A User’s Guide to Entropy*

YVE-ALAIN BOIS AND ROSALIND KRAUSS

ENTROPY. Roger Caillois’s example is simple: hot and cold water mixing together to settle into a uniformly tepid blandness.1 Robert Smithson’s is only somewhat more complex. To explain entropy he asks his reader to imagine a sandbox filled on one side with white sand and on the other with black.2 A little boy begins to run around the enclosure in a clockwise direction, kicking up the sand as he goes and mixing together dark grains with light. He is then told to reverse his course and run counterclockwise. This will certainly do nothing to undo the movement toward uniformity and re-sort the two colors into separate fields. As his legs continue to churn, the process of entropy will, irreversibly, only progress and deepen.

Although both these meditations on the second law of thermodynamics were conceived at more or less the same time—Caillois’s “La dissymétrie” first presented as a lecture in 1970, Smithson’s “The Monuments of Passaic” written in 1967—Caillois’s argument reaches back to his earliest, brilliant essays from Minotaure, published in the 1930s. Medusa & Co., his book on the phenomenon of animal mimicry which in 1960 expanded the ideas of his 1935 “Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia,” works on some of the same material that will now concern him in relation to entropy, namely, the dissymmetry between left and right that runs right back from the rightward spiraling of the galaxies, through the superior dexterity of the right side of humans, down to the preference for the right half of the nucleic chain in the chemical compounds that make up life.3

This bridge to the subject of mimicry, plus the nature of the two examples, particularly Smithson’s, could give the impression that entropy’s import is particularly acute for visual analysis and most especially for that which concerns

* The main body of the catalogue for the exhibition L'Informe: mode d'emploi, from which this group of texts derives, is in dictionary form, divided roughly into four sections: Base Materialism; Horizontality; Pulse; and Entropy. As is clear from the alphabetical organization of the following entries, “entropy” puts in its first appearance near the beginning of the dictionary, and then forms a cluster at the end.
3. Caillois’s argument in La dissymétrie, however, is that this break with symmetry is antientropic, producing the imbalance that allows for the break to occur between inorganic life, which is strictly crystalline and symmetrical in structure, and organic life.

modernist painting. For the image of the sandbox's erasure of the division between white and black seems to rhyme very nicely with the photographs from *Minotaure* of insects so perfectly imitating the patterns of their habitats as to vanish completely into the uniformity of one, continuous texture. And this in turn makes it seem that what is at issue is a question of boundary or contour, which is to say, of the distinction between figure and ground.

Indeed, in Caillois's early essay the boundary condition is precisely what breaks down in what is described as a form of insectoid psychosis, as the animal is unable to hold the distinction between itself and its leafy milieu intact. Caillois compares this condition to that reported by schizophrenics who feel themselves dispossessed and even devoured by the space around them. In the grip of this, he writes,

The individual breaks the boundary of his skin and occupies the other side of his senses. He tries to look at himself from any point whatever of space. He feels himself becoming space. . . . He is similar, not similar to something, but just similar. And he invents spaces of which he is "the convulsive possession."  

The steady erosion of figure/ground distinction which ties the schizophrenic to what has been termed the "subjective detumescence" of the animal gripped by mimicry might indeed seem to blend imperceptibly into that clamor for the erasure of distinctions that characterized the world of avant-garde practice, such as the call for the collapse of the barrier "separating art from life." But more specifically, since the mimic example apparently addresses the visual condition of figure/ground, it would seem to resonate with the ambition internal to "high modernism" to conceive a spatial condition unique to the perceptual modality specific to the arts of vision, one that would cancel all separations of figures from their surrounding spaces or backgrounds to produce a continuum unimaginable for our earthly bodies to traverse, but into which we as viewers might easily slide—or glide—in an effortless, soaring, purely optical movement.

And "purity" is, indeed, the operative word in this ideological drive toward a visualist or "optical" dimension. For in sloughing off the inevitable separations of space as we normally experience it, in which objects stand apart from one another and space is discontinuous with them, this new optical continuum would be the result of what one vocabulary would call sublation—as figure and ground achieve a new and higher synthesis—and another sublimation, since the purified space would, in dispensing with bodies, rid itself as well of all the drives to which bodies are

6. The operative text here is Clement Greenberg's "Modernist Painting" (1960), in which he describes this opticality: "The Old Masters created an illusion of space in depth that one could imagine oneself walking into, but the analogous illusion created by the Modernist painter can only be seen into; can be traveled through, literally or figuratively, only with the eye" (Greenberg, *The Collected Essays and Criticism*, vol. 4, ed. John O'Brian [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993], p. 90).
lamentably prone, erotic and otherwise. As both sublation and sublimation would indicate, furthermore, this act of purification is understood as formal progress, rather than the reverse: as a process of moving visual form closer to *eidos*; of visual form divested of its natural accoutrements and taken up closer to the idea of itself.

