodic, in other words, that each thing seen is the parody of another, or is the same thing in a deceptive form” (VE 5). Language moves over this parodic world of matter as its most adaptive element, that is, as vermin scurrying over a endless and undifferentiated heap of detritus.

(6) LANGUAGE: HEAP

One of Smithson’s most oft-quoted lines further establishes, with brevity and severity, the relation between language and materiality: “My sense of language is that it is matter and not ideas – i.e., ‘printed matter’ ” (RSCW 61). Bataille’s hesitation about language and its tendency toward idealization is echoed here as Smithson establishes an order of composition that denies the historical privilege of language. Far from the sign of an upright and conscious

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human agency, for Smithson, language, like the human, is only a falsely restricted economy of circulation that can never be freed from its materiality. In a similar vein, Smithson writes in “Entropy and the New Monuments” that, “Recently, there has been an attempt to formulate an analog between “communication theory” and the ideas of physics in terms of entropy. As A. J. Ayer has pointed out, not only do we communicate what is true, but also what is false. Often the false has a greater “reality” than the true. Therefore, it seems that all information, and that includes anything that is visible, has its entropic side. Falseness, as an ultimate, is inextricably a part of entropy, and this falseness is devoid of moral implications” (RSCW 18). Thus, not only is language a restricted ideality, but the entropic dynamic within language as a communicative process is itself an engine of meaning. While this meaning cannot rely on any overarching coherence or purposive telos, it is also freed from the Morality that such an end would necessitate.

This relation is perhaps nowhere more clearly seen in Smithson’s work than in his pencil drawing A Heap of Language, 1966 [fig. 3.7]. As Richard Sieburth has noted, given its appearance as drawing, but also as writing, it is, from the most basic formal classification of the piece, elusive. While this simple work threatens the geometrical support of the graph paper with a cursive, sloped pile of words, each one referencing language more or less directly (i.e. ‘phraseology, speech, tongue, lingo, vernacular ...’), it also suggests the geological process of stratification as an analogue to, if not precedent for, human language. Turning to additional writings and works, it seems that language, for Smithson, is indeed a form of material compression of meaning and value within the geological frame of stratification while, simultaneously, exhibiting formally similar and nearly isomorphic processual behaviours.

In ‘A Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects,’ 1968 (originally published in Artforum, September 1968), Smithson contends, “Words and rocks contain a language that follows a syntax of splits and ruptures. Look at any word long enough and you will see it open up into a series of faults, into a terrain of particles each containing its own void” (RSCW 107). Similarly, in an interview from 1969,
he suggests an operative logic with respect to the serial, stating, “An artist in a sense does not differentiate experience into objects. Everything is a field or maze, and you get that maze, serially, in the salt mine in that one goes from point to point. The seriality bifurcates: some paths go somewhere, some don’t. You just follow and what’s you’re left with is like a network or a series of points, and then these points can be built in conceptual structures” (RSCW 190). Further, in an interview from 1970, Smithson makes clear the distinction between the serial logic in his work and the goals of minimalism, claiming, “Minimal art – My work has always been an attempt to get away from the specific object. My objects are constantly moving into another area. There is no way of isolating them – they are fugitive. They are things, rather than definable presences. Working with non-illusionistic materials, like opaque materials, breaks down that whole idea of certainty which is in the ‘object.’ ” (RSCW 240). As we noted above, Smithson’s work does not stage an encounter with the object as a reductive event of phenomenological inquiry; instead, the thing-ness of the objects he produced is held in tension with the logics they suggest, at once suggesting and denying their purposive relation to the viewer who is, in part, constituted by this ambiguous tension.

Architecture, like language, suffers from an entropic insistence within Smithson’s work. In ‘A Museum of Language in the Vicinity of Art,’ 1968 Smithson suggests how the artistic might navigate such systems: “In the illusory babels of language, an artist might advance specifically to get lost, and to intoxicate himself in dizzying syntaxes, seeking odd intersections of meaning, strange corridors of history, unexpected echoes, unknown humours, or void of knowledge ... but this quest is risky, full of bottomless fictions and endless architectures and counter-architectures ... at the end, if there is an end, are perhaps only meaningless reverberations” (RSCW 78). That is, the artist is not troubled by a need to locate the purposive aspect of the work and instead attempts to foreground the impossibility of purpose through the creative construction of art works. This gives the artist, according to Smithson, an ability to elide the traps of purposive utility: “Like some of the other artists [Dan] Graham can ‘read’ the language of buildings. (‘Homes for America,’ Arts, December-January 1967.) The ‘block houses’ of the
post-war suburbs communicate their ‘dead’ land areas’ or ‘sites’ in the manner of linguistic permutation. [...] The reading of both buildings and grammars enables the artist to avoid out of date appeals to ‘function’ or ‘utilitarianism.’” (RSCW 82). That is, questions of purpose or value are forced to give way to the processes of evaluation and their ambiguous relations to construction, maintenance and dissemination.

The creative aspect of Smithson’s artistic practice is thus articulated in a discussion of the Air Terminal Site Project in the essay “A Thing is a Hole in a Thing it is Not” (1968). In this essay, Smithson explains, “I am not concerned here with the original ‘functions’ of such massive projects, but rather with what they suggest or evoke. It is important to mentally experience these projects as something distinctive and intelligible. By exacting from a site certain associations that have remained invisible within the old framework of rational language, by dealing directly with the appearance of what Roland Barthes calls ‘the simulacrum of the object,’ the aim is to reconstruct a new type of ‘building’ into a whole that engenders new meanings. From the linguistic point of view, one establishes rules of structure based on a change in the semantics of building” (RSCW 96). The change in semantics, to follow Smithson’s linguistic analogy, is one that again emphasizes the baseness over the ground, and entropic geological forces over their more noble and reified human ideals.

By way of a conclusion, we turn to Blanchot, who, quoting Levinas, admits, “Language is in itself already scepticism.”123 This assumption is shared by Bataille, and it should be emphasized that, for both Bataille and Blanchot, language itself must be developed as a force to clarify and locate ambiguity, but not, as in Derrida, in order to suggest the aporias of communicability. We will see how this localizable ambiguity is further taken up by Smithson and Bataille with respect to processes and practices of sedimentality in the following chapter. We conclude our present discussion of the serial noting how the escape from the ideality of purpose by way of serialization is always threatened by a return of meaning in the very articulation of loss. That is, we conclude with Blanchot, who warns,

Energy, as destruction of things or as removal from among things, destroys and removes itself. Let us acknowledge this. However, this loss, as the disappearance of things – the disappearance, indeed, of the order of things – seeks in its turn to get into line, either by reinvesting itself as another thing, or by letting itself be spoken. Thereby, thanks to this discourse that makes a theme of it, it becomes considerable, it fits back into the order and ‘consecrates’ itself. Only order gains from its loss.\textsuperscript{124}

\textsuperscript{124} Blanchot, \textit{The Writing of the Disaster}, p. 90.
CHAPTER 4
SEDIMENTALITY

I don’t think it really matters where you are. You will always be faced with limits of some kind. I think that actually it’s not so much expanding into infinity, it’s that you are really expanding in terms of a finite situation. I mean, there is no romantic urge towards the never-never land or something. I think that artists are now very conscious of strict limitations and they see them very clearly and can expand them in terms of other limitations. There’s no way you can really break down limitations; it’s a kind of fantasy that you might have, that things are unlimited, but I think there’s greater freedom if you realize that you have these limits to work against and actually, it’s more challenging that way.

– Smithson

(1) INTRODUCTION: EARTH ART

As early as the first “Earth Art” exhibition at Cornell University in February, 1969, the question regarding the relation between the artists and a somewhat naïve relation to nature would arise. In his introductory essay “Earth Systems” – included in the catalogue that was published following the exhibition – William C. Lipke stresses the failure of conservative critics such as Clement Greenberg, Michael Fried, and Sidney Tillim to grasp the complexity of operations within the new projects grouped under the term ‘earth art.’ Indeed, a few months prior to the Cornell exhibition, Tillim had published his critical review of recent earth works exhibited at the Dwan Gallery in New York in the article “Earthworks and the New Picturesque” (*Artforum*, December, 1968). According to Tillim, who at times in the article seems to be lost in his own reverie of Greenberg-inflected ‘high criticism’, suggests, “What I think is involved in earth art in particular and actual media art in general is a 20th century version of the picturesque. The picturesque was a theory of landscape that emerged in the last 18th and early 19th centuries, especially in England. As the word itself implies, the picturesque referred to landscape seen in an essentially pictorial way. Landscapes were judged for their pictorial beauties and the same effects in painting were highly praised. In other words it was a very important way of seeing nature and the setting was very
important.” 125 Tillim goes to include minimalism, which is “likewise dependent on setting,” in an increasingly aggressive polemic that has as its stakes “the future of modernism.” 126

Indeed, Tillim follows Greenberg and Fried in the dismissal of both minimalist sculpture and earth works, noting that “it is not an accident that almost every artist in the show [Dwan Gallery] exhibited “minimal” art in seasons past.” 127 He continues, “Less than sublime, yet seeking a surrogate for the ideal, it signalled, by virtue of its resultant sentimentality, the end of the ideals of high art. It substituted the sentimental for the nobility of feeling and developed the cult of nature as an antidote to the excessive sophistication of society.” 128 Finally, for Tillim, “As the early 20th-century form of the picturesque, Earthworks signify an analogous degree of overcultivation of the modernist idiom [...] And like Pop Art, it is effective only insofar as it confirms the stylistic attrition it seeks to reverse.” 129

Tillim concludes with several quotes from Greenberg and a plea for the decency of true modernism against the juvenile sentimentality of minimalism and earth art. Since the polemical posturing is obvious enough from these passages, the only reason Tillim is worth mentioning at all is the somewhat accidental accusations he levels at Smithson, thus providing an occasion to take up the question of the picturesque and its role in Smithson’s work which we will consider in terms of his ‘sedimental’ burial of sentimentality.

While we will avoid much of the Greenberg-Fried versus the artists (Judd, Morris, Smithson, etc.) debate that is by now quite well-worn in the scholarship, several points with respect to Tillim’s modernist aesthetic are worth noting: first, Smithson can hardly be seen to advance any interest in ‘surrogates’ for the ideal; indeed, as we saw clearly in the previous chapters, Smithson is beyond any romantic hope for the recuperation of a lost ideality. Second, as Lipke notes in his “EarthArt” catalogue essay, the accusations of sentimentality marshalled against the earth artists, especially Smithson, seem to completely miss the historical

126 Ibid.
127 Ibid.
128 Ibid.
129 Ibid.
consequences of the development of the picturesque. That is,

The picturesque as an eighteenth- and nineteenth-century modes of vision was, as Christopher Hussey noted, ‘the first step in the movement towards abstract aesthetic values.’ The ensuing aestheticism of the last quarter of the nineteenth century and its camouflaged appearance in the contemporary preference for formal analysis are precisely what Smithson and others intend to avoid.\(^{130}\)

Given the perverse trend of art criticism of the period to play out the stakes of ‘modernity’ \textit{per se} on every exhibition which took up any allegedly ‘theatrical’ trajectory, it is no wonder that Willoughby Sharp felt it necessary to group the earth artists together for the exhibition, despite the variety of differences in their work. For Sharp, “Despite the extremely disparate origins of earth art, several sculptural concerns are widely shared by earth artists, including a total absence of anthropomorphism and a pervasive conception of the natural order of reality. The conceptual bases of the works vary greatly, but visually they all tend to be unpretentious and relatively unobtrusive.” He continues, “This apparent lack of sophistication, however, is deceptive. The works are without physical support, without base, grounded in their environment either indoors or out. The result is an unframed experience with no one correct perspective or focus.”\(^{131}\) Sharp goes on to note that, “In art’s escape from object orientation, the new sculpture is trying to confront new issues, ones of vast scale, of open, unstructured space and non-materialistic attitudes. [...] Art can no longer be viewed primarily as a self-sufficient entity. The iconic content of the work has been eliminated, and art is gradually entering into a more significant relationship with the viewer and the component parts of his environment.”\(^{132}\) Sharp is indeed a major influence on the contemporary reception of earth art works, as well as a key figure in the exhibition of the works in the later 1960s. And, he is right to assert that a major element of the earth works was the artists varying attempts to destroy the self-sufficiency presumed by the art-object.


\(^{132}\) Sharp, “Notes Towards an Understanding of Earth Art,” p. 18.
This move toward the destruction of the art-object is evident in the symposium held at Cornell University, February 6, 1969, in concert with the Earth Art exhibition. However, Smithson stands apart from the other members of the panel (other artists included were Dennis Oppenheim, Neil Jenney, Günter Uecker, Hans Haacke, and Richard Long) as the most uncompromising with respect to the place, meaning, and value of ‘earth art.’ Noting that his initial foray into earth art came from his exposure to “all this material that I didn’t know anything about — like aerial photographs, maps, large-scale systems” during his tenure as a consultant with Tippetts-McCarthy-Stratton (Engineers and Architects) on their project for a Dallas-Fort Worth air terminal site, Smithson stresses that,

The preoccupation with the outdoors was very stimulating. Most of us used to work in a closed space. [...] I developed a method or a dialectic that involved what I call site and non-site. The site, in a sense, is the physical raw reality – the earth or the ground that we are really not aware of when we are in an interior room or studio or something like that – and so I decided I would set limits in terms of that dialogue (it’s a back and forth rhythm that goes between indoors and outdoors), and as a result I went and instead of putting something on the landscape I decided in would be interesting to transfer the land indoors, to the non-site, which is an abstract container. He adds that, “Most sculptors just think about the object, but for me there is no focus on one object so it is the back-and-forth thing.” In response to an audience question regarding how the viewer is meant to interact with the works, Smithson says, “Well in my case, the piece is there in the Museum, abstract, and it’s there to look at, but you are thrown off it. You are sort of spun out to the fringes of the site.” Later in the discussion, when a member from the audience asks, “Do you feel that working in an expanded areas and then having to work within a limited field, like a museum, is at all parallel to site and non-site?”, Smithson offers a prescient analysis of both systems and limits, responding (as we read in the epigraph to this chapter),

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133 See also, Smithson, “Towards the Development of an Air Terminal Site,” RSCW, pp. 52-60.
135 Ibid.
136 Earth Art, p. 61.
I don’t think it really matters where you are. You will always be faced with limits of some kind. I think that actually it’s not so much expanding into infinity, it’s that you are really expanding in terms of a finite situation. I mean, there is no romantic urge towards the never-never land or something. I think that artists are now very conscious of strict limitations and they see them very clearly and can expand them in terms of other limitations. There’s no way you can really break down limitations; it’s a kind of fantasy that you might have, that things are unlimited, but I think there’s greater freedom if you realize that you have these limits to work against and actually, it’s more challenging that way.¹³⁷

He then concludes, “It doesn’t really matter where you are. So in a sense, you are always expanding — the upper limits are always going out — like taking a larger and larger area or smaller and smaller area. It doesn’t really matter which way you go.”¹³⁸ Smithson makes a similar claim in his 1970 discussion with Michael Heizer, Dennis Oppenheim, published in the first issue of *Avalanche* magazine edited by Willoughby Sharp and Liza Bear: “I don’t think you’re freer artistically in the desert that you are inside a room” (RSCW 245). Does this seeming negation of the conditions of production not serve to further alienate the artist by suggesting that the limits are in fact the conditions of real production? While it would be easy to dismiss Smithson’s remarks as intentionally ‘ignorant’ of the social-historical conditions within which artists attempt to create their works, it seems perhaps more consequential to note the potential for creativity suggested by his claims. That is, does the artist not always face a set of limitations – formal, material, historical, political, etc. – which, by their relentless and ubiquitous presence, demand a consideration of the ways out, the lines of flight from the strata of limitation, unfolded by the artist? Were we to insist on these conditions, would not every artist faced with the same set of limitations be read as a reactive, and thus simply predictably responding to a prescriptive set of conditions? Thus, by emphasizing the significance of the limit, of the sum of all the limitations faced by the artist, Smithson provokes a more decisive consideration: how, and not why, does the artist find his or her way out of the aporias of meaning and the limitations of artistic creativity?

¹³⁷ *Earth Art*, p. 65.
¹³⁸ *Earth Art*, p. 65.
Returning to the Cornell symposium, as the discussion comes to a close, Smithson replies to a question regarding the commercial value of earth art by indicating the significance of the artist’s ‘process’ time, and leads into the following evaluation of different times in correspondence:

The reflection might be the mind, or the mirror might be the matter. But you always have these two things. They form a dual ‘unity and to say that one is better than the other is to go around like a squirrel in a cage. [...] so that dialectic can be thought of that way: as a bipolar rhythm between mind and matter. You can’t say it’s all earth and you can’t say it’s all concept. It’s both. Everything is two things that converge. This range of convergence is really the great area of speculation, and I think artists are getting a firm grip on this. I mean, they’ve been relegated to the garret for some time now, and it’s just that they know what material is, and they know what the degree of abstraction is, and the two somehow blend, and I think that this starts a fruitful dialogue, something that can be very open ended.  

Here we see how Smithson is again quite careful in his articulation of the dialectic: far from any idealized subsumption of contradiction, Smithson’s dialectic is driven by the differential relations among impossible convergences: mind and matter. It is clear that this turn to the differential inclusion of ‘bipolar’ contradiction and ambiguity is, for Smithson, an exciting potential for practices of art making. There is a also certain serial resonance in his remarks, as well as a very significant emphasis on the valuable tensions that might be provoked aesthetically through the staged confrontations between mental and material commitments. We will now turn our analysis to considerations of how the serial unfolds toward a logic of sedimentality that attempts to escape the sentimentality of linguistic models and their aesthetic counterparts.