So it is important to note that the models Smithson actually built, whether in his early sculpture or his writings, were determinedly antivisualist. For him the intellectual challenge of thinking about entropy was temporal rather than spatial, which is why he liked the geological metaphor, the idea of a spatial site ravaged by billions of years of upheaval that results in the stratifications of the geological “clock” appearing to have been submitted to the mercy of a gigantic cocktail shaker. Describing such a site he writes, “Syncline (downward) and anticline (upward) outcroppings and the asymmetrical cave-ins caused minor swoons and vertigos. The brittleness of the site seemed to swarm around one, causing a sense of displacement.”

And when he initially conceived of a sculptural model of this crystalline world, it was in the form of *Enantiomorphic Chambers* (1964), a work made up of facing mirrors positioned in such a way that the viewer placed between them—instead of being multiplied to infinity in the cross fire of reflections—would both disappear from the space ricocheting between the canted, facing planes and observe the trajectory of his or her gaze bifurcate into multiple, unsynthesizable vanishing points. It is not just the viewer’s body that cannot occupy this space, then; it is the beholder’s visual logic as well, as the *Chambers* explore what needs to be called a kind of “structural blindness.”

Another model for this vertiginous (anti-)visual field, antivisual because it logically erases any beholder, was the simulacreral condition of the mirror itself, the mirror with which Smithson ends his tour of “the monuments of Passaic”:

I walked down a parking lot that covered the old railroad tracks which at one time ran through the middle of Passaic. That monumental parking lot divided the city in half, turning it into a mirror and a reflection—but the mirror kept changing places with the reflection. One never knew what side of the mirror one was on. There was nothing *interesting* or even strange about that flat monument, yet it echoed a kind of cliché idea of infinity.

When Plato introduces the notion of the simulacrum in *The Sophist* he describes it as a copy that, though identical, has paradoxically become nonresemblant. Since all earthly objects are themselves copies of *forms*, it is not the fact of being a copy that is simulacral, but that of being an *untrue*, nonresemblant copy, as in the Christian doctrinal case in which humanity is made in God’s image, but, having fallen into sin, no longer resembles Him. Christian revelation itself provides a guide through which the individual subject can map its way through a thicket of

8. Smithson, *Writings*, p. 73.
false replicas and back to the inner truth that would secure resemblance. But in *The Sophist*, Plato imagines the possibility of a mapless world, in which there would be no way to measure, no way to tell the difference between the true copy and the simulacrum, and thus “what side of the mirror one was on.”

This is why for Smithson, entropy was less a condition of boundaries surmounted within a visualist space mastered by a transcendental subject than a function of a structural blindness brought on by a kind of simulacral riddle that perplexingly has no place in space at all. Unsurprisingly, for Caillois as well, it is the simulacral puzzle that is at the heart of his interest in mimicry. Caillois tells the story of the praying mantis, the ultimate mimetic animal, who not only folds itself into a stalk-like immobility through which it becomes visually indistinguishable from the branches on which it sits, but outrunning the visual in this domain, uses as its main line of defense against its predictors the strategy of playing dead. Indeed, so deep is the imitative reflex ingrained in this creature that it can, when decapitated and thus truly dead, continue to mime the functions of life, such as hunting for food, building a nest, even laying eggs, all the way up to the ultimate form of its preservation of life: that of “playing dead.” And like Smithson’s mirror of Passaic, it is this intellectual vista into the abyss of the undecidable-into-infinity that fixates Caillois on the praying mantis: this most spectacular model of the simulacrum performed as death imitating life imitating death.

If subjectivity is born through reflexiveness, through the possibility of consciousness folding back on itself to take cognizance of itself in the “I think,” it is the merely repetitive possibility of the reflex that undoes the subject, depriving the statement’s “thinking” of its ego. This is the case of the praying mantis, for which the automatism of “playing dead,” which can occur from the vantage of either death or life, makes it possible to imagine the impossible statement “I am dead” to be projected within this situation. This utterance, which no first person can truly pronounce from the horizon of its occurrence, but which the mantis exemplifies, demonstrates the way the simulacral condition is coupled with a radical desubjectivization. For in the case in point, the “am dead” is true; but either way, alive or dead, the “I” is not possible.