(2) FROM SERIES TO SEDIMENT

As we saw at the end of the previous chapter, the serial and its linguistic preoccupations must, for Smithson, be returned to their materiality (i.e. as ‘printed matter’) and are thus rendered as a heap. From this angle, language is a highly variable and extremely viscous idealization of matter. From the point of view of human history, the attenuation of history into a scale geological time is

139 Earth Art, pp. 69-70.
simultaneously a compression of man, a reduction in his capacities, his knowledge, and, as we will see in the next chapter, his monumentality. How is this transition from human historical scales and their attendant Moral commitments to the scale of geological time articulated materially in Smithson’s work?

As we have already seen in Chapter 2, Smithson’s Glass Stratum, 1967 [fig. 2.2] offers an especially striking depiction of the false simplicity or transparency of historical stratification. Even in an perfectly ordered, linear progression, the clarity or transparency of the work is undermined by the stacking of the glass; history, even when distributed with an even and careful layering, remains opaque and denies any simply evidentiary reading. Sedimentation denies the simplicity of any obvious human sentiments. Thus, against the accusations of a sentimental deployment of picturesque affections, we see how Smithson’s sedimentality undermines Modernist art historical sentiments and is allied more closely with Bataille’s conception of nature as a cascading force chance beyond the restricted and illusory economies of human agency and intention.

On this point, Smithson’s Nonsite (Cayuga Salt Mine Project), 1969 [fig. 4.1] offers an especially provocative material confirmation. For Hobbs, “Among all the Sites/Nonsites conceived in 1968, the Cayuga Salt Mine Project is by far the most grandiose in conception and the most elaborate in its execution. It was first begun in October 1968 when Smithson visited Ithaca, New York, in anticipation of the ‘Earth Art’ exhibition” (RSS 132). The ‘Earth Art’ catalogue entry for the piece reads: “After examining geological maps of the Ithaca area, Smithson selected the Cayuga Rock Salt Company mine as the site for his piece. He took mirrors down into the mine, one-half mile below the earth’s surface, and photographed them in the tunnels and among piles of rock salt. More than a ton of material was then transported to the gallery and exhibited in variously shaped piles with mirrors to be the interior section of the piece (“non-site”). On the walls were displayed geological maps of the area; photographs of mirrors in the mine (“site”); and photographs of mirrors along the route from the mine to the Museum (“mirror trails”).” In his analysis, Hobbs goes on to note a series of changes that occurred from the initial plan of the work to its final execution. In the exhibited

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version, he explains, “When he set up this Site/Nonsite, Smithson decided not only to establish a dialectic between mine and gallery but also to elaborate a scheme with a subset that formed a reversed and criss-crossed version of the first dialectic” (RSS 132). Hobbs then makes the significance of this Site/Nonsite work especially clear in the following description, which is worth quoting at length,

The Sub-Site was above ground at the neighbouring Cayuga Crushed Rock Company’s quarry and the Sub-Nonsite was placed in the basement of the White Museum and consisted of a two-foot-square mirror supported by fossilized rocks from the Sub-Site. Connecting the Site and Sub-Site to the gallery was a Mirror Trail consisting of eight mirrors placed at evenly spaced points that the artist designated on a U.S. Geological Survey map. The artist titled the path with mock formality, “A Mirror Trail with Mirror Displacements from the White Art Museum to the Cayuga Salt Works,” thus linking the Site with the Nonsite. The gallery piece differed significantly from other Nonsites: here the bin/rock relationship is reversed so that the rock salt serves as the container for the mirrors. The artist was playing in this piece with differences between appearances and reality: salt appears amorphous but has a regular molecular structure while the glass looks regular but is actually amorphous (RSS 132).141

Here we see how Smithson stages a complex material confrontation by multiplying the differential relations across multiple scales. This shift creates a successful tension between the sensory apprehension of materials – namely, salt and glass – and the reality of their molecular structure, which is not given by evidentiary judgment. Sediment is, indeed, rarely what it seems. This disjunction between the sensuous ‘seeming’ of processes of sedimentation and the cognitive apprehension of their morphological dynamics leads directly to the concept of an ‘abstract geology.’

(3) ABSTRACT GEOLOGY

The concept of an ‘abstract geology’ is developed in both Smithson’s artistic work and his writing during the late 1960s. In ‘A Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects,’ (originally published in Artforum, September 1968), Smithson’s contends,

One’s mind and the earth are in a constant state of erosion, mental rivers

141 For additional comments on the work, see ‘Fragments of a Conversation,’ in RSCW, especially pp. 189-190.
wear away abstract banks, brain waves undermine cliffs of thought, ideas decompose into stones of unknowing, and conceptual crystallizations break apart into deposits of gritty reason. Vast moving faculties occur in this geological miasma, and they move in the most physical way. This movement seems motionless, yet it crushes the landscape of logic under glacial reveries (RSCW 100).

The cognitive processes are not, in this description, metaphorically connected to the material geological tendencies; while the limits of language may force some concession on this point, Smithson’s emphasis is meant to suggest the contiguous and not the comparative relation between mind and matter. Further, after discussing his affections for construction equipment, Smithson suggests, “With such equipment construction takes on the look of destruction; perhaps that’s why certain architects hate bulldozers and steam shovels. They seem to turn the terrain into unfinished cities of organized wreckage” (RSCW 101). For Smithson, “The actual disruption of the earth’s crust is at times very compelling, and seems to confirm Heraclitus’s Fragment 124, ‘The most beautiful world is like a heap of rubble tossed down in confusion.’ ” (RSCW 102). This position seems to beg to question of abstraction; that is, how might the rubble of confusion return us to some strangely intensified concept of beauty.

Later in the same essay Smithson again refuses any metaphorical referent, stating, “The strata of the Earth is a jumbled museum. Embedded in the sediment is a text that contains limits and boundaries which evade the rational order, and social structures which confine art. In order to read the rocks we must become conscious of geologic time, and of the layers of prehistoric material that is entombed in the Earth’s crust. When one scans the ruined sites of pre-history one sees a heap of wrecked maps that upsets our present art historical limits” (RSCW 110). In order to escape the confines of the restricted economy of art history, Smithson thus suggests reading another form of text, that of the geological sedimentation that is culture. As Bataille warns, “Sentences will be confined to museums if the emptiness in writing persists.”

142 While we have already noted our reservations about Derrida’s essay on Bataille (in relation to his emphasis on Hegel and neglect of Kant), his observation regarding the impossible in ‘From Restricted to General Economy,’ is of particular interest here, not least because it

reiterates the problems of emptiness and language. Derrida writes, “the _impossible_ meditated by Bataille will always have this form: how, after having exhausted the discourse of philosophy, can one inscribe in the lexicon and syntax of a language, our language, which was also the language of philosophy, that which nevertheless exceeds the oppositions of concepts governed by this communal logic? Necessary and impossible, this excess had to fold discourse into strange shapes.” If the museum is the space where the shapes of culture are confined to a particular, historical, and socially-conservative articulation, Smithson’s Nonsites will attempt to break this space open and bend the excess of discourse, the materiality that exceeds it, into strange shapes indeed.

In fact, Smithson is highly critical of the containment of art works with the boundaries of criticism. Writing with particular force against the critic Michael Fried, Smithson elaborates this point as follows:

Most critics cannot endure the suspension of _boundaries_ between what Ehrenzweig calls the ‘self and the non-self.’ They are apt to dismiss Malevich’s _Non-Objective World_ as poetic debris, or only refer to the ‘abyss’ as a rational metaphor ‘within narrow bounds.’ […] The bins or containers of my _Non-Sites_ gather in the fragments that are experienced in the physical abyss of raw matter. The tools of technology become a part of the Earth’s geology as they sink back into their original state. Machines like dinosaurs must return to dust or rust. One might say a ‘de-architecturing’ takes place before the artist sets his limits outside the studio or the room (RSCW 103-4).

This practice of ‘de-architecturing’ is not merely an iteration of artistic freedom against the imagined confines of the museum; instead, it is a confrontation with the artists’ own confrontation with the presumed dynamics of making and the space of production. In this sense, it is also an archaeological practice which examines and selections the foundational elements upon which these architectures of confinement, both in terms of real space and imagined potential, rest.

These practices are given further exposition in ‘What is a Museum?’ (1967) – a 1967 dialogue between the American performance artist Allan Kaprow and Smithson. Here we find further evidence of the break with art historical commitments and a turn toward geological abstraction as a ‘de-architecturing’ of

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the space of artistic production. Smithson comments,

The categorizing of art into painting, architecture and sculpture seems to be one of the most unfortunate things that took place. Now all these categories are splintering into more and more categories, and it’s like an interminable avalanche of categories. You have about forty different kinds of formalism and about a hundred different kinds of expressionism. The museums are being driven into a kind paralyzed position, and I don’t think they want to accept it, so they’ve made a myth out of action; they’ve made a myth out of excitement; and there’s even a lot of talk about interesting spaces. They’re creating exciting spaces and things like that. I never saw an exciting space. I don’t know what a space is like. Yet, I like the uselessness of the museum (RSCW 48-9).

For Smithson, “the uselessness of the museum” is related to its redundancy or obsolescence within the larger framework of American culture; the need to invent new varieties of art and attendant art historical categories only signals the slow death of the institution. In this sense, the refusal to attribute any specific determinations of ‘space’ in general is then substituted for a coy support of the institution as an irrelevant site. Again, not only is the museum ‘de-architected’ as a laudatory cultural milieu, but it is also located as the vanguard: entropic, useless, paralyzed, and thus, instead of being read as an obstacle, it is selected as a site within which, and against which, Smithson’s own amplification of this condition can resonate as an abstract geology.

(4) THE NEO-PICTURESQUE

Having situated Smithson’s interest in an abstract geology of sedimentation that would deny any simple restricted art historical continuities above, we now return to Tillim’s accusation that Smithson was a ‘neo-picturesque’ artist. To examine Smithson’s relation to the picturesque, we will analyse his discussions of early landscape architects, including Uvedale Price, William Gilpin, and Frederick Law Olmsted. In ‘A Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects,’ Smithson suggests, “The gardens of history are being replaced by the sites of time” (RSCW 105). This is precisely a moral question, with a particular inflection of technological humanism: “While steel is valued over rust is a technological value, not an artistic one” (RSCW 106). Smithson continues,

Oxidation, hydration, carbonization, and solution (the major processes of
Rock and mineral disintegration) are four methods that could be turned toward the making of art. The smelting process that goes into the making of steel and other alloys separates ‘impurities’ from an original ore, and extracts metal in order to make a more ‘ideal’ product. Burnt-out ore or slag-like rust is as basic and primary as the material smelted from it. Technological ideology has no sense of time other that its immediate ‘supply and demand,’ and its laboratories function as blinders to the rest of the world. Like the refined ‘paints’ of the studio, the refined ‘metals’ of the laboratory exist within an ‘ideal system.’ Such enclosed ‘pure’ systems make it impossible to perceive any other kinds of processes than the ones of differentiated technology (RSCW 106).

The ideality of technology is a fundamental component of any confrontation with the Moral commitments of the project of Critical philosophy. In this sense, as Smithson suggests, the prized commodity stainless steel can be understood as an especially Moral construct within an especially restricted economy. By its name alone, morality is already present: purity, durability, progress. The clean line of the International Style and its stainless steel I-beam construction versus the stained, polluted spaces of the vernacular. But, it is not only at the scale of the building, but also within the cognitive and cosmological registers that this technological determinism plays out. And, it is precisely Smithson’s turn to an abstract geology that reinscribes picturesque commitments within a broader geological time that calls our attention to these conception and cosmic relations.

Turning to Smithson’s important adumbration of the work of Landscape Architecture Frederick Law Olmsted (originally published under the title ‘Frederick Law Olmsted and the Dialectic Landscape,’ in Artforum, February 1973), which we will examine in detail, we notice immediately how Smithson stages a confrontation between the order of the park and the forces of contingency which constantly threaten its program. The text opens with an epigraph from Frederick Law Olmsted’s The Spoils of the Park: “The landscape-architect André formerly in charge of the suburban plantations of Paris, was walking with me through the Buttes-Chaumont Park, of which he was the designer; when I said of a certain passage of it, ‘That, to my mind, is the best piece of artificial planting of its age, I have ever seen.’ He smiled and said, ‘Shall I confess it is the result of neglect?’ ” (RSCW 157). The juxtaposition between this comic epigraph and the adjacent barren image of Central Park in 1885 immediately suggests a strange tension that Smithson will amplify with the imperative of his opening lines:
Imagine yourself in Central Park one million years ago. You would be standing on a vast ice sheet, a 4,000-mile glacial wall, as much as 2,000 feet thick. Alone on the vast glacier, you would not sense its slow, crushing, scraping, ripping movement as it advanced south, leaving great masses of rock debris in its wake. Under the frozen depths, where the carousel now stands, you would not notice the effect on the bedrock as the glacier dragged itself alone (RSCW 157).

On a long enough time line, we find ourselves captivated by the speculative, and no less spectacular, image of our own extinction. If Smithson can be read within the logic of a neo-picturesque production, it is one much more closely aligned with the geologically-driven planning and social pedagogy of Frederick Law Olmsted than with the scenic botanical planting of his English predecessors.

In fact, as the opening speculative exercise in the essay suggests, Smithson is especially interested in the curious fact that “Back in the 1850s, Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux considered that glacial aftermath along its geological profiles” (RSCW 158). The turn, in American landscape architecture, to and emphasis on geological elements within park design was developed as a practice of ‘editing’ the geological profiles to emphasize and accentuate their geological form. This is certainly an element about Olmsted which is of tremendous interest for Smithson; however, according to Hobbs, it is also important to note that Smithson’s work tended equally toward banal sites wherein Smithson attempted to reduce the potential for sublime effects on the viewer:

He was also intrigued with the picturesque’s emphasis on contrast and transition. The picturesque landscape is a dialectical landscape. In Partially Buried Woodshed (Kent, Ohio, January 1970) Smithson created a picturesque situation when he ordered loads of dirt piled on a rustic vacated woodshed until the building started to give way. [...] In light of this piece it is interesting to consider that aging rural thatched cottages situated at the end of curving lanes frequently characterize the picturesque, while the awesomeness of an already ruined cathedral is used to illustrate the sublime. Although he tended to romanticize the prosaic and cultivate the ordinary, Smithson deliberately minimized potentialities for the sublime in his art. He chose unfrequented places like the Pine Barrens and Bayonne’s Line of Wreckage in New Jersey, because they are commonly considered unspectacular (RSS 29).  

Yet, with this cautionary remark from Hobbs in mind (indeed, this tension

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144 On this point, see also RSCW 172.
between the banality of industrial sites and their relation to geological time will resurface in the chapters that follow), we note that Smithson is emphatic about the radicalism of Olmsted’s vision, writing that Olmsted wanted “the asymmetrical landscapes of Uvedale Price in the middle of urban flux. [...] This is like having an orchid garden in a steel mill, or a factory where palm trees would be lit by the fire of blast furnaces” (RSCW 158). For Smithson, “In comparison to Thoreau’s mental contrasts (‘Walden Pond became a small ocean’), Olmsted’s physical contrasts brought a Jeffersonian rural reality into the metropolis. Olmsted made ponds, he didn’t just conceptualize about them” (RSCW 158-9). The emphasis on making, while certainly somewhat rhetorically driven, is key: Thoreau’s metaphorical retreat to the ideality of an imagined nature will not suffice. Like Olmsted, Smithson is driven by a commitment to elaborate the difficult disjunctions created by the urban and the ‘natural’ (i.e. geological). For Smithson, the aspect of contradiction and ambiguity is precisely what makes Olmsted such a revolutionary landscape architect. Smithson then locates Olmsted’s historical trajectory in the work of earlier 18th century landscape designers, particularly Uvedale Price and William Gilpin. According to Smithson,

Price extended Edmund Burke’s *Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (1757) to a point that tried to free landscaping from the ‘picture’ gardens of Italy into a more physical sense of the temporal landscape. A tree, for example, struck by lightning was something other than merely beautiful or sublime – it was ‘picturesque.’ This word in its own way has been struck by lightening over the centuries. Words, like trees, can be suddenly deformed or wrecked, but such deformation or wreckage cannot be dismissed by timid academics. Price seems to have accepted a side of nature that the ‘formalists’ of his times would rather have excluded (RSCW 159).

With respect of Gilpin, Smithson quotes a passage from his *Observations Relative to Picturesque Beauty* (1789): “A piece of Palladian architecture may be elegant to the last degree, but if we introduce it in a picture it immediately becomes a formal object and ceases to please” (RSCW 159). Thus, Smithson can claim, “Inherent in the theories of Price and Gilpin, and in Olmsted’s response to them, are the beginnings of a dialectic of the landscape” (RSCW 159). However, this dialectic is positioned against any idealistic appropriation – the sublime is a long way from sublimation, in that: “Burke’s notion of ‘beautiful’ and ‘sublime’ functions as a
thesis of smoothness, gentle curves, a delicacy of nature, and as an antithesis of terror, solitude, and vastness of nature, both of which are rooted in the real world rather than in a Hegelian Ideal” (RSCW 159). The footnote to this line is emphatic: “Hegelian dialectics exist only for the mind,” a claim which is followed by an argument against Thoreau’s similarly suspicious idealism. Thus, for Smithson, “Price and Gilpin provide a synthesis with their formulation of the ‘picturesque,’ which is on close examination related to chance and change in the material order of nature. The contradictions of the ‘picturesque’ depart from a static formalist view of nature” (RSCW 159-60). Smithson then takes on the commitments of the broader philosophical tradition with a certain awkward clarity:

The picturesque, far from being an inner movement of the mind, is based on real land; it precedes the mind in its material external existence. We cannot take a one-sided view of the landscape within this dialectic. A park can no longer be seen as ‘a thing-in-itself,’ but rather as a process of ongoing relationships existing in a physical region – the park becomes a ‘thing-for-us.’ As a result we are not hurled into the spiritualism of Thoreauian transcendentalism, or its present day offspring of ‘modernist formalism’ rooted in Kant, Hegel, and Fichte. Price, Gilpin, and Olmsted are forerunners of a dialectical materialism applied to the physical landscape. Dialectics of this type are a way of seeing things in a manifold of relations, not as isolated objects. Nature for the dialectician is indifferent to any formal ideal (RSCW 160).