“I am seeing” is the analogous statement at the level of visual form. Reflexive modernism wants to cancel the naturalism in the field of the object in order to bring about a newly heightened sense of the subject, a form that creates the illusion that it is nothing except the fact that “I am seeing” [it]. The entropic, simulacral move, however, is to float the field of seeing in the absence of the subject; it wants to show that in the automatism of repetition to infinity, the disappearance of the first person is the mechanism that triggers formlessness.

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QUALITIES (WITHOUT). "To turn an object upside-down is to deprive it of its meaning," as Merleau-Ponty notes in his *Phenomenology of Perception*. And the example he gives is particularly convincing (try it and see!):

If someone is lying on a bed, and I look at him from the head of the bed, the face is for a moment normal. It is true that the features are in a way disarranged, and I have some difficulty in realizing that the smile is a smile, but I feel that I could, if I wanted, walk around the bed, and I seem to see through the eyes of a spectator standing at the foot of the bed. If the spectacle is protracted, it suddenly changes its appearance: the face takes on an utterly unnatural aspect, its expressions become terrifying, and the eyelashes and eyebrows assume an air of materiality such as I have never seen in them. For the first time I really see the inverted face as if this were its "natural" position: in front of me I have a pointed, hairless head with a red, teeth-filled orifice in the forehead and, where the mouth ought to be, two moving orbs edged with glistening hairs and underlined with stiff brushes.¹

Why would this be? Because our perception is oriented (and oriented in relation to our upright posture): it's this that Merleau-Ponty retains from Gestalt psychology. Certainly, but why the tragic tone? Because here it is a question of the human face: the panic comes from the fact that the narcissistic imago of the perceiver has been attacked.

But doesn't this failure of specular identification, a sort of demonstration by negative example of the formative function of the mirror stage such as that had been isolated by Lacan, have its comic aspects as well? The upended face, of which Merleau-Ponty speaks, is also that of a grotesque clown: the panic that overcomes the philosopher could just as well have led to laughter. And this, moreover, is what inevitably happens when the reversal involves neither the human face nor the whole body.

"We should like to know what the ego would be in a world in which no one had any idea of mirror symmetry," Lacan wonders, a world, for instance—to refer to the famous example used by Kant—in which the noncongruence of the left and right hands would go unnoticed. What happens when noncongruence is itself inverted, as in Hans Bellmer's photographs of hands crossing back-to-back (1934)? Or when the hands (or the mirror) are pivoted into the horizontal plane, as in Bruce Nauman's *Finger Touch No. 1* and *Finger Touch with Mirrors* (1966)? Nothing less than a "psychasthenic" loss of the subject, a burlesque return to animality, a leaking away into the nondifferentiated.3


3. See Caillois, "Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia." On this text, see the articles "Entropy" and "Water Closet."

*Hans Bellmer.* Three Hands. 1934.
And if the overturned object doesn’t belong to our own bodies? It becomes a
kind of black hole in our perception, reminding us that our self-assurance, insofar
as it rests only on the solidity of our legs, is in fact rather precarious. Perhaps this
is what Robert Smithson wanted to show with his *Upside-Down Trees*; he says that
flies were attracted to them by their riddle-like character:

> Flies would come and go from all over to look at the upside-down
trees, and peer at them with their compound eyes. What the fly sees is
"something a little worse than a newspaper photograph as it would
look to us under a magnifying glass." (See Animals Without Backbones,
Ralph Buchsbaum.) The "trees" are dedicated to the flies. . . . They are
all welcome to walk on the roots with their sticky, padded feet, in
order to get a close look. *Why should flies be without art?*4

Smithson’s flies are ludicrous—they have more to do with that visual quack
landing “on the nose of the orator” to which Bataille alludes in his important article
on “the human face,” much to the disgust of André Breton, than with those dead
ones, in close-up, by Boiffard, or those shown in macrophotographs illustrating
another of Bataille’s texts, this time of a dark pessimism, published in the final issue
of *Documents* ("The Modern Spirit and the Game of Transpositions").