He continues, “This does not mean one is helpless before nature, but rather that nature’s conditions are unexpected, like Price’s hill torn by the flood. In another sense Olmsted’s parks exist before they are finished, which means in fact they are never finished; they remain carriers of the unexpected and of contradiction on all levels of human activity, be it social, political, or natural” (RSCW 100). Here the aesthetic work of the park is opened up to a temporal reading that again defies any reification within the art historical logic of the discreet ‘thing’ or art-object. For Smithson,

Any discussion concerning nature and art is bound to be shot through with moral implications. […] Abstraction is a representation of nature devoid of ‘realism’ based on mental or conceptual reduction. There is no escaping nature through abstract representation; abstraction brings one closer to physical structures within nature itself. But this does not mean a renewed confidence in nature, it simply means that abstraction is no cause for faith. Abstraction can only be valid if it accepts nature’s dialectic (RSCW 162).
Again, this dialectic is one of differential force and not recuperative speculation. With these remarks in mind, we turn to Smithson’s absolute refusal of any ‘surrogate for the ideal’ by way of a turn to nature.

Discussing a column in the *New York Times*, Smithson “discovers what might be called an Ecological Oedipus Complex” where “[p]enetration of ‘Mother Earth’ becomes a projection of the incest taboo onto nature” (RSCW 163). Smithson is arguing against the projection of an Oedipus Complex onto ‘earth works artists’ which, as he sees it, is “born out of a wishy-washy transcendentism” (RSCW 163). Against the spiritualism of nature that Smithson loves to loath, he suggests that artists must face the contradictions of working with and against nature at the same time. Returning to his discussion of Central Park, Smithson makes the aspect of de-naturalizing nature emphatic:

Looking on the nature of the park, or its history and our perception of it, we are first presented with an endless maze of relations and interconnections, in which nothing remains what or where it is, as a-thing-itself, but the whole park changes like day and night, in and out, dark and light – a carefully designed clump of bushes can also be a mugger’s hideout. The reason the potential dialectic inherent in the picturesque broke down was because natural processes were viewed in isolation as so many classifications, detached from physical interconnection, and finally replaced by mental representations of a finished absolute ideal. [...] Central Park is a ground work of necessity and chance, a range of contrasting viewpoints that are forever fluctuating, yet solidly based in the earth (RSCW 165).

We should pay close attention to Smithson’s claim that the Park is “a ground work”: is this not a suggestion that the work of the Park is itself rooted, or grounded? But, in what is it grounded? Because it is grounded, for Smithson, in the long time line of geological, Olmsted’s design “in the earth” does not create a static site. That is, grounding is here a work of subjecting and amplifying the dynamics of time and their expression as temporality, and not, as is so often the case within philosophical discourses regarding foundation, the reverse.

Following a discussion of the potential for mining sites to be reclaimed as components of earth art works, Smithson concludes his homage to Olmsted as follows: “A consciousness of mud and the realms of sedimentation is necessary in order to understand the landscape as it exists. The magnitude of geological change is still with us, just as it was millions of years ago. Olmsted, a great artist
who contended with such magnitudes, sets an example which throws a whole new light on the nature of American art" (RSCW 171). Here both the scale of Olmsted’s work as well as the geological ‘consciousness’ it implies suggest the artistic value of a more direct and decided confrontation with processes of sedimentation. In the following section we will explore how Smithson stages this confrontation with geological sedimentation alongside an interrogation of cultural sedimentality through the dynamic of the Site/Nonsite works.

(5) THE SEDIMENTALITY OF SITE & NONSITE

Smithson’s Nonsite (Essen Soil and Mirrors), 1969 [fig. 4.2] makes this tension especially clear: exhibited as part of a group show in Düsseldorf, Germany, at the Städtische Kunsthalle, the work was a Nonsite “composed of mirrors ‘planted’ in red Essen soil” as a “variation on the theme of displacement” (RSS 172). According to Mark Linder,

The Nonsites (all produced in 1968) are Smithson’s most elegant and complex reconfigured of reconfigured formalism. Each Nonsite ‘represents’ an actual site in a ‘backwater’ or ‘fringe’ area and consists in three parts: documents (maps, photographs, descriptive text) of the site; mineral samples (sand, rock, slag) from the site; and a fabricated compartmentalized bin that ‘contains’ the samples and functions as an index of their position on the site.146

Linder further explains the constructive process, writing, “First, Smithson selected and actual site, based on his own recollections and supplemented by geographical and geological research; he then traveled to the site, gathered the samples, and placed them in the bin. Finally, the documents, the samples, and the bin were

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145 Nancy offers what might be considered a complementary articulation of this point as follows: “these singular beings are themselves constituted by sharing, they are distributed and placed, or rather spaced, by the sharing that makes them others: other for one another, and other, infinitely other for the Subject of their fusion, which is engulfed in the sharing, in the ecstasy of the sharing: ‘communicating’ by not ‘communing.’ These ‘places of communication’ are no longer places of fusion, even though in them one passes from one to the other; they are defined and exposed by their dislocation. Thus, the communication of sharing would be this very dis-location”; see Nancy, The Inoperative Community, 25.

installed in an otherwise empty gallery on both the wall and the floor.”[147] We should add to this description that Smithson also designed and commissioned the containers, which vary in shape, size, colour and arrangement for each of the Nonsites produced during 1968.

In his essay ‘Towards the Development of an Air Terminal Site,’ 1967 Smithson explains, “‘Site Selection Study’ in terms of art is just the beginning. The investigation of specific site is a matter of extracting concepts out of existing sense-data through direction perceptions. Perception is prior to conception, when it comes to site selection or definition. One does not impose, but rather exposes the site – be it interior or exterior. Interiors may be treated as exteriors or vice versa. The unknown areas of sites can best be explored by artists” (RSCW 60). The distinction between imposes and exposes here develops the picturesque practice of ‘editing’ the site as a means to draw out the inherent potentials of a given space, across a variety of scales, within minimal imposition. He further explains the process of site selection in ‘Fragments of a Conversation,’ 1969, suggesting that,

I’m interested in making a point in a designated area. That’s the focal point. You then have a dialectic between the point and the edge: within a single focus, a kind of Pascalian calculus between the edge and the middle or the fringe and the centre operating within a designated area. And usually when you focus on it with a camera, it becomes a rectangle. The randomness to me is always very precise, a kind of zeroing in. But there is a random element: the choice is never abolished (RSCW 188).

As we have seen, Smithson is simultaneously committed to operations of chance and precision, whereby the dynamic between these two elements can be used to develop and articulate the work itself.

In his essay ‘Aerial Art,’ 1969, Smithson continues his consideration of the area of operation available through a navigation between chance and precision. Noting the relation between art and architecture, he explains,

Art today is no longer an architectural afterthought, or an object to attach to a building after it is finished, but rather a total engagement with the building process from the ground up and from the sky down. The old landscape of naturalism and realism is being replaced by the new

[147] Ibid.
landscape of abstraction and artifice. [...] The future air terminal exists both in terms of mind and thing. It suggests the infinite in a finite way. The straight lines of landing fields and runways bring into existence a perception of ‘perspective’ that evades all our conceptions of nature (RSCW 116).

Smithson’s theory of the Nonsite is given further clarification in his essay ‘A Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects,’ (originally published in *Artforum*, September 1968). In this piece, he explains,

...if it is art it must have limits. How can one contain this ‘oceanic’ site? I have developed the Non-Site, which in a physical way contains the disruption of the site. The container itself is in a sense a fragment of itself, something that could be called a three-dimensional map. Without appeal to ‘gestalts’ or ‘anti-form,’ it actually exists as a fragment of a greater fragmentation. It is a three-dimensional *perspective* that has broken away from the whole, while containing the lack of its own containment. There are mysteries in this vestiges, no traces of an end or a beginning (RSCW 111).

Through the careful construction of multiple displacements, Smithson upsets the viewer’s reliance on traditional formal modes of aesthetic apprehension, freeing the sensory and the cognitive dynamics of viewing from their hierarchical ordering and forcing them into new encounters.

In his conversations with Denis Wheeler, Smithson suggests that his interest in the Nonsites developed from his work on the Air Terminal site, noting that: “It was highly artificial and purely mental, and sort of spun out into convergences that couldn’t converge, and polarities that never quite met but were in correspondence with each other, the enantiomorphic idea, the mirror images, the whole thing. All these different kinds of degrees of abstraction became a kind of wreck of precision, it went out on tangents; these kinds of spiraling progressions that I did” (RSCW 212). Similarly, in discussion with Michael Heizer and Dennis Oppenheim, when he is asked, “What exactly is your concept of a non-site?”, Smithson responds,

There’s a central focus point which is the non-site; the site is the unfocused fringe where your mind loses its boundaries and a sense of the oceanic pervades, as it were. I like the idea of quiet catastrophes taking place... The interesting thing about the site it that, unlike the non-site, it throws you out to the fringes. In other words, there’s nothing to grasp onto except the cinders and there’s no way of focusing on a particular place [...] The site is a place where a piece should be but isn’t. The piece should be there is now somewhere else, usually in a room. Actually everything that’s of any
importance takes place outside the room. But the room reminds us of the limitations of our condition (RSCW 249-50).

In this sense, the room or the gallery offers a cognitive reminder that conditions the sensual or aesthetic apprehension of the art-object. For Smithson, the point is not to lament this limit or demand its inclusion of other forms of social organization or other types of objects, but, instead, to use it. That is, the Site/Nonsite construction begs the question: by what logic, and by what presumptions, do we restrict our aesthetic sense to the gallery space? The play of expectations that these questions undermine are fundamental in creating a tension between apprehension and loss, between focus and ambiguity.

Smithson’s explanation of the dialectic of Site/Nonsite is stated most explicitly in a footnote to the ‘The Spiral Jetty’ essay. In the first part of the note, Smithson offers two columns describing the differences between Site and Nonsite:

Dialectics of Site and Nonsite

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Site</th>
<th>Nonsite</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Open Limits</td>
<td>Closed Limits</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. A Series of Points</td>
<td>An Array of Matter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Outer Coordinates</td>
<td>Inner Coordinates</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Subtraction</td>
<td>Addition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Indeterminate</td>
<td>Determinate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Scattered</td>
<td>Contained</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Reflection</td>
<td>Mirror</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Edge</td>
<td>Centre</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Some Place</td>
<td>No Place</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(physical)</td>
<td>(abstract)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Many</td>
<td>One</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(RSCW 153).</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Following the duality suggested by these two columns, Smithson adds an additional corrective explanation under the heading ‘Range of Convergence’:

The range of convergence between Site and Nonsite consists of a course of hazards, a double path made up of signs, photographs, and maps that belong to both sides of the dialectic at once. Both sides are present and absent at the same time. The land or ground from the Site is place in the art (Nonsite) rather than the art placed on the ground. The Nonsite is a container within another container – the room. The plot or yard outside is yet another container. Two-dimensional and three-dimensional things trade places with each other in the range of convergence. Large scale becomes small. Small scale becomes large. A point on a map expands to the size of
the land mass. A land mass contracts into a point. Is the Site a reflection of the Nonsite (mirror), or is it the other way around? The rules of this network of signs are discovered as you go along uncertain trails both mental and physical (RSCW 153).

What is clear from this note is that Smithson’s emphasis on the uncertainties provoked by the Site/Nonsite relation and their multi-scalar dynamics. By way of these tensions between localizable distinctions of site and ambiguous referentiality, as well as between scales and dimensions of apprehension, the Site/Nonsite relation disrupts any return to a gestalt relation between viewer and work, using the limitations of the gallery space as catalysts for speculative inattention that demand some other conception of agency beyond the organic.

(6) GEOLOGICAL AGENCY: AFTER ORGANICISM

In her influential article “Breaking Circles: The Politics of Prehistory,” Lucy R. Lippard quotes René Dubos in reference to her discussion of Smithson, “The geologist cannot escape dedication to history, and this makes him the epitome of western man, whose tragic sense of life comes from his awareness that he is not absolute and final.” The capacity of this geological abstraction to overwhelm the restricted logic of Man and history is clearly evinced in Smithson’s inorganic constructions. Indeed, Smithson’s own interest in prehistory, as discussed above in Chapter 2, is again reiterated in an interview from 1972, published in Domus. Here, Smithson explains,

I like landscapes that suggest prehistory. As an artist it is sort of interesting to take on the persona of a geologic agent where man actually becomes part of the process rather than overcoming it – rather than overcoming the natural processes of challenging the situation. You just go along with it, and there can be a kind of building that takes place this way (RSCW 298).

It is important to notice how this immersive geological agency and the ‘kind of building’ it enables remain at odds with any recourse to naturalizing narratives of the human in relation to other forms of spatial occupation. These naturalizing narratives can be especially problematic in contemporary discourses of

sustainability, which have become all the more prevalent since the time of Smithson's appraisal of their limitations. As Andrew Payne persuasively argues,

what sets the advocates of sustainability apart from other progressive political tendencies is a commitment, inherited from early ecological movements, to viewing the environment as a primary and, if prudently managed, perduring matrix out of which social and political institutions emerge as secondary manifestations of adaptive behaviours homologous to those found in the settlement practices of non-human species. This assumption of the at once logical and chronological priority of the natural system over its social and political correlatives can have the effect of precipitously foreclosing the question of how these various regimes interact with one another within the dynamics linking natural and cultural history, and further, what degree and sort of autonomy those interactions make possible.¹⁴⁹

Payne's critique of the sustainability agenda finds a parallel in both Bataille's philosophical commitments and Smithson's artistic production. For Bataille, there is a particularly strong relationship between intentionality that must be brought into the equation. That is, “[e]xistence recognizes that it is at the disposal of chance, provided that it can see itself on the same scale as the starry sky, or death. It recognizes itself in its magnificence, made in the image of a universe untouched by the stain of merit or intention” (VE 231). Thus, one sees that Bataille is equally committed to an interrogative analysis of the intentionality at stake in the politics of conservation and their attendant distribution of risk at the scale of human settlement. There is, for Bataille, no possibility of any return to nature as a result of the precarious imbrications of cultural and natural processes, as indicated by Payne in the passage above.

Similarly, for Smithson, in the unpublished piece “The Shape of the Future and Memory,” the tension between history and time, and thus culture and ‘natural’ forces, is paramount. He writes, “The continuous dimensions of space with all its certainties and rationalisms have broken through my consciousness into the discontinuous dimensions of time where certainties and rationalisms have little value. The calamitous regions of time are far from the comforts of space. The artificial ingenuity of time allows no return to nature” (RSCW 333). From his early ‘groping’ out of Modernism to this later works, Smithson rejects Modernism's

laudatory positioning of Man without succumbing to any naive or romantic repositioning of Nature, as Man’s Other, which by a simple reversal of priority would in no way escape this Modernism paradigm.\textsuperscript{150}

Instead of this organic Man-Nature inversion, Smithson proposes that the inorganic pleasure-waste doublet offers a more prescient conceptual framework within the expenditures of the human, and their varying levels of acceptability, might be considered. In an interview with Alison Sky, (edited by Sky and Smithson, but published posthumously in \textit{On Site #4}, 1973), Smithson emphasizes the relation between waste and luxury as he argues that

It seems that when one is talking about preserving the environment or conserving energy or recycling one inevitably gets to the question of waste and I would postulate actually that waste and enjoyment are in a sense coupled. There’s a certain kind of pleasure principle that comes out of a preoccupation with waste. [...] So there’s a kind of equation there between the enjoyment of life and waste. Probably the opposite of waste is luxury. Both waste and luxury tend to be useless (RSCW 303).

Smithson’s ‘inorganicism’ is clarified by his failed attempt to construct the Glass Island near Vancouver, Canada. As Philip Leider notes in his 1970 travel essay published in \textit{Artforum},

There had been a lot of ecological language used in the furor that had preceded the Canadians’ decision to cancel the island of broken glass, an ecologically harmless piece. And ecology-minded people had grumbled against Serra’s Pasadena piece, for wasting trees. Smithson felt that in both cases the community had made of the art scapegoats for their own failure to come to grips with what they knew was killing them. [...] The handwriting was on the wall for ecology, Smithson felt. “All those sins. And here’s 2000 coming so near. Sin everywhere. The dead river, with its black oil slime. The crucified river instead of the crucified man. When to you think they’ll start burning polluters at the stake?\textsuperscript{151}

Smithson’s defiance of ecological concerns is in keeping with Bataille’s own concept of nature and helps to draw out the cultural and political consequences of this concept and further trouble any naive recourse to ecological narratives. This is made especially clear, as Leider has already suggested, in Smithson’s

\textsuperscript{150} For an excellent discussion of questions surrounding the aspects of organicism in art of the period, see Reinhold Martin, ‘Organicism’s Other,’ in \textit{Architecture and the Sciences}, pp. 174-195.

unrealized project for a 100 tonne glass island. In her editorial annotation to Smithson’s interviews with Dennis Wheeler, Eva Schmidt explains,

The *Island of Broken Glass* was a development of the hypothetical continents and led to the large-scale works in the early 1970s and especially to the infinite number of island forms depicted in the later drawings. The plan to pour 100 tons of tinted glass onto the small Miami Islet, a rocky island about 50 yards long, could not be realized. A public controversy arose over the question as to whether wildlife might be injured by the broken glass. This ‘ecological’ controversy led later to Smithson’s etymological argument that ecology is the guilty side of economics and that the ‘belief in ecology and the infernal agents of pollution’ has the function of a cheap religion. For Smithson […] esthetic experience could be an important experience only when it is risky and dangerous. ‘The Island is not meant to save anything or anybody, but to reveal things as they are’ (RSCW 197).

While Smithson was interested in the last years of his artistic production with large scale reclamation works, these projects were not driven by any naïve conception of nature or restorative ecology. We will return to the reclamation works below; presently, we turn our attention to the Vancouver Project: Island of Broken Glass, 1970 (unbuilt). As Hobbs points out, “At the time Smithson intended to build Island of Broken Glass, ecological concerns became newsworthy. Two Vancouver newspapers devoted space to his proposal, each taking the opposite editorial stance. The island was only a large barren rock but around it raged a considerable controversy” (RSS 186). While the large barren rock seems a strange site for such a controversy, it is, perhaps, the scale of the island that gave rise to a multitude of ecological attention. Hobbs explains the details of the proposal, writing, “One hundred tons of green-tinted industrial glass bought in Stockton, California, were to be dumped on the island on February 2. Plans called for a crane to place the glass on the pumice rock that was about one hundred yards long at low tide and half that size at high tide. Then the artist, wearing special logger’s boots, would break the glass with a crowbar into pieces ranging from jagged spikes to fine bits. The resulting glass mound would shimmer like emeralds on the dull rock. In a few months, the sharper edges of the glass would be smoothed down, and in a few centuries the entire glass heap would become sand” (RSS 186). However, “The shipment reached the Canadian border where it was stopped by representatives of the Society for Pollution and Environmental Control who were anxious to keep the glass from entering Canada. Although all the
necessary legal work for the project had been prepared [...] as a result of public outcry the government decided to reverse its decision and prevent the creation of the piece” (RSS 186). If, as discussed above, Glass Stratum [fig. 2.2] suggests the opacity of historical evidence through the cool, pyramidal stack of green glass, the island inverts the evidentiary trope, exaggerating the presumed nature of the island by covering it in smashed glass. If the former work renders history opaque, the latter makes nature a glimmering but shattered transparency reflecting human waste. Smithson’s response to the controversy is entirely dismissive of the ecological arguments leveled against the proposal:

WHEELER: . . . you were talking about the artist as a geologic agent before, about the element of danger involved in the glass island piece, about the intervention of people who were concerned with disturbing the ecology . . .
SMITHSON: Yeah, well in nature you can fall off cliffs, and you can drown in the water, and you can fall into a volcano. . . . I mean the fact that somebody will swim out there and impale himself on that glass is not my fault (RSCW 216).

This refusal to adopt any ecological argument that would return his art to a functional utility within the environmental movement or their broader political agenda is evident throughout Smithson’s writing and interviews during the period. In an interview from 1970, Smithson offers the following adumbration of the moral confusion of ecology:

On the salvation idea – the whole Western moral tradition has collapsed; that feeling still persists, so it has to find other outlets. In a technological society, the values have dissipated, and the ecology thing is a way of delivering one from death. Sin is like pollution. In the 18th century, people used to believe that hospitals and insane asylums were poisoning society. The ecology thing represents moral confusion, and a need to continue (RSCW 236-37).

Smithson clarifies his position further in conversation with Michael Heizer, and Dennis Oppenheim, when asked about this attitude toward nature:

Well, I developed a dialectic between the mind-matter aspects of nature. My view became dualistic, moving back and forth between the two areas. It’s not involved with nature, in the classical sense. There’s no anthropomorphic reference to environment. But I do have a stronger tendency towards the inorganic than the organic. The organic is closer to the idea of nature: I’m more interested in denaturalization or in artifice than I am in any kind of naturalism (RSCW 250).
As Hobbs prescient analysis suggests, “Many people, it seems, have regarded the constant pollution of waterways by industrial and human waste and the ravaging of underdeveloped areas by strip mining as necessary evils of a populous and highly technologized world. But these same people could not understand why someone would willingly, with no objective of monetary gain, create a ruin.” Thus, “When the Island became the subject of a hot debate among concerned environmentalists and art lovers, Smithson may have felt that his statement concerning planned obsolescence had already been made and that he didn’t have to pursue the project any further” (RSS 186). Whether the general incapacity to grasp the intention of the work was enough for Smithson, or whether he simply regarded the debate another instance provoking a politics of disgust, is unclear. Regardless, it seems obvious enough that the polemical banter about the work, dissociated from any actual engagement with the piece, demonstrates a Moral-ecological astriction that has, since the time of ‘debate’ surrounding Island, only increased the forms of social organization (whether in terms of ‘Corporate Responsibility’ or ‘Cap and Trade’ pollution credits) that are incapable of looking beyond the horizons of economic utility.

By way of a conclusion, we turn now to Smithson’s Nonsite, Site Uncertain, 1968 [fig. 4.3]. Comprised of six L-shaped containers of linear geometrical descending size, Smithson refers to Nonsite, Site Uncertain as the final Nonsite work (while it was not, in fact, the last ever made). However, Smithson’s explanation suggests that the logic of the Nonsite reached its peak with this piece, perhaps because the ephemerality it signals suggests a shift toward a more complicated expression of simple tensions by way of larger earthworks. As Smithson explained to Paul Cummings, in an interview from 1972, “The last Nonsite actually is one that involves coal and there the site belongs to the Carboniferous Period, so it no longer exists; the site becomes completely buried again. There’s no topographical reference. It’s a submerged reference based on hypothetical land formations from the Carboniferous Period. The coal comes from somewhere in the Ohio and Kentucky area, but the site is uncertain. That was the last Nonsite; you know, that was the end of that” (RSCW 296). As in Nonsite, Oberhausen, Germany, 1968 [fig. 1.1], where the product contains the waste
produced by its own making, the Nonsite, Site Uncertain evinces an impossible conjunction between the sensory material object and the cognitive recuperation of its logic of production. Where Oberhausen takes this problematic disjunction up by staging the relation between industry and purpose, Site Uncertain completes the arc of the Nonsites by emphasizing their ultimate entropic disappearance – in the Site as in the Nonsite. Yet, even through the production of this self-cancelling work, Smithson must still confront the monumental dimension of art-marking and its attendant Moral order, as we will see in the following chapter on the annihilation of both material and theoretical monumentality.
CHAPTER 5
MONUMENTALITY

Therefore an attack on architecture, whose monumental productions now truly dominate the whole earth, grouping the servile multitudes under their shadow, imposing admiration and wonder, order and constraint, is necessarily, as it were, an attack on man.

– Bataille

It is through reverence that the work, always already in ruins, is frozen: through reverence which prolongs, maintains, consecrates it (through the idolatry proper to titles), it congeals, or is added to the catalogue of the good works of culture.

– Blanchot

(1) INTRODUCTION: MORAL PROBLEMS

Systems are always a moral problem. The reverse is also true: morals are, inevitably, systematic. From either direction, both rely on the evidentiary judgment of subjects for their constitution. As we have seen in our discussion of Kant above, the connection between the selection of evidentiary forms of natural purpose and their suggestion, a priori, of the necessity of Man’s moral reason, is one of petrifying astriction. While this petrification does not always lead to any greater clarity with regard to broader social or political problems, it is no less dangerous for presupposing such definable clarity is desirable. It is in this sense that Smithson claims in a 1970 interview, “People don’t know where their heads are now, they don’t know where their continuance is. It is a moral problem, more so than an aesthetic one” (RSCW 241). In “Fragments of an Interview with P.A. Norvell,” Smithson states the problem even more bluntly: “People are convinced they know what reality is, so they bring their own concept of reality to the work . . . . They never contend with the reality that is outside their own, which might be no reality at all. The existence of ‘self’ is what keeps everybody from confronting their fears about the ground they happen to be standing on” (RSCW193). Similarly, his distrust of ‘systems’ is articulated as follows:

System is a convenient word, like object. It is another abstract entity that
doesn’t exist. I think art tends to relieve itself of those hopes. Jack Burnham is very interested in going beyond, and that is a utopian view. The future doesn’t exist, or if it does exist it is the obsolete in reverse. The future is always going backwards. Our future tends to be prehistoric. [...] If you make a system you can be sure the system is bound to evade itself, so I see no point in pinning any hopes on systems. A system is just an expansive object, and eventually it all contracts back to points (RSCW 194).

He continues, “I posit that there is no tomorrow, nothing but a gap, a yawning gap. That seems sort of tragic, but what immediately relieves it is irony, which gives you a sense of humour. It is that cosmic sense of humour that makes it all tolerable. Everything just vanishes” (RSCW 195). While we will return later to Smithson’s notion of a cosmic sense of humour and its relation to laughter in Bataille, it is Smithson’s conclusion at the end of the interview that beckons further attention because it connects this apparently tragic position with an aspect of construction and artistic practice. He claims,

There is no point in trying to come up with the right answer because it is inevitably wrong. Every philosophy will turn against itself and it will always be refuted. The object or the system will always crush its originator. Eventually he will be overthrown and be replaced by another series of lies. It is like going from one happy lie to another happy lie with a cheerful sense about everything. An art against itself is a good possibility, an art that always returns to essential contradiction. I’m sick of positivists, ontological hopes, and that sort of thing, even ontological despairs. Both are impossible (RSCW 195).

This ontological impossibility is a key aspect of our confrontation with Kantian Morality and its relation to the concept of a “project.” For Bataille, as for Smithson, the emphasis on a localizable and permanent referent by which contradictions are resolved and ambiguities are righted is problematic for a number of reasons – the monumental role they are ascribed in founding and maintaining social order (i.e. a system) not least among them.

In this regard, Smithson would take note of the significant change in trajectory with respect to the artistic production of monuments in his 1966 essay “Entropy and the New Monuments.” Smithson begins, “Many architectural concepts found in science-fiction have nothing to do with science or fiction, instead they suggest a new kind of monumentality which has much in common with the aims of some of today’s artists. [...] The works of many of these artists celebrate what [Dan] Flavin calls “inactive history” or what the physicist calls
‘entropy’ or ‘energy drain’” (RSCW 11:11). That is, according to Smithson, “Instead of causing us to remember the past like the old monuments, the new monuments seem to cause us to forget the future. [...] They are not built for the ages but rather against the ages. They are involved in a systematic reduction of time down to fractions of seconds, rather than in representing long spaces of centuries” (RSCW 11). While Smithson attributes this develop to other artists of the period, in the following chapter we will examine how Smithson’s artistic works give further material force to the attack on monumentality and the history of Man that this logic supports.

(2) FROM JUDICIAL TO ENANTIOMORPHIC CHAMBERS

The sculptural work ‘Enantiomorphic Chambers’ offers an excellent point of departure for our consideration of Smithson’s confrontation with the logic of the monument, not least because it turns the use of the mirror, operative in the Mirror Displacements discussed in Chapter 4, against the viewer of the work herself. In his ‘Interpolation of the Enantiomorphic Chambers’ (1966), Smithson’s description of the work reads, in part:

3. The chambers cancel out one’s reflected image, when one is directly between the two mirrors.
4. Definition of the enantiomorphic with the context of binocular vision.
   A. Any manifest division between the position of the two eyes.
   B. Contrary accommodation and convergence.
   C. Duplex structure of sight as an invention.
   D. Infinite myopia.
   E. Equidistant dislocation.

(RSCW 39; originally in Finch College catalogue, Art in Process, 1966).

Reading of Enantiomorphic Chambers, 1965 [fig. 5.1] alongside the After Thought Enantiomorphic Chambers, c. 1965 [fig. 5.2] we find a clear elimination of the viewing subject, who is crossed out by the diagonal lines corresponding to the image of the work, and thus rendered acephalous. The sculptural work, comprised of two metallic boxes suspended on the gallery wall and containing mirrors facing the viewer at oblique angles, suggests the possibility, if not the presumed necessity, that the mirrors housed in the work will reflect the image of the viewer back. However, the oblique angle directs the image away from the viewer, toward the opposing mirror, and thus effectively cancels out the image of the viewer.
Smithson’s conversations with Dennis Wheeler, 1969-70, offer further clarification of his attack on the viewing subject:

That’s really about the eyes, a kind of external abstraction of the eyes; it’s like you’re entering the field of vision. It’s like a set of eyes outside my personal set, so it’s a kind of depersonalization. [...] Like a stereopticon kind of situation – artificial eyes – that in a sense establishes a certain kind of point of departure not so much toward the idealistic notion of perception, but all the different breakdowns within perception. So that’s what I’m interested in. I’m interested in zeroing in on those aspects of mental experience that somehow coincide with the physical world (RSCW 208).

Hobbs’ reading of Enantiomorphic Chambers similarly suggests that, “The Sites/Nonsites also continue the interest in antinomies which occupied Smithson in his early paintings and intrigued him in such works as Enantiomorphic Chambers” (RSS 14). Here we note that the term enantiomorph “refers to either a pair of crystalline chemical compounds whose molecular structures have a mirror-image relationship to each other” (RSS 59-61). This mirror play, repeated in such a wide range of works including the mirror displacements in the Yucatan and various Site/Nonsite works, is here, in this early iteration, strictly tied to the geometrical order. While the mirror reflects the image back as a result of the angle of refraction, here Smithson shifts the balance between the two mirrors, creating a pair of oblique angles that, instead of multiplying the viewers’ image to infinity (as one expects standing between two mirrors), multiply it by zero, cancelling it entirely.

This work can be also be compared to the Four-sided Vortex, 1965 [fig. 5.3]. The “solid-state hirality” of the work is here the time of laughter that echoes back at the subject searching for an image of herself which is only ever the projection (the Project) of an image of a unified subject as viewer. As the viewer leans over the sculptural container, the mirrors solicit the search for an image; this solicitation is, indeed, a mocking one in that the viewer’s image is fragmented by the four mirrors which refuse to consolidate a single image. In another work produced during the same period –Untitled, 1964/65 [fig. 5.4] – Smithson again undermines the position of the viewing subject by simultaneously doubling and inverting the vanishing point. Hobbs notes that, “In a working sketch for the piece he noted that in the very centre, a ‘double vanishing point existing as a solid
reversal of traditional illusionistic perspective. Infinity without Space’” (RSS 58). The reversal of the illusionistic space repeats again gestures that we have seen, above, as confronted this limited aesthetic convention. In this instance, the doubling both echoes and mocks the gestalt viewer: as the reversal returns the desire for penetration of the work back to the viewer, the doubling of this inverted perspective denies any privilege to the viewer as someone capable of viewing the single work as a whole. Again, the mirrored surface annihilate the presumption that we should find a reflected image (whether metaphorically, from the point of view of a ‘liberal’ or Bildung-aesthetic, or, also, quite literally) in the work.

(3) RISING INTO RUIN

Ruination is a condition of monumentality in as much as the ruin, the waste, and the condition of gratuitousness relies on the reifying fidelity to the project of monumentalization. It is a projection of meaning from the present into the future, and thus, as such, every monument, every architecture, rises into the ruin of its own existence: the objective future of its own obsolescence traceable to the cornerstone of its foundation. As Bataille suggests in Inner Experience, the first three volumes comprising his Le Somme Athéologique (the other two volumes being Guilty and On Nietzsche), “The difficulty — that contestation must be done in the name of an authority – is resolved thus: I contest in the name of contestation what experience itself is (the will to proceed to the end of the possible). Experience, its authority, its method, do not distinguish themselves from contestation.”\footnote{Georges Bataille, Inner Experience, p. 12.} A note to the passage reads: “As I write in Part 4, the principle of contestation is one of those upon which Maurice Blanchot insists as on a foundation.”\footnote{Ibid.} While Bataille does not return to this theme in part four in any detail, or with regard to Blanchot, the note is of interest because of its relation of two lines of the arche in philosophy – experience and ground. In On Nietzsche, Bataille suggests, “In the process of risking, value is simply displaced from the object to the risking and to the contestation itself. [...] What’s called chance is the value of a given situation, variable in itself. A particular chance is a response to
desire. Desire is given in advance, at least as possible desire, even if it isn’t evident to begin with.” In *The Unfinished System of Nonknowledge* (intended, by Bataille, to be the fifth and final volume of his *Summa Athéologique*), Bataille further distinguishes his notion of contestation: “Now, what does the contestation — political, in fact — of the established order mean? It claims power and could, theoretically, do this in the name of that which exceeds servile necessity (this used to be the principle of the poetic revolution). [...] The *major* positions of political sovereignties (understood: those of the past, founded on heroism and sacrifice) were nothing less than *minors* inserted into the sphere of activity. The classical idea of sovereignty binds itself to that of commandment.” Instead, for Bataille, “Sovereignty is revolt, it is not the exercise of power. Authentic sovereignty refuses ... .” These ‘major’ sovereign exercise of power, as normally understood, are, for Bataille, simply false depictions of heroism creating illusions of control or restriction in relation to the more general economies. They are, in a word, monumental: attractors which direct the gaze toward the iconography of an impossible restriction.

Thus, regarding the emptiness of the monument, Bataille is as decisive as Smithson:

> There was some difficulty in finding an appropriate symbol for the Place de la Concorde, where the images of royalty and the Revolution had proven powerless. But it was contrary to the majesty of the site to leave an empty space, and agreement was reached on a monolith brought back from Egypt. Seldom has a gesture of this type been more successful; the apparently meaningless image imposed its calm grandeur and its pacifying power on a location that always threatened to recall the worst. Shadows that could still trouble or weigh upon the conscience were dissipated, and neither God nor time remained (VE 221).

This is because, according to Stoekl, “‘Man’ is not so much the author of his own narrative, or the subject that experiences and acts, as ‘he’ is the focal point of the intensification or slackening of energy flows. For this reason human life on earth must be seen as just one instance of many energy events: moments in which energy is absorbed from the sun lead to growth and reproduction, but, just as

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156 Ibid.
important, energy is also blown off.” The monument is, for Bataille, the frozen image of an energy well-conserved, signalling both the economy of restriction and the historical referentiality which provides its support, or ground. In a confrontation with this logic of monumentality, we see, in the following section, how Smithson’s dematerialization of the art-object, by way of his production of ephemera and especially through the travelogue essay, suggests a new, disseminated, similaicral monumentality.

(4) IN WHAT STYLE SHALL WE BUILD NEW MONUMENTS?