The flies are ludicrous, but nonetheless they signal the limited character of
our human world. Smithson moreover makes immediate allusion to the geographic
inversion that these “upside-down trees” presuppose: “Perhaps they are dislocated
‘North and South poles’ marking peripheral places, polar regions of the mind
fixed in mundane matter—poles that have slipped from the geographical moor-
ings of the world’s axis. Central points that evade being central.”5 The upside-down
tree is a sadistic reply to the habitual childish question, What would happen if a
tunnel were dug below my feet that would come out on the other side of the earth?
The world loses it center, that is, it has no meaning or direction (we are lost there)
because its imaginary seat is inverted—as Piero Manzoni himself had demonstrated
in 1961 with his *Socle du monde*.

Without consciousness of “mirror symmetry” the subject would dissolve into
space, and the world, anthropocentric for the Gestalt-oriented human, would be
stripped of its qualities, made characterless, isotropic. We would lose our marbles
there: signs themselves would become empty, flat; there would be smoke without
fire. Even the most immediate elements of communication, the index or indices,
for example, would no longer point to anything. In a world with no differentiation
of “regions within space,” to put it like Kant, imprints would become illegible. For
the world to lose its meaning, it is enough to turn it inside-out like a glove, to
invert the full and the empty. *Platform Made Up of the Space between Two Rectilinear
Boxes on the Floor* (1966), or even *A Cast of the Space under My Chair* (1965–68), by

5. Ibid.
Bruce Nauman, signal above all the indecipherable character of the cast as such: only the caption (itself comic) tells us what it is of. The same what's that? could be uttered before the plaster casts of crumpled paper that Picasso made in 1934 (shortly before the essays by Caillois on animal mimicry and psychasthenia appeared), or faced with the bronze by Jean Arp titled Relief Following the Torn Papers (1930), or with Duchamp's Female Fig Leaf (1950). The upside-down face became hideous for Merleau-Ponty because, as a phenomenologist, he was sworn to uphold the anthropocentric idea of the world: once we abandon this, everything, even the organs of the human body, can be redoubled by prosthetic appendage. No more transpositions, no more metaphors: "The earth is base, the world is world."
RAY GUNS. Trash collection is the business of public sanitation; its recycling, the very height of capitalist alchemy, turns everything into grist for commodification’s mill. But it is also a strategy of aesthetic sublimation that, according to Thomas Crow, is internal to modernism (he has analyzed the cyclical aspect of this in terms of the incorporation of the “low” by the “high”). In this matter of artistic recycling, the work of Dubuffet and of Pop art represent two examples from the two extremes of a huge gamut of possibilities.

As he said himself in 1946, Dubuffet tried to “rehabilitate dirt.” After having listed the materials in the *Hautes Pâtes* shown in his “Mirobolus, Macadam & Cie” exhibition (“very vulgar and cost-free substances such as coal, asphalt, or even dirt”), materials whose shock-effect at the time we now find surprising, he writes:

In the name of what—except perhaps the coefficient of rarity—does man deck himself out in necklaces of pearls and not of spider webs, in fox furs and not in fox innards? In the name of what, I want to know? Don’t dirt, trash, and filth, which are man’s companions during his whole lifetime, deserve to be dearer to him and shouldn’t he pay them the compliment of making a monument to their beauty?

As for Pop art, more nostalgic perhaps than it seems, it takes the inversion covertly carried out by the capitalist economy as its starting point: it’s the commodity itself (and the kitsch of the culture industry) that is the contemporary cast-off, and it is this very throwaway that it’s a matter of redeeming.

Claes Oldenburg started off from Dubuffet (along with Céline, this was the major reference for his beginnings), and he ended up with Pop. Between these two points of his itinerary came the invention of the Ray Gun. Initially it put in a timid appearance in the scrap heap of the first exhibition, “The Street,” in January to March 1960, among the torn silhouettes pinned to the walls or hanging from the ceiling, and in the form of notes that the visitor could read. These notes are Dubuffet “applied” to the urban theme: “The city is a landscape worth enjoying—damn necessary if you live in the city. Dirt has depth and beauty. I love soot and scorching. From all this can come a positive as well as a negative meaning.”

Given the fact that it is urban, the trash is a little less aestheticized than in Dubuffet’s work. The silhouettes were cut out with a blowtorch from material gathered in the street (lots of corrugated cardboard, and newspapers), and the Judson Gallery itself—where a series of “Happenings” also took place—became a kind of trash

can: the ground