The threat of artists expanding the field of the art-object beyond the gallery to include the ephemeral and easily disseminated ‘essay’ form was certainly not missed by critics of the period. John Perreault’s essay “Union-Made: Report on a Phenomenon,” first published in Arts Magazine, in March, 1967, argues, “Although his works are of a high calibre, Robert Smithson’s writings are boyishly pretentious and distract from the validity of his actual work.” If we detect in this rather pernicious remark a certain reactionary tone, it is at least in part because Smithson’s use of periodicals and essays as an element of his art work certainly posed a threat to many critics who, like Perrault, felt their traditional territory was being encroached. Thus, while Smithson’s work moved to emphasize the materiality of the work of it, his essays, writing, and travelogues would simultaneously help effect its dematerialization. The force of this dematerialization is developed, at least in part, as a response to Smithson’s (among many other artists who shared similar criticisms) own uneasy relation to the museum. In ‘Some Void Thoughts on Museums’ (1967), Smithson positions the museum as a monumental cultural tomb:

Museums are tombs, and it looks like everything is turning into a museum. Painting, sculpture and architecture are finished, but the art habit continues. Art settles into a stupendous inertia. Silence supplies that dominate chord. Bright colors conceal the abyss that holds the museum together. Every solid is a bit of clogged air or space. Things flatten and

157 Stoekl, Bataille’s Peak, p. 32.
159 For a more complete discussion of this process of dematerialization, see Lucy R. Lippard, ed., Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966-1972, which includes an interview with Robert Smithson.
fade. The museum spreads its surfaces everywhere, and becomes an untitled collection of generalizations that immobilize the eye (RSCW 42).

In ‘Entropy and the New Monuments,’ Smithson’s articulation of the potential of a new approach to the monument emphasizes the move from historical referentiality to more general temporal systems. Rather than pointing to a laudatory historical moment around which the current political and social fields can be ordered, the new monuments, for Smithson, will emphasize the ephemerality of action: “Instead of causing us to remember the past like old monuments, the new monuments seem to cause us to forget the future. Instead of being made of natural materials, such as marble, granite, or other kinds of rock, the new monuments are made of artificial materials, plastic, chrome, and electric light. They are not build for the ages, but rather against the ages. They are involved in a systematic reduction of time down to fractions of seconds, rather than in representing the long spaces of centuries” (RSCW 11). He goes on, after describing Dan Flavin’s “instant monuments,” to claim that “The reduction of time all but annihilates the value of the notion of “action” in art” (RSCW 11). He continues, “Questions about form seem as hopelessly inadequate as questions about content. Problems are unnecessary because problems represent values that create the illusion of purpose” (RSCW 11-12). Further, “This kind of architecture without ‘value of qualities,’ is, if anything, a fact. From this ‘undistinguished’ run of architecture, as Flavin calls it, we gain a clear perception of physical reality free from the general claims of ‘purity and idealism.’ ... As the cloying effect of such ‘values’ wears off, one perceives the ‘facts’ of the outer edge, the flat surface, the banal, the empty, the cool, blank after blank; in other words, the infinitesimal condition known as entropy” (RSCW 12).

The monuments of the Park Place Group are read in the essay ‘Ultramoderne’ (originally published in Arts Magazine, September-October 1967), in fact, as the vanguard expression which artists merely reiterate after the fact. That is, the banality of the Modern architectural scene anticipates the minimal and serial works that follow. This advance is described in detail by Smithson in the conclusion of his ‘Quasi-Infinities and the Waning of Space,’:

Consider the avant-garde as Achilles and progress as the Tortoise in a race
that would follow Zeno’s second paradox of ‘infinite regress.’ This non-Aristotelian logic defies the formal deductive system and says that ‘movement is impossible.’ Let us paraphrase Jorge Luis Borges’ description of that paradox. (See Avatars of the Tortoise): The avant-garde goes ten times faster than progress, and gives progress a headstart of ten meters. The avant-garde goes those ten meters, progress one; the avant-garde completes that meter, progress goes a decimeter; the avant-garde goes that decimeter, progress goes a centimeter; the avant-garde goes that centimeter, progress, a millimeter; the avant-garde, the millimeter, progress a tenth of a millimeter; and so on to infinity without progress ever being overtaken by the avant-garde. The problem may be reduced to this series: $10 + 1 + 1/10 + 1/100 + 1/1000 + 1/10,000 + \cdots$ (RSCW 37).

This, of course, returns us to the question of cultural practices and vanguardism as a way of undermining the illusory efficacy of cultural progress. We also see a crucial element of Smithson’s art practice in these comments: specifically, we see his treatment of the vanguard as a secondary echo of earlier primary industrial practices. In this sense, Smithson’s reading of the vanguard follows Bataille’s reading of acceptability within the framework of restricted economies: the artist creates in a glorious expenditure what ‘progress’ has already created as a catastrophe. To undermine the paradox, the artist must amplify the entropic pulse of industry, as Smithson attempts to do, and perhaps augment the course of catastrophic expenditure.

Turning now to Smithson’s well-known travelogue essays, we recall that his adumbration of the problem of ‘the human’, as we saw in the introduction, in ‘The Domain of the Great Bear,’ that depicts his visit to the Hayden Planetarium (originally published in Art Voices, Fall, 1966). This piece concludes with ‘illustrations of catastrophe and remote times.’ The resonance with Bataille’s acephalous commitments is clear as Smithson describes the scene:

The problem of the ‘human figure’ vanishes from these illustrated infinities and prehistoric cataclysms. Time is deranged. Oceans become puddles, monumental pillars of magma rise from the dark depths of a cracking world. Disasters of all kinds flood the mind at the speed of light. Anthropomorphic concerns are extinct in this vortex of disposable universes. A bewildered ‘dinosaur’ and displaces ‘bears’ are trapped in amazing time dislocations. ‘Nature’ is simulated and turned into ‘handpainted’ photographs of the extreme past or future. Vast monuments of total annihilation are pictured over boundless abysses or seen from dizzying heights. This is a bad-boy’s dream of obliteration, where galaxies are smashed like toys. Globes of ‘anti-matter’ collide with ‘proto-matter,’ billions and billions of fragments speed into the deadly chasms of space.
Destruction builds on destruction; forming sheets of burning ice, violet and green, it all falls off into infinite pools of dust. A landslide of diamonds plunges into a polar crevasse of boundless dimension. History no longer exists (RSCW 33).

While this description suggests the potent rhetorical aspect of Smithson’s travelogue writing, we now turn to one of his most well-known essays to examine its emphatic dematerialization of the art object as a disappearing reflection forever lost in the work of its own making. The travelogue ‘Incidents of Mirror-Travel in the Yucatan,’ 1969 (originally in Artforum, September 1969) begins with two epigraphs, the second of which is taken from Claude Levi-Strauss’ The Savage Mind: “The characteristic feature of the savage mind is its timelessness: its object is to grasp the world as both a synchronic and a diachronic totality and the knowledge which it draws therefrom is like that afforded of a room of mirrors fixed on opposite walls, which reflect each other (as well as objects in the intervening space) although without being strictly parallel” (RSCW 119).

Another important influence on the work is John L. Stephens’ Incidents of Travel in Yucatan. According to Suzaan Boettger, Stephens’ anthropological account, originally published in 1843, included a “description of ‘numerous and extensive cities, desolate and in ruins’,,” and thus “offered Smithson an enticing parallel to his own often-stated appreciation for deteriorating sites and other manifestations of entropy, the degradation of matter and energy in the universe to simpler states of inertness and uniformity.”

While the influence of Stephens’ entropic anthropology is undoubtedly an important parallel for Smithson’s project, the 1963 edition provides another clue about the dematerialization of the art object: on the back jacket the editors’ description ends with the following claim: “This is a permanent book.” Despite the parallels described by Boettger, Smithson’s own travelogue seems to be conceived in a direct confrontation with this idea of permanence, and the whole placement, play, recording and removal of mirrors seems to suggest the impossibility of any permanent mode of recognition.

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or remembrance. The idea of travelling, with its attendant vernacular relation to culture refinement and reflection (as something that ‘impacts’ us) is also doubled and interrogated in the essay. That is, Smithson’s interest is not only in the ruins and desolation of previously significant cultural sites, but in doubling this entropic force with the dematerialization of its representation through his own ephemeral journalistic account. We will follow the play of displacements in this section to see the various ‘doublings’ that Smithson created as a series of strategies that confront not only the evidence of ruin, but also to challenge grounding, temporality, logic, perception and nature.

Returning to the travelogue, we note Smithson’s interest in the displacement not only of the art-object but of any destination: “Space can be approached, but time is far away. Time is devoid of objects when one displaces all destinations” (RSCW 119). Devoid of all intention, all projects, all goals, Smithson does still rely on two key elements of his sculptural practice, the mirror and the earth. Smithson emphasizes these elements from the very first displacement, noting, “The displacement was in the ground, not on it” (RSCW 121). The nine mirrors were placed in the earth, grounding their ephemeral reflections that would soon be withdrawn. As Smithson travels through the Yucatan, each mirror displacement is photographed and then disassembled, allowing the mirrors to continue to travel to their next displacement. The effect of their second displacement is related to temporality and the facility with which our ambitions for making are undone: “Timelessness is found in the lapsed moments of perception, in the common pause that breaks apart into a sandstorm of pauses. The malady of wanting to ‘make’ is unmade, and the malady of wanting to be ‘able’ is disabled” (RSCW 121-2). The abstraction of temporality persists in the third displacement, since, as Smithson explains, “A scale in terms of ‘time’ rather than ‘space’ took place. The mirror itself is not subject to duration, because it is an ongoing abstraction that is always available and timeless. The reflections, on

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162 Boettger, p. 202. Notably, following the discussion of mirrors and earth, Boettger’s description of Smithson’s travelogue as echoing Dante’s Divine Comedy relies heavily on the inclusion of Dante in Smithson’s library. While echoes of Dante may indeed be found in the text, it is important to note, again, the reference to the library suggests a peculiar fixation in the scholarship on Smithson. That said, Boettger’s analysis is especially valuable for its attention to religious themes in Smithson’s work.
the other hand, are fleeting instances that evade measure. Space is the remains, or corpse, of time, it has dimensions” (RSCW 122). Here the relation between spatiality and temporality creates a conceptual inversion wherein the scales of time are seen to exceed those of the spatial remainder. Yet, the encounter with the fourth displacement moves from this temporal abstraction to a consideration of the very possibility of logic: “A sense of arrested breakdown prevails over the level mirror surfaces and the unlevel ground. ‘The true fiction eradicates the false reality,’ said the voiceless voice of Chalchihuitlicue – the Surd of the Sea. The mirror displacement cannot expressed in rational dimensions” (RSCW 123). Smithson continues,

Such mirror surfaces cannot be understood by reason. Who can divulge from what part of the sky the blue color came? Who can say how long the color lasted? Must ‘blue’ mean something? Why do the mirrors display a conspiracy of muteness concerning their very existence? When does a displacement become a misplacement? These are forbidding questions that place comprehension in a predicament. The questions the mirrors ask always fall short of the answers. Mirrors thrive on surds, and generate incapacity. Reflections fall onto the mirrors without logic, and in so doing invalidate every rational assertion. Inexpressible limits are on the other side of the incidents, and they will never be grasped (RSCW 124).

Following from these reflective reveries, the fifth displacement then interrogates the play between light and color at stake in all perceptual apprehension. “At Palenque the lush jungle begins. [...] In the jungle all light is paralyzed. Particles of color infected the molten reflections on the twelve mirrors, and in so doing engendered mixtures of darkness and light. Color as an agent of matter filled the reflected illuminations with shadowy tones, pressing the light into dusty material opacity. [...] The word ‘color’ meaning at its origin to ‘cover’ or ‘hide.’ Matter eats up light and ‘covers’ it with a confusion of color” (RSCW 125). This description is precisely that of Bataille in the ‘Theoretical Introduction’ of The Accursed Share: material life is the excessive realization, through increasingly burdensome forms of life, of the even more excessive distribution of solar energy. The cloak of color is here just one other aspect of the increasing burden and complexity of the organisms which seek to dissipate the overwhelming force of solar energy.

During the sixth displacement, “the jungle extinguished the ground, and spread the horizon into a smouldering periphery. This perimeter was subject to a
double perception by which, on the one hand, all escaped to the outside, and on the other, all collapsed inside; no boundaries could hold this jungle together. [...] The jungle grows only by means of its own negation – art does the same” (RSCW 126-7). Smithson’s seventh displacement reiterates his interest in annihilating the obscenity of the vanishing point (as we already saw above in our discussion of *Pointless Vanishing Point*). He explains the experience of the displacement: “Horizons were submerged and suffocated in an asphyxiation of vanishing points. [...] The mirror surfaces being disconnected from each other ‘destructuralized’ any literal logic. Up and down parallels were dislocated into twelve centres of gravity” (RSCW 128). During this displacement, Smithson also describes one of his three *Upside Down Trees* that was planted during his mirror-travels:

On this site the third upside-down tree was planted. The first is in Alfred, New York State, the second is in Captiva Island, Florida; lines drawn on a map will connect them. [...] In riddling zones, nothing is for sure. Nevertheless, flies are attracted to such riddles. Flies would come and go from all over to look at the upside-down trees, and peer at them with their compound eyes. [...] The ‘trees’ are dedicated to the flies. Dragonflies, fruit flies, horseflies. They are all welcome to walk on the roots with their sticky, padded feed, in order to get a closer look. *Why should flies be without art?* (RSCW 129).

If, for Bataille, the root system of the tree suggests another order of nature that is less inclined toward noble and upstanding Moral reason, Smithson’s *Upside Down Tree*, 1969 [*fig. 5.9*], made explicitly for the flies, demonstrates the ‘heterological’ commitments of the work. Here the privileged position of the human is undermined by Smithson’s attempt to attract insect viewers who might find greater amusements in the work. The asphyxiation of vanishing points, occurring here as a mode of ‘destructuralization,’ denies any privilege to enantiomorphic human vision, multiplying it to correspond to the many eyes of the flies. The roots and tree trunk reversed, a noble upstanding and excessively non-human image of Nature.

By way of the eighth displacement, “The island annihilates itself in the presence of the river, both in fact and mind. Small bits of sediment dropped away from the sand flats into the river. Small bits of perception dropped away from the edges of eyesight” (RSCW 129). Here Smithson completes his attack on vision with an especially rigorous conviction:
To reconstruct what the eyes see in words, in an ‘ideal language’ is a vain exploit. What not reconstruct one’s inability to see? Let us give passing shape to the unconsolidated views that surround a work of art, and develop a type of ‘anti-vision’ or negative seeing. The river shored up clay, loess, and similar matter, that shored up the slope, that shored up the mirrors. The mind shored up thought and memories, and that shored up points of view, that shored up the swaying of glances of the eyes. Every clear point of view slipped into its own abstract slump. All view-points choked and died on the tepidity of the tropical air. The eyes, being infected by all kinds of nameless tropisms, couldn’t see straight. Vision sagged, caved in, and broke apart. Trying to look at the mirrors took the shape of a game of pool underwater. All the clear ideas of what had been done melted into perceptual puddles, causing the brain to gurgle thoughts. Walking conditioned sight, and sight conditioned walking, until it seemed like only the feet could see. Squinting helped somewhat, yet that didn’t keep views from tumbling over each other. The oblique angles of the mirrors disclosed an altitude so remote that bits of ‘place’ were cast into a white sky (RSCW 130).

Thus, this displacement can be understood as a decisive move to undermine the visionary dimension of the aesthetic vanguard, while simultaneously suggesting the vulnerability of cognition when faced with the visually incomprehensible.

For the ninth and final displacement [fig. 5.6], “Two asymmetrical trails that mirror each other could be called enantiomorphic after those two common enantiomorphs – the right and left hands. Eyes are enantiomorphs. Writing the reflection is supposed to match the physical reality, yet somehow the enantiomorphs don’t quite fit together” (RSCW 131). Further, Smithson adds,

If one wants to be ingenious enough to erase time one requires mirrors, not rocks. A strange thing, this branching mode of travel: one perceives in every past moment a parting of ways, a highway spreads into a bifurcating and trifurcating region of zigzags. Near Sabancuy the last displacement in the cycle was done. In mangrove (also called mangrove) branches and roots the mirrors were suspended. There will be those who will say ‘that’s getting close to nature.’ But what is meant by ‘nature’ is anything but natural (RSCW 131).

Further clarifying the artists’ relation to this ‘unnatural’ nature, Smithson concludes,

Art works out of the inexplicable. Contrary to affirmations of nature, art is inclined to semblances and masks, it flourishes on discrepancy. It sustains itself not on differentiation, but dedifferentiation, not on creation but decreation, not on nature but denaturalization, etc. Judgements and opinions in the area of art are doubtful murmurs in mental mud. Only
appearances are fertile; they are gateways to the primordial. Every artist owes his existence to such mirages. [...] Artists are not motivated by a need to communicate; travel over the unfathomable is the only condition (RSCW 132).

This mode of ‘travel’ is doubled by the circulation of the travelogue itself. It is for this reason that Hobbs can say the essay ‘Incidents of Mirror-Travel in the Yucatan,’ suggests that “secondary media become primary, the work of art is replaced by the critical-literary essay, and the gallery is supplanted by the periodical” (RSS 15). Further,

Such secondary media, then, became a significant means of communicating his art. What Smithson did when he created *Spiral Jetty* was to turn art centers into provincial outposts and the province into a new center for art. When the new art moved out of the traditional art network, when it became accessible only to a few on a primary level, and to all as secondary media, it achieved an experimental status that equalled mass knowledge of interplanetary investigations (RSS 15).

Thus, for Hobbs, “Smithson undercut monumentality when he placed as much emphasis on the new communication circuits as on the traditional art objects” (RSS 15). Hobbs emphasizes this point throughout the catalogue, and it is important to understand how Smithson’s challenge to the art world was not simply launched by way of the art-objects he produced, but by the expansion of the media which communicated the works to a broader public audience:

When he became a filmmaker and essayist as well as an Earth artist, Smithson appropriated large segments of the art network, placing in question traditional limits of the aesthetic: Is the art object really autonomous? Does the artist’s creative act begin and end with the work of art per se? Then he even subjected to scrutiny the very significance of meaning when he piled one interpretation on another so that the sculpture is about all truth or no truth: it is a vortex of crystals and a void whirlpool of thought.163

If, as Hobbs explains, Smithson’s work as an essayist and Earth artist helped to displace the sovereign monumentality of the art-object and its presumed discrete aesthetic existence, it is Smithson’s deadpan study of the city as a dead metaphor of urban progress to which we now turn to continue our analysis of the logic of monumentality.

(5) DEAD METAPHOR: PASSAIC

In what can easily be read as an exaggerated homage to Tony Smith’s car ride along the unfinished New Jersey turnpike (RSS 24) which so angered Modern art critics, Smithson’s Passaic travelogue seems to beg the question of the art-object, as well as the monument, through a highly-comical reading of this small New Jersey town. In the travelogue essay ‘A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey, 1967 (published as ‘The Monuments of Passaic," Artforum, December 1967) [fig. 5.7] Smithson further develops the form of the picturesque travel essay following the legacy initiated by Gilpin and Price (as discussed above), beginning with the excessively banal description: “On Saturday, September 30, 1967, I went to the Port Authority Building on 41st Street and 8th Avenue. I bought a copy of the New York Times and a Signet paperback called Earthworks by Brian W. Aldiss. Next I went to ticket booth 21 and purchased a one-way ticket to Passaic. After that I went up to the upper bus level (platform 173) and boarded the number 30 bus of the Inter-City Transportation Co.” (RSCW 68). Smithson provides an account of his movement among the additional monuments of Passaic, including: The Bridge Monument Showing Wooden Sidewalks; Monument with Pontoons: The Pumping Derrick; The Great Pipe Monument; The Fountain Monument: Bird’s Eye View and Side View; and, finally, The Sand-Box Monument. Among the descriptions of these vernacular monuments, Smithson makes the offhand remark that, “A psychoanalyst might say that the landscape displayed ‘homosexual tendencies,’ but I will not draw such a crass anthropomorphic conclusion. I will merely say, ‘It was there’” (RSCW 71). Smithson then makes the coy claim that landscape of Passaic contained ‘ruins in reverse,’ which we quote at length:

Actually, the landscape was no landscape, but ‘a particular kind of heliotypy’ (Nabokov), a kind of self-destroying postcard world of failed immortality and oppressive grandeur. I had been wandering in a moving picture that I couldn’t quite picture, but just as I became perplexed, I saw a green sign that explained everything:

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164 Iverson passes over this comment in her focus on Smithson’s ‘great work’; suffice it to say that beyond his alleged articulation of the death drive in the Spiral Jetty, Smithson was certainly suspicious of, and at times certainly amused by, the commitments of psychoanalysis.
YOUR HIGHWAY TAXES AT WORK
Federal Highway Trust Funds 2,867,000
U.S. Dept. of Commerce State Highway Funds 2,867,000
Trust Funds Bureau of Public Roads
2,867,000 New Jersey State Highway Dept.

That zero panorama seemed to contain ruins in reverse, that is – all the new – construction that would eventually be built. This is the opposite of the ‘romantic ruin’ because the buildings don’t fall into ruin after they are built but rather rise into ruin before they are built. This anti-romantic mise-en-scene suggests the discredited idea of time and many other ‘out of date’ things. But the suburbs exist without a rational past and without the ‘big events’ of history” (RSCW 72).

Not only a reverie of ruination, but also a reflection of it, echoing the Borgesian madness of the Immortals and their irrational monument to finitude: “After I returned to Passaic, or was it the hereafter – for all I know that unimaginative suburb could have been a clumsy eternity, a cheap copy of The City of the Immortals” (RSCW 73). As Hobbs notes, “In the tradition of such essayists as Uvedale Price and William Gilpin, Smithson tours a picturesque landscape, only one wrought not by natural forces, but by forces of industrialization, urban growth, and suburban sprawl. In the essay Smithson provides an inversion of romantic sensibility, both by viewing ruins of the recent past which are not yet immortalized through history and by envisioning ruins that will rise into the future” (RSS 88).

The final monument of Smithson’s return to Passaic is a model of the desert:

The last monument was a sand box or a model desert. Under the dead light of the Passaic afternoon the desert became a map of infinite disintegration and forgetfulness. This monument of minute particles blazed under a bleakly glowing sun, and suggested sullen dissolution of entire continents, the drying up of oceans – no longer were there green forests and high mountains – all that existed were millions of grains of sand, a vast deposit of bones and stones pulverized into dust. Every grain of sand was a dead metaphor that equaled timelessness, and to decipher such metaphors would take one through the false mirror of eternity. This sand box somehow doubled as an open grave – a grave that children cheerfully play in (RSCW 74).

Similarly, in ‘A Sedimentation of the Mind,’ Smithson remarks, “The desert is less
‘nature’ than a concept, a place that swallows up boundaries” (RSCW 109). If, as we have seen, Passaic is the rising into ruin of the monument, doubled by the art-object with rises into ruin as the absent work made present by the travelogue, we now turn to the last monument, Man, and his interminable architecture.

(6) THE LAST MONUMENT: MAN IS TO ARCHITECTURE ...

For Bataille, “Human life is exhausted from serving as the head of, or the reason for, the universe. To the extent that it becomes this head and this reason, to the extent that it becomes necessary to the universe, it accepts servitude” (VE 180). This exhaustion can be read as the result of ‘curse’ of ordering, constructing and maintaining forms of conservation within the restricted economies of human scale. The drawing of Acéphale [fig. 5.5] by André Masson suggests a similar logic as that which is operative in Smithson’s Enantiomorphic Chambers: both drawings, by Smithson and Masson, evince an ambition to destroy the reflective (Narcissistic image) of the spectator as reasonable viewer of art and/or the universe. It is in this sense the group Acéphale, of which Bataille was a key member, is recognizable in the Masson’s eponymous image. As Blanchot makes clear,

The texts published under that title [Acéphale] do not reveal its scope, except for a few sentences which might later still stun those who wrote them. Each member of the community is not only the whole community, but the violent, disparate, exploded, powerless incarnation of the beings who, tending to exist integrally, have as corollary the nothingness they have already, and in advance, fallen into. Each member of the group only through the absoluteness of the separation that needs to affirm itself in order to break off so as to become relation, a paradoxical, even senseless relation, if it is an absolute relation with other absolutes that exclude all relation.166

While the dislocation of the identity of the group remained an important aspect of Bataille’s interest in the College de Sociologie and its more mysterious articulation within the group tied to Acéphale, it is the implications of the ‘headless’ that are of particular interest for our discussion. With respect to this

165 Bataille can certainly be read as anticipating Deleuze and Guattari’s ‘Body-without-organs’ in his attack on the upright and well-ordered viewing subject. See Deleuze and Guattari, A Thousand Plateaus, especially pp. 149-166.

166 Maurice Blanchot, The Unavowable Community, pp. 13-14.
question, Denis Hollier argues persuasively, quoting Bataille, that

Losing one’s head open prisons. “Man has escaped his head as the convict escapes from prison.” [...] A meditation on the drawing of “Acéphale,” Andre Masson’s headless man. This image of a human figure without a head rejects both identification and adoration; it is neither immanent nor transcendent, neither man nor god. It is an alteration of the human form that eludes every identification and draws the meditating subject into a labyrinth where we becomes lost, that is, he metamorphoses, is transformed in turn, rediscovers himself only as other, monster, Minotaur himself. “It is not me but it is more myself than myself,” says Bataille of the “Headless Man.”

The headless man: operative ‘enantiomorphicism’, at least in theory. This alteration of the human is a rejection of the representational logic of identification tied to the Moral constancy of the Critical project. This attack on the monumentality of Man is given its more forceful theoretical articulation in Bataille’s ‘Critical Dictionary’ entry on ‘Architecture’, which reads, in part:

Il est évident d’ailleurs, que l’ordonnance mathématique imposée à la pierre n’est autre que l’achèvement d’une évolution des formes terrestres, dont le sens est donn, dans l’ordre biologique, par le passage de la forme simiesque à la forme humaine, celle-ci présentant déjà tous les éléments de l’architecture. Les hommes ne représentent apparemment dans le processus morphologique, qu’une étape intermédiaire entre les singes et les grand édifices. Les formes sont devenues de plus en plus statiques, de plus en plus dominantes. Aussi bien, l’ordre human est-il dès l’origine solidaire de l’ordre architectural, qui n’en est que le développement. Que si l’on s’en prend à l’architecture, dont les productions monumentales sont actuellement les véritables maîtres sur toute la terre, groupant à leur ombre des multitudes surviles, imposant l’admiration et l’étonnement, l’ordre et la contrainte, on s’en prend quelque sorte a l’homme. Tout une activité terrestre actuellement, et sans doute la plus brillante dans l’ordre intellectuel, tend d’ailleurs dans un tel sens, dénonçant l’insuffisance de la prédominance humaine (Bataille, Oeuvres complètes 1, p. 172).

[It is clear, in any case, that mathematical order imposed on stone is really the culmination of the evolution of earthly forms, whose direction is indicated within the biological order by the passage from the simian to the human form, the latter already displaying all the elements of architecture. Man would seem to represent merely an intermediate stage within the morphological development between monkey and building. Forms have become increasingly static, increasingly dominant. From the very outset, in any case, the human and architectural orders make common cause, the latter being only the development of the former. Therefore an attack on architecture, whose monumental productions now truly dominate the whole earth, grouping the servile multitudes under their shadow, imposing

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167 Dennis Hollier, Against Architecture, p. 64.
admiration and wonder, order and constraint, is necessarily, as it were, an attack on man. Currently, an entire earthly activity, and undoubtedly the most intellectually outstanding, tends, through the denunciation of human dominance, in this direction (Bataille, ‘Architecture,’ in *Encyclopaedia Acephalica*, pp. 35-36).]

Finally, we conclude by turning to one of Smithson's most well-known works, *Partially Buried Woodshed*, 1970 [fig. 5.8]. While Smithson had originally proposed a mud pour (in keeping with the logic of pouring into process, discussed in Chapter 6), according to Hobbs, “Because low temperatures prevented mud from flowing” – Smithson’s initial proposal for Kent State was a mud pour – “Smithson thought of cancelling the project. At the insistence of the students, however, he decided on another course of action. He had thought for some time that he would like to bury a building, so we began looking around the campus for a suitable structure” (RSS 189-90). Hobbs continues, “The woodshed he found has been part of an abandoned farm that belonged to the university. [...] Operating a backhoe under Smithson’s direction, Rich Helmling, a building contractor, piled twenty loads of earth onto the shed until its central beam cracked.” Further, “The breaking of the beam was crucial to the piece: to Smithson it symbolized entropy, like the falling of Humpty Dumpty, ‘a closed system which eventually deteriorates and starts to break apart and there’s no way that you can really piece it back together again’” (RSS 190). The breaking apart of the closed system of architecture, especially by way of the instance on the wood shed as the image of utility within the fragile economy of rural subsistence, suggests a clear and explicit aesthetic of expenditure.

If we recall our distinction between endosomatic and exosomatic consumptive energies (outlined in Chapter 2 in relation to the biophysicist Alfred Lotka), we can see the wood shed as a specifically human articulation of conservation: while it may not reach the excessive ratio of 1000:1 for its relation of spent energy to energy consumed, it nonetheless signals the conservation of energy by way of both construction and maintenance. The wood shed is, by definition, a storage of energy. The fact of its abandonment only further reiterates the move to increasingly burdensome forms of storage and circulation. If, as Bataille suggest, an attack on architecture is necessarily an attack on Man, Smithson’s *Partially Buried Woodshed* offers a decisive material articulation of
this attack, rendering the entropic force of the general economy visible in the pile of decay that formerly guaranteed human warmth and comfort. Following our operative strategy from the previous chapter, the monumentality of Man collapses under the sedimentation of the earth. As materially compelling as it is ‘intellectually outstanding,’ we will now move, in the final chapter, from the burial of the Man and his monuments to the dangers of meandering and its immoral commitments.
CHAPTER 6
MEANDERING

The notion of ebb and flow. The deficiency we have to admit here. We do not have the right to wish for a single state. ‘We have to desire to become like periodic beings: like existence’ (The Will to Power).

— Bataille

(1) INTRODUCTION: TERMINAL

In order to meander, one must free oneself from the desire for predetermined destinations. Meandering eludes efficiency as much as utility, and it therefore must also evade any telos, or terminus. Smithson’s most well-known earth work, the Spiral Jetty, initiates our consideration of strategies of meandering in the final chapter of the dissertation. While the Jetty does not exactly meander, it evades the purposive logic governing its regular utilitarian construction. The jetty normally is the site of efficiency, of transaction, of nautical commerce and economic trade. In Smithson’s Jetty, the capitalist economic project by which nautical commerce initiates the global project of trade and economic dependency is relieved of its purposive ambitions. That is, the Spiral Jetty, as a bending into regressive infinity of the jetty that allows for trade and commerce, repeats, again, the annihilation of the industrial exigencies of consumer exchange within a restricted economic field. If, in a contemporary capitalist economy, we find ourselves lost in a dedifferentiated sea of indefinite promises and their attendant products, the Spiral Jetty suggests an economic terminal turned against itself and its purpose, making the entropic feeling of capitalist dedifferentiation explicit while at the same time relying on the mechanisms of dissemination associated with capitalist advertisement (through the magazine article and film). The Spiral Jetty is, for most, unapproachable; still, at the same time, it is brought close to home by the video and the print essay that bear the same name. Thus, while the reality of the Jetty is exported, disseminated, and made ‘commercial,’ it has nothing to sell other than the distinct and unavoidable terminus of indistinction
and confusion. This dissemination advances the meandering in time made possible through the infolding of space, infinitely through the spiral, and appears to us to relieve progress of its purposive support. Here, in addition to Smithson’s politics of disgust (Chapter 2), we might also find a disgust with the ever-increasing global economic order of capitalism.

Smithson’s interest in the terminal leads back to several earlier works, including the mirror assemblage *Aerial Map – Proposal for Dallas-Fort Worth Regional Airport*, 1967 [fig. 6.1], and the painted steel sculpture *Terminal*, 1966 [fig. 6.2]. Smithson’s *Aerial Map* can be seen as a flattened and mirrored version of the sculptural piece *Gyrostasis* [fig. 2.4]; indeed, both pieces follow the same geometrical form that folds in on itself to suggest an infinite regress. The ‘infinite terminal’ suggested by *Aerial Map* and *Gyrostasis* is also evident in the sculptural work *Terminal*, 1966 [fig. 6.2]. As Hobbs notes, “Although the word ‘terminal’ has several meanings – end, boundary, terminus, relay attached to wire or cable for making connections, and such devices as a teletype writer enabling communication with a computer – the definition Smithson most likely had in mind when he used this word to title a sculpture was a freight or passenger station” (RSS 78). Hobbs continues, noting that in *Terminal*, many “ideas about the crystalline order of time, the immobilization of space, and the refutation of worn-out concepts of energizing presences are apparent. The sculpture is an enantiomorph composed of pentagonal [sic] sections radiating from each side of a central core. The virtual time and space commonly accorded to realistic sculptures is broken down in this work. […] Terminal is a terminus, an end zone, a point of stasis” (RSS 79). While these earlier sculptural works already suggest Smithson’s interest in dedifferentiating entropic processes, we will now turn to the three-part work of the *Spiral Jetty* – as earthwork, essay, and video – to examine their articulation of entropic force and its attendant meandering form. Following our discussion of the Jetty, we will consider the relations among ebb and flow, pouring and process, and ebullition and meandering, noting their spatial and temporal implications for broader questions of purpose and progress. Finally, we will conclude the chapter with a reassessment of the concept of reclamation within the context of a general economy.
(2) SPIRAL JETTY: SITE OF ABANDONED HOPES

Smithson’s essay ‘The Spiral Jetty,’ originally published in *Arts of the Environment*, edited by György Kepes in 1972 for his ‘Vision + Value’ series, provides an excellent explanation of the artists’ interest in the site on the Great Salt Lake. On location near Rozel Point, Smithson suggests, “A great pleasure arose from seeing all those incoherent structures. This site gave evidence of a succession of man-made systems all mired in abandoned hopes” (RSCW 146). He continues,

As I looked at the site, it reverberated out to the horizons only to suggest an immobile cyclone while flickering light made the entire landscape appear to quake. A dormant earthquake spread into the fluttering stillness, into a spinning sensation without movement. This site was a rotary that enclosed itself in an immense roundness. From that gyrating space emerged the possibility of the Spiral Jetty. No ideas, no concepts, no systems, no structures, no abstractions could hold themselves together in the actuality of that evidence. My dialectics of site and nonsite whirled into an indeterminate state, where solid and liquid lost themselves in each other. [...] No sense wondering about classifications and categories, there were none (RSCW 146).

Here Smithson seems to admit that his previous logic of Site and Nonsite reaches its limit within the landscape surrounding the Great Salt Lake. Yet, far from inspiring a feeling the sublime, Smithson seems to suggest that what was at stake was a cognitive tension. The landscape leaves Smithson, as Blanchot might say, “In search neither of the place, nor of the formula.”168 How to work with such a space? How to work with this site that already disintegrates thought? Smithson goes on to explain that, “After securing a one year lease on the meandering zone” (RSCW 146), he would set out to create an earthwork that could accentuate the confusion of scales already operating on the site. Smithson continues, “The scale of the Spiral Jetty tends to fluctuate depending on where the viewer happens to be. Size determines an object, but scale determines art. [...] A room could be made to take on the immensity of the solar system. Scale depends on one’s capacity to be conscious of the actualities of perception. When one refuses to release scale from size, one is left with an object or language that appears to be

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certain. For me scale operates by uncertainty. To be in the scale of the Spiral Jetty is to out of it” (RSCW 147). The scales are further confused by the recursive repetition of the salt crystals: “And each cubic salt crystal echoes the Spiral Jetty in terms of the crystal’s molecular lattice. Growth in a crystal advances around a dislocation point, in the manner of a screw. The Spiral Jetty could be considered one layer within the spiraling crystal lattice, magnified trillions of times” (RSCW 147). This affect is transferred to the subject, who is lost alongside the art-object the moment it is apprehended. That is, “Here is a reinforcement and prolongation of spirals that reverberates up and down space and time. So it is that one ceases to consider art in terms of an ‘object.’ The fluctuating resonances reject ‘objective criticism,’ because that would stifle the generative power of both visual and auditory scale. [...] One seizes the spiral, and the spiral becomes a seizure” (RSCW 147). The experience of the viewer, at the level of sensation, is enveloped by the Spiral and reverses its own apprehension: far from the non-conceptual apprehension at stake in the aesthetic experience outlined by Kant, for Smithson it is the viewer who is simultaneously apprehended by the multiple scales of the site staged by the earthwork.

Again, as we have seen with Smithson’s early sculpture and with his Nonsite works, the Spiral Jetty forces a confrontation between cognitive/abstract apprehension and empirical/sensory reality. Smithson explains this tension, maximized in the centre of the Jetty, as follows, “After a point, measurable steps (‘Scale skal n. it. or L; it. Scala; L scala usually scalae pl., i.a. originally a ladder; a flight of stairs; hence, b. a means of ascent’) descend from logic to the ‘surd state.’ The rationality of a grid on a map sinks into what it is supposed to define. Logical purity suddenly finds itself in a bog, and welcomes the unexpected event. The ‘curved’ reality of sense perception operates in and out of the ‘straight’ abstractions of the mind” (RSCW 147). Further, “... in the Spiral Jetty the surd takes over and leads one into a world that cannot be expressed by number or rationality. Ambiguities are admitted rather than rejected, contradictions are increased rather than decreased – the alogos undermines the logos” (RSCW 147). If the alogos subsumes the logos through a permissive relation to ambiguity and contradiction, it does so in opposition to the rationality of numerical calculation.
Again, as we noted in the introduction to this chapter above, we find in the Spiral Jetty a refusal of the extensive and commercial logic of a (capitalist) world rules by number.

The Jetty, however, remains largely inaccessible and its notoriety is largely due to the essay and film which permit its dissemination. For Smithson, the film offers an opportunity to double, again, the experience of the site: “For my film (a film is a spiral made up of frames) I would have myself filmed from a helicopter (from the Greek helix, helikos meaning spiral) directly overhead in order to get the scale in terms of erratic steps” (RSCW 148). The film works to unwork the apprehension of the earthwork it documents [fig. 6.3], attacking the sensation of viewing by provoking a desire for some mathematical logic of understanding that it simultaneously denies: “Eyesight is often slaughtered by the other senses, and when that happens it becomes necessary to seek out dispassionate abstractions. The dizzying spiral yearns for the assurance of geometry” (RSCW 148). While this yearning is, in part, realized by the film which gives a certain geometric regularity to the work by way of the regularity of the frame, the film also follows the logic of disintegration operative in the earthwork:

The movie recapitulates the scale of the Spiral Jetty. Disparate elements assume a coherence. Unlikely places and things were stuck between sections of film that show a stretch of dirt road rushing to and from the actual site in Utah. [...] Nevertheless, all the improbabilities would accommodate themselves to my cinematic universe. Adrift amid scraps of film, one is unable to infuse into them any meaning, they seem worn-out, ossified views, degraded and pointless, yet they are powerful enough to hurl one into a lucid vertigo (RSCW 151).

This vertigo reaches a crescendo in what are perhaps the most remarkable lines of the film, where a repetitive series of directional coordinates are repeatedly annihilated by dedifferentiation. Smithson’s monotone annihilation of all direction and co-ordination, of all purposive activity, seem to suggest that he had finally achieved an entropic subsumption of meaning at the centre of the Jetty, and now had only to read out the final verdict that banished the evidentiary bias of aesthetic apprehension:

[Smithson’s voice over:]  
*From the centre of the Spiral Jetty:*
A final verdict, indeed: against the ordinal logic governing the navigable world and its globalizing nautical commerce, Smithson’s elementary dedifferentiation achieves a banal and monotone triumph. Here, the epistemological commitments at the heart of mapping and navigation as the decisive support for the ‘progress’ of political and social life by way of standardization are taken to a higher power, a higher order of standardization: the entropic swallows this practical knowledge.

Later in the essay, Smithson explains his own experience of dissolution suggested by his dedifferentiation of all coordinates,

*Et in Utah ego.* I was slipping out of myself again, dissolving into a unicellular beginning, trying to locate the nucleus at the end of the spiral. All that blood stirring makes one aware of protoplasmic solutions, the essential matter between the formed and the unformed, masses of cells consisting largely of water, proteins, lipoids, carbohydrates, and inorganic salts. Each drop that splashed onto the Spiral Jetty coagulated into a crystal. Undulating waters spread millions upon millions of crystals over the basalt (RSCW 149).

Then, in the film, again doubling the experience of the sited work: “A geopolitics of primordial return ensued. [...] Consciousness of the distant past absorbed the time that went into the making of the movie. I needed a map that would show the prehistoric world as coextensive with the world I existed in” (RSCW 151). The

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169 The passage is included in ‘The Spiral Jetty’ essay; RSCW 149. For a complimentary discussion of the relation between dynamics of the salt crystals in relation to the ordinal system confronted in the film, see David Campbell, “Nonlinear Science: From Paradigms to Practicalities,” in *From Cardinals to Chaos*, edited by Necia Grant Copper (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).
scales are again brought into ambiguous co-presence: not only the 1500 foot Spiral with the molecular logic of the salt crystals, but also the temporal frame of prehistory with those the present frame of the film. As the Spiral translates and amplifies the landscape within which it is sited, the film Spiral Jetty reinterprets and amplifies the absent work which it documents and disseminates.

Returning to the site of the earthwork, in an interview from 1970, Smithson locates the importance of this meandering zone:

A point is like a whirlpool or central vortex. The piece in Salt Lake will be built on a meandering zone, that is unstable, and the idea is to stabilize something that is unstable. It can be seen from the ground. A road comes into it through a big valley, to the salt lake that is shimmering with mirages. The water is red, like an entropic landscape. Sometimes it looks like wine. Crystals will grow on the fringes. It is built on a reef under three feet of water, and it dries up in later summer, so there is a constant shift in physical properties (RSCW 239).

Here is it again clear that Smithson’s interest in the Jetty is its capacity to deny any static reading, overwhelming its own potential as a sign with its constant capacity for mutation, decay, and construction. Lawrence Alloway, in his essay “Sites/Nonsites,” contends that, “[t]here is an incomparable horizontality once you are out on the jetty, as the lake flows to the distant mountains that seem extensions of the concentricity of the landscape rather than limits or edges.”

Still, the white curling spiral on the red field of the Great Salt Lake [fig. 6.5] is indeed a startling sight, even in the mere photographic image of the work. Indeed, the stark contrast is anticipated in Smithson’s drawing from 1970 [fig. 6.4] where we already see his interest in the site as a dynamic attractor for entropic disillusion. Yet, Alloway’s emphasis on the distant flatness experienced from the centre of the spiral suggests the impossibility of these coherent images: from above, whether in the drawing or the photograph, the Jetty can be apprehended as a whole. Alloway’s point is that this capacity to apprehend the work in its totality, or to distinguish it from the horizon into which its emphatic horizontality bleeds, is impossible from the centre of the Jetty.

Further, Alloway contends that “Smithson never chose sites according to what might be described as norms of beauty. The Great Salt Lake is a sombre,

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moody, dead lake that supports no life within its waters except for the algae giving it its red hue. I think I saw the Spiral Jetty under the very best of circumstances, under romantically sublime conditions. [...] The site is a terribly lonely place, cut off and remote, conveying the feeling of being completely shunned by man.”

Alloway’s coding of the work within the Romantic aesthetic logic of the sublime notwithstanding, it is clear that the lonely, emphatically distant aspect of the site also beckons its own ruin and its own forgetting. In the travelogue “The Monuments of Passaic,” Smithson can be seen as creating, according to Hobbs, an “inversion of the romantic sensibility, both by viewing ruins of the recent past which are not yet immortalized through history and by envisaging ruins that will rise into the future” (RSS 88). Similarly, the Jetty rises subtlety above the waterline Great Salt Lake into ruin: both the ruin of the nautical terminal logic of the purposive and commercial logic of the Jetty, and as the ruin or disappearance of the work as it sinks back into the lake. In this sense, the Jetty can be seen as amplifying the scale of disappearance that was operative in works like ‘Incidents of Mirror-Travel in the Yucatan,’ but also extending this logic to the permanence of even the most industrial and massive works. This also reemphasizes the operative strategy of ‘de-architecturing’ discussed in relation to monumentality in Chapter 5, as the monument of the Jetty becomes a monument to ruin.

The ruin of the Jetty finds a further parallel in the writing of Blanchot. In this context, while Blanchot’s cautionary remarks regarding any philosophical recourse to etymology must be kept in mind172, The Writing of the Disaster itself, in its title, calls to mind that dis-astro, a movement without or away from the star, the sun, or, in all likelihood, the navigational relation to the stars (plural) at night: a kind of writing that denies itself a basis for orientation. A dis-membered writing broken off from all navigation, where co-ordinates are subsumed by their indistinguishable position, a moving away where the subject is multiplied by zero. A disaster. In the film, as the sun plays off the water pooled in the centre of the Spiral Jetty, we recall that, for Blanchot, “the indeterminateness of what is written when this word [disaster] is written, exceeds etymology and draws it into the

171 Alloway, “Sites/Nonsites,” p. 54; my italics.
172 “Etymology and eschatology seem to be complicitous”; Blanchot, The Writing of the Disaster, p. 97.
disaster.” Smithson’s inscription of the Spiral Jetty on the surface of the earth suggests another disaster, not one of philosophy, nor of writing, but of the constructive work of art making (as mark making), wherein the work is always already lost in the moment of its realization. Both the work, as art-object, and the viewer, as subject, are annihilated at the centre of the Jetty, where each multiplies the other by zero and the entropic force of dedifferentiation realizes its sovereignty. Similarly, both the essay and the film disseminate the work, taking it away from itself as a discreet art-object and turning it into an absent referent, the Jetty as the Site of the Nonsite essay and film.

In addition to the exposure of any nautical commerce enhanced by the utility of the jetty to its entropic end, Smithson can also be seen as exposing the presumed community of the viewer, that is, the art world, to further questioning. While the presumption of commonality as a basis for spectatorship was a key element of the articulation of aesthetic discourse, Smithson subjects this assumption of community to a cruel evaluation. This evaluation can be understood as analogous to the process described by John Paul Ricco as the unbecoming of community. Ricco quotes Jean-Luc Nancy:

> Perhaps we should not seek a word or a concept for it, but rather recognize in the thought of community a theoretical excess (or more precisely, an excess in relation to the theoretical) that would oblige us to adopt another praxis of discourse and community. ... Which means here that only a discourse of community, exhausting itself, can indicate to the community the sovereignty of its sharing. ... An ethics and politics of discourse and writing are evidently implied here.

The ethics and politics of writing implied in Nancy’s description of the community of excess, or, again, what Ricco terms the unbecoming community, is evident on two different registers in Smithson Jetty. First, he suggests an ethics of disintegration against the consolidation of any (art-viewing) community. This takes place through the dedifferentiating experience of the earthwork itself, as well as through the film and essay which multiply it. Second, the surface of inscription itself reiterates the connection between materiality and discourse, reinforcing the

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173 Blanchot, The Writing of the Disaster, p. 117.  
corporeal dimension of any practice of community, while also, simultaneously, attacking this dimension through the ephemeral iterations of the work. The Jetty suggests an ethics and politics of excess, exhausting, as Ricco and Nancy suggest, the laudatory constitutive inscription of community by marking its entropic end through a monument that is already in ruin.

(3) EBB & FLOW

Following the logic of the meander, we have already noted that the Spiral Jetty as an artefact, that is, as a distortion of the function or purpose of a nautical terminal, both realizes and intensifies elements of Terminal, 1966, and Aerial Map — Proposal for the Dallas-Fort Worth Regional Airport, 1967, escalating the logic of infinity in a dramatic fashion. Turning to Bataille, we will now consider how Smithson’s staging of this entropic swirl suggests another explicit materialization of the logic of expenditure. As we have seen, for Bataille, the dissolution of the identity of the I is a decisive moment of freedom from utility. We find this argument throughout his work, including Erotism: “If necessary I can say in eroticism: I am losing myself. Not a privileged situation, no doubt. But the deliberate loss of self in eroticism is manifest; no one can question it.” As we have seen, Bataille’s schema of sovereignty gives a privileged place to the erotic dissolution of the self, or the ‘I’, as it enables an experiential dislocation of purpose-driven activity. Neither for purpose nor for gain, the erotic disillusion in pleasure is exactly that, in pleasure, without any direction or meaning beyond itself. A total submission: mud, salt crystals, rocks, water.

However, if Death and Sensuality takes up the question of dissolution from the side of a disintegrating subjectivity, Bataille’s earlier writing, particularly in his entry ‘Space – 1’ for the ‘Critical Dictionary,’ would emphasize the philosophical ambition to safeguard the object site of epistemological illumination: “It is not surprising that the mere utterance of the word space should introduce philosophical protocol. Philosophers, being the masters of ceremony of the abstract universe, have pointed out how space should behave under all

\footnote{Bataille, Erotism, p. 31.}
This would also relate to the ‘heterological’ attack on epistemology in Bataille’s early writings. As Bataille claims, in section ‘The Heterological Theory of Knowledge’ in the essay “The Use Value of D.A.F. de Sade, “In that way it [heterology] leads to the complete reversal of the philosophical process, which ceases to be the instrument of appropriation, and now serves excretion; it introduces the demand for violent gratifications implied by social life” (VE 97). As philosophy is relieved of its ambitions for idealized appropriations of space – the space of a known and predictable behavior – by Bataille’s interrogation the abstraction, Smithson similarly relieves the work of art production of its ambitions for any socially-useful end. Both suggest that a fundamental confrontation with the very notion of work, and the ideality of Man as worker, are at stake.

As we have seen above, the reversal of this appropriative drive of philosophical work is modelled, at least in part, on the general economic principle of an excess of energy. Thus, at Stoekl explains, “It is the energy that by definition does not work, that is insubordinate, that plays now rather that contributing to some effort that may mean something at some later date and that is devoted to some transcendent goal or principle. It is, as Bataille reminds us a number of times, the energy of the universe, the energy of stars and “celestial bodies” that do no work, whose fire contributes to nothing.” That is, Bataille, like Smithson, wants to dedifferentiate the human from ‘nature’ in order to position ‘Man’ not as the measure of all things, but as one energetic relay among others. Again, while Bataille skirts vitalist and nihilist lines with this argument, it should be emphasized that he bypasses the limits of both by insisting on the excessive nature of the general (i.e. energetic) economy. It is not that human life is limited by its ‘natural’ constraints; for Bataille, it is exactly the opposite problem: human life, in attempting to distinguish itself from the energetic flow of the general economy, loses its capacity for a rhythm of relation, or a cadence of existence. This problem can be summarized, for Bataille, through the following reference to Nietzsche: “The notion of ebb and flow. There’s a deficiency we have to admit here. ‘We do not have the right to wish for a single state. We have to desire to

177 Stoekl, Bataille’s Peak, p. xvi.
become like periodic beings: like existence.’ (The Will to Power).”¹⁷⁸ That is, even the most noble (i.e. the most stable) of gases are still only periodic expressions of stability. Bataille continues,

River flowing grey, under skies thick with wind, dark clouds, dense mists, magic of the whole world suspended in still emerging evening coolness, at the ungraspable moment of inevitable heavy downpour, forests, grasslands trembling in anguish like women about to give in. I’m coming close to the laceration of reason—and within me happiness grows, and with it a growth in my evident inability to possess it! We were like a meadow about to be drenched by rain — vulnerable under wan skies. We had only one choice — to lift our glasses to our lips, drink gently of the immense gentleness of the turbulence of things.¹⁷⁹

Here Bataille’s highly literary description returns us to the question of the acceptance of the processes of the expenditure of the general economy: an embrace of the gentle turbulence as the sky breaks open, to drink from this opening with the recognition that it cannot be possessed. Neither alienated nor subjected, Bataille’s nature courses through us as periodic beings. As in Bataille’s The Accursed Share, the image of an infinite expenditure will suffice: “Let us go back to the image of champagne, itself animated by the movement of general exuberance and clearly symbolic of an overflowing energy” (AS2 41).

In the essay ‘Cultural Confinement,’ 1972 Smithson takes a similar position regarding the meandering realities of nature that deny any sense of progress or end: “Parks are idealizations of nature, but nature in fact is not a condition of the ideal. Nature does not proceed in a straight line, it is rather a sprawling development” (RSCW 155). An ebb and flow: the river appears explicitly in Smithson’s ‘Incidents of Mirror-Travel in the Yucatan,’ 1969, during the 6th displacement: “The current of the river carried one swiftly along. Perception was stunned by small whirlpools suddenly bubbling up till they exhausted themselves into minor rapids. No isolated moment on the river, no fixed point, just flickering moments of tumid duration” (RSCW 127). The meandering vicissitudes of the river, like those of the individual, are in fact coded with a Moral logic: as the etymological meaning of the term ‘vicissitude’ suggests, straying from a linear progression is always already coded as a turn toward vice. The moral risks of

¹⁷⁹ Bataille, On Nietzsche, p. 137.
‘meandering’ are evident in every laudatory estimation of progress, as well as in every denunciation of indecision and inefficiency. Before turning to a more specific analysis of the relation between meandering and ebullition and their attendant modes of expression, we will pause, in the next section, to consider the unique emphasis on process in Smithson’s work.

(4) POURING? ON VERBS & PROCESSES

The American sculptor Richard Serra was an important friend and ally in Smithson’s attack on the aesthetic conventions of modernity. This friendship was articulated in the concerns and commitments shared by both artists, as well as their provocative work in the 1960s which challenged the sanctity of the art-object, emphasizing, instead, the processual dimension of making. In this context, if it is to be thought, Richard Serra’s Verb List (1967-68) – and influential provocation for many other artists of the period – must be read slowly, with a careful attention to each verb and its attendant imagery and conceptual resonance (we thus encourage the reader to linger here):

- to roll to curve
- to crease to lift
- to fold to inlay
- to store to impress
- to bend to fire
- to shorten to flood
- to twist to smear
- to dapple to rotate
- to crumple to swirl
- to shave to support
- to tear to hook
- to chip to suspend
- to split to spread
- to cut to hang
- to sever to collect
- to drop of tension
- to remove of gravity
- to simplify of entropy
- to differ of nature
- to disarrange of grouping
- to open of layering
- to mix of felting
- to splash to grasp
- to knot to tighten
- to spill to bundle
- to droop to heap
to flow  to gather
to scatter  to modulate
to arrange  to distil
to repair  of waves
to discard  of electromagnetic

to pair  of inertia

to distribute  of ionization

to surfeit  of polarization

to complement  of refraction

to enclose  of simultaneity

to surround  of tides

to encircle  of reflection

to hide  of equilibrium

to cover  of symmetry

to wrap  of friction

to dig  to stretch

to tie  to bounce

to bind  to erase

to weave  to spray

to join  to systematize

to match  to refer

to laminate  to force

to bond  of mapping

to hinge  of location

to mark  of context

to expand  of time

to dilute  of carbonization

to light  to continue

While the end of the verb list points to the question of light, and thus, of sight, it is Smithson who notes the difficulty of the site with respect to every location: “‘I told him [Serra],’ he said grinning, ‘that is was going to be tough.’ Every time to found your place in a site the site kicked you out of it. Makes you feel like a fool. That’s what Serra was going through.” Here Smithson is referring to Serra’s attempt to site the work *Shift*, yet his comments help us identify the significance of the last verb in Serra’s list: *to continue*. The infinitive is, itself, a suggestion of continuity, where the present is constantly elided: one continues into the future as one has continued to pursue the site to its end in the realization of the work. But the site, as such, is in a conceptual tension with the infinitive. The difficulties of ‘siting’, signalled in Smithson’s comments about Serra’s *Shift*, suggest that the

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processual dynamics of any given spatial configuration invite and deny, simultaneously, any realization of an art work. The work, as in the Spiral Jetty, attempts to amplify and accentuate the dynamic, while risking its ruin in the frozen and fixed realization of the work. This is the impossibility of entering the site, of selecting the site, and of become an element within the infinitive process that makes the site legible. It is for this reason that Smithson denies any interest in the process as such: that is, it is not the process that Smithson attempts to capture, but the tension between the selection and articulation of the site and their relation to the site as process or infinitive. To translate. To disintegrate.

As Smithson contends, “You see, it’s ultimately what’s done after the truck pulls away. I’m not interested in process, but only insofar as the process is absorbed into the experience of the piece. And then you have just the piece. The piece is at once solidly there, but it’s subject to the elements. And yet, all the battering they take, as parts break off . . . the trickles and the bleeds on the side must disintegrate, the main body of it will just sort of lie there. I’m interested in that downslope” (RSCW 215). This again suggests the need for Smithson to turn his art against itself: “You can always see in my work that the art is against itself. There’s always an aspect where the mirrors cancel their reflectivity, the perspective has no vanishing point, the gravitation is suspended. In the case of [Asphalt Rundown] it sort of stops before it hits the bottom. So in the case of the falls . . . it’s arrested again . . . That’s sort of like isolated like a petrified river . . . so there you have the sense of something very definite in time, yet the moment gives you the sense of timelessness” (RSCW 216). We will return to Smithson’s Asphalt Rundown below; presently, what is most consequential to note in these passages is the artist’s emphasis on the self-canceling dynamics of his work. In this sense, we turn in the next section to the conceptual-sensory doublet of ebullition and meandering as they play out against the Moral backformation of spatial and temporal restrictions.

(5) EBULLITION IS TO SPACE WHAT MEANDERING IS TO TIME

In Chapter 2 we saw how Bataille characterized energy on earth by arguing the fact of its predominant overabundance and then locating the human ‘curse’ as
the affliction of the political and social orders which attempt to modulate this surplus of energy through conservation. On this point, we recall that, for Bataille,

If the path is paved with asphalt, it is for a long time sheltered from the pressure. This means that the volume of life possible, assuming that the path were abandoned instead of being covered with asphalt, will not be realized, that the additional energy corresponding to this volume is lost, is dissipated in some way. [...] In a sense, life suffocates within limits that are too close; it aspires in manifold ways to an impossible growth; it releases a steady flow of excess resources, possibly involving large squanderings of energy. The limit of growth being reached, life, without being in a closed container, at least enters into ebullition: Without exploding, its extreme exuberance pours out in a movement always bordering on explosion (AS 30).

Here, ‘progress’ can only be understood as the varying results driven by the dynamics of pressure and its unequal distribution, measured according to ratios of acceptability within a given social register or political context. This description of excess also leads to questions of temporality and its expression of the tensions between excess and conservation.

Smithson’s work Asphalt Rundown, 1969 [fig. 6.6] in Rome makes his interest in a sort of petrifaction between time and timelessness materially explicit while giving further material expression to Bataille’s theoretical description of ebullition. As Hobbs explains, “A dump truck released a load of asphalt to flow down an eroded hillside in an abandoned section of a gravel and dirt quarry in Rome. The black viscous material merged with the hillside; along its edge it traced a few of the washed-out gullies, thus freezing erosion. The asphalt was molded by the earth, the Rundown became a casting of erosion, and the entire piece a grand tribute to entropy. [...] an overlay of industrial sludge” (RSS 174-5). An industrial-scale refutation of Pollock: neither abstract nor expressive, in this work Smithson creates a frozen portrait of entropy, which is then left to be subjected to the entropic force of decay and dedifferentiation it ephemerally captured. This is important, especially because, as Smithson makes clear in an interview in 1970, “I’m not interested in ‘happenings,’ or process for process sake” (RSCW 238). The Rundown is not a staging of process in the same way that many artists of the period where attempting to emphasize the processual dynamics of making over the realized work of art; instead, as Smithson argues, “I think there are a lot of
naive attitudes among the people involved in this, like some new sort of freedom, implying constantly going out to the periphery. If you go out far enough, it just gets into a fog. If there is no dialectic, then there is no control over what is going on; they just do things to compete with the vagueness of the situation. The process is important, but within the process each moment is subject to an arrest in the process” (RSCW 235). Here we see again how the process is retained in the determination, and how the determination is only possible by its indelible relation to process. Yet, this is not simply in order to emphasize the processual dimension of the work, but to animate the tensions between process and determination in any differential relation.

To ‘go out far enough,’ for Smithson, requires a dialectical-differential control that permits a concrete encounter with the limit. As he writes in “Cultural Confinement,” 1972, “I am speaking of a dialectics that seeks a world outside of cultural confinement. Also, I am not interested in art works that suggest ‘process’ within the metaphysical limits of the neutral room. There is no freedom in that kind of behavioural game playing. The artist acting like a B.F. Skinner rat doing his ‘tough’ little tricks is something to be avoided. Confined process is no process at all. It would be better to disclose the confinement rather than make illusions of freedom” (RSCW 155). He continues, “The point of convergence is always being lost . . . In the case of all these perspectives, you can walk around and they just destroy themselves as perspectives. The gestalt loses itself” (RSCW 216). In this sense, as Smithson explains, Asphalt Rundown “dealt, in a funny way, with all the implications of the early work. The outer fanning of it, in a sense, follows the same kind of irregular perception coming from this central point and sort of fanning out, as it goes down. It’s very thermodynamic in the sense that it’s hot material that is gradually cooling down […] My interest here [in Asphalt Rundown] is to root it to the contour of the land, so that it’s permanently there and subject to the weathering” (RSCW 225; see also RSCW 239). More ebullient than determinate, and less progressive than meandering, Smithson again offers a striking material realization of Bataille’s philosophical commitment to expenditure.

Smithson’s other ‘pouring’ works provide further material support to the energetic exuberance that can never be completely disentangled from its entropic
realization. In both *Concrete Pour, 1969* and *Glue Pour, 1969* [fig. 6.7], Smithson gives the art-work, as well as the control of the artist, over to the force of entropy. *Glue Pour* “was created for ‘955,000,’ an exhibition organized by Lucy R. Lippard for the Vancouver Art Gallery” (RSS 182). As Hobbs explains, “When the *Pour* was enacted, bright orange glue was poured down an eroded dirt slope. Ironically, the glue turned out to be water soluble, and the *Pour* was erased by a few rainfalls” (RSS 182). Like the city of Passaic, this work is a veritable pouring into ruin, washed away by a broader economy of energy. We should also note the materials for these pouring works all signal industrial scale production and the real material economy of an urban context increasingly driven by mass production. In this sense, the seemingly wasteful and pointless pouring of asphalt on the abandoned quarry site undermines the progress-driven logic of infrastructural highway development by speeding up the entropic decay of the material itself. Similarly with the glue and concrete pours, Smithson not only gives the work over to the forces of entropy, but suggests, at a cognitive level, the ambiguous tension between paving, building and construction and their ultimate realization in a city of decay, forever dependant on further energies of maintenance to defer their ultimate entropic end. It is in this sense that we can see how the meandering time of entropy annihilates the progressive history of Man in the pouring works.

In addition to these more raw materials of construction, for Smithson, the illusion of a progressive history is also supported by the art historical representations of the museum space, as we have noted in previous chapters. In his essay ‘Some Void Thoughts on Museums’, he contends:

> History is a facsimile of events held together by flimsy biographical information. Art history is less explosive than the rest of history, so it sinks faster into the pulverized regions of time. History is representational, while time is abstract; both of these artifices may be found in museums, where they span everybody’s own vacancy. The museum undermines one’s confidence in sense-data and erodes the impression of textures upon which our sensations exist (RSCW 41).

In this way, the museum sustains the restricted economies of Moral representation, along with the progress of Man they narrate. While nearly all of Smithson’s later works attack the museological functions of representational memory with an abstract geological aggression, one final work – Smithson’s pencil
drawing *Meandering Canal with Mounds*, 1971 [fig. 6.8] – suggests the collaboration between ebullition and meandering. Like the drawing *Meandering Island*, 1971 (RSS 205), the work suggests a turn away from the spiralling, self-enclosing works such as *Gyrostatic*, *Aerial Map*, and *Spiral Jetty*, toward an overflowing and multi-directional excess. The drawing suggests an excess of energy that orients itself according to the *alogos* of meandering. We will now turn to the final section of this final chapter to examine how Smithson’s own attempts at gaining support for reclamation works (all of which remained unrealized at the time of his death) demonstrate a further, final exaggeration of an aesthetics of expenditure.

(6) UNREQUITED RECLAMATIONS

It is indeed important to include, at the end of these meanderings, some discussion of Smithson’s turn to reclamatory art projects and their unrequited proposals. In 1971, Smithson began to petition industrial corporations to allow him to create works that would frame, respond to, or otherwise articulate the sites of extraction left barren by their industrial activities, typically mining. These scarred sites were, for Smithson, an opportunity to intervene in vast and often overwhelming landscapes of destruction. As Hobbs explains, Smithson’s first reclamation statement [called] for the ‘recycling’ of natural resources through Earth art. He maintained that art could mediate between the ecologist and the industrialist, although he did not specify how. He later explained, in numerous letters to corporate heads, that Earthworks could provide a redeeming focus to reclamation projects. Rather than attempting to create images of paradise – an impossible task – corporations could reclaim large portions of land by creating grazing land or recreation areas for skiing and boating and leave the tailings ponds, steep-walled water impoundments, and deep pits to Earth artists who would make them focal points on which people could reflect about devastation – in much the same way that they contemplate natural forces in the Grand Canyon (RSS 216).

While Smithson’s articulation of his logic of reclamation could easily be read as some form of social-improvement or return to nature by way of aesthetic improvements or ‘editing,’ the issue is somewhat more complicated. As we have seen repeatedly in the previous chapters, and as is again explicit in Smithson’s own writing from 1971, “ECONOMICS, WHEN ABSTRACTED FROM THE WORLD,
IS BLIND TO NATURAL PROCESSES. ART CAN BECOME A RESOURCE, THAT MEDIATES BETWEEN THE ECOLOGIST AND THE INDUSTRIALIST. ECOLOGY AND INDUSTRY ARE NOT ONE-WAY STREETS, RATHER THEY SHOULD BE CROSS-ROADS. ART CAN HELP TO PROVIDE THE NEEDED DIALECTIC BETWEEN THEM” (RSCW 376). In an untitled piece from the following year, Smithson adds that, “A dialectic between mining and land reclamation must be developed. such devastated places as strip mines could be recycled in terms of earth art. the artist and the miner must become conscious of themselves as natural agents” (RSCW 379). Like the idealization and control of space for which Bataille chastens the philosophers, Smithson seems to suggest that art, as a ‘resource’, could in some way help return the catastrophic sites of industry to some useful human purpose. What is more significant is how the processes of industry are brought back into the logic of geology: that is, Smithson’s desire to ‘edit’ these scenes repeats the process and logic of Olmsted’s landscape architecture and his relation with geology.

It is in this sense that we should understand the practice of mining as a specific iteration of a more general expression of the human trajectory of conservation: by pausing on the site of its exhaustion, Smithson might return the progress to a more general economy of sedimentation, where the social and political implications of such practices would be cognitively present alongside the overwhelming sensory experience of the site of disaster. It is a mining exhausted of purpose, but, simultaneously given a strange ‘purpose’ (as art) in an effort that would return the site of the mine to ambiguity. The ebb and flow of materials and energy, moving from acceptability to condemnation in the course of human history. Still, Smithson did not realize any of the reclamation projects before his death. For this reason, we turn to another especially compelling example of the ebb and flow of river meandering in the incredible series of maps of the ancient courses of the Mississippi River (see Plates 22-1 to 22-15 [fig. 6.9]) composed by Harold N. Fisk. What these plates make clear are the overwhelming

entanglements and the interrelation of hydrological and geological processes through the meandering transformation of the river bed and its landscape. The entanglement of these two economies of energy and their dynamics of influence are clear in works as divergent as Theodor Schwenk’s *Sensitive Chaos: The Creation of Flowing Forms in Water and Air* and Manuel Delanda’s “Inorganic Life.” Both Schwenk and Delanda, despite their very different commitments, demonstrate that the interrelation of the geological and hydrologic processes is a key to understanding the operative potential of either system. For Delanda, aspects of selection pressures within nonlinear systems “play the same role that processes of sedimentation perform in the case of rocks.” He continues, “Like patterns in the sedimentary deposits that form at the bottom of the ocean, the accumulated patterns of adaptive traits and behaviours brought about by natural selection are very ephemeral. They slowly sediment over many generations but they can be wiped out by a single large-scale bifurcation, like the onset of an ice age.”

However, we do not need an ice age to see that these large-scale bifurcations, to borrow Delanda’s language of nonlinear science, have tremendous impact on human settlements. As in the case of the Lower Mississippi, and, the Lower 9th ward of the city of New Orleans, attempts to confine, contain, and control processes of meandering evince the operative search to increase energetic conservation and efficiency. Thus, we recall that Bataille’s notion of expenditure leads us to interrogate the processes of restriction that cause us to face an inevitable expenditure: glorious or catastrophic. The choice of the Lower Mississippi as an example here is not intended to stress the catastrophic outcomes of human conservation; in this case, the attempts to invest so much energy in a process of restriction that denies the fundamental physical dynamics

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of the river and its movement is clear. The obvious response, is, of course, to ‘green’ the site following the Katrina disaster and invest more capital and resources into building a safer, more sustainable city.\textsuperscript{186} The question of this development is, however, also tied to a more explicitly political problem: the terms of acceptability that govern our relation to lost energy, as Bataille has made clear, is a political question. The exposure to the risks of a form of human settlement and development such as New Orleans makes brutally clear how the terms of acceptability are also those of race and class, barely hidden within the immediate wake of the disaster.

It is within the turbulent wake of these debates that we endure the violence of the biopolitical present: with the force of an ambiguous and precarious attention to cultural practices, and against all attempts to subsume these practices within the necroeconomic order of Capital (forever driven to conserve the energies it exploits in search of greater profits), we search for forms of social life beyond the restricted horizons of utility or necessity. If the project of Critical philosophy continues, in the present epoch, to infect our political compositions and social practices, it is still by way of the investment structure it both presupposes and profits from, compelling our obedience to the trilogy of Man, God, and World, and the suffering they command. Our enduring astriction is one that is lessened only through the interrogative practices of culture which confront the politics of conservation with a severity and force – whether material or philosophical – capable of emboldening our social organizations beyond the limits of Moral utility. Gloriously or catastrophically: we confront the politics of acceptability with a culture, or aesthetics, of expenditure. The intolerability of the present geological age of the Anthropocene certainly does not require such protracted academic exercises as these to make itself known; it is only in the experience of the moment that this intolerability is lived, and, whenever possible, contested. In every moment, an infinite work: periodic, like existence.

\textsuperscript{186} For an especially prescient analysis of the biopolitical implications of the human attempts to control energetic economies, and the relation between these modes of restriction and the politics of sustainability, see Yates McKee, “Haunted Housing: Eco-Vanguardism, Eviction, and the Biopolitics of Sustainability in New Orleans,” in Grey Room 30 (Winter 2008), pp. 84-113.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


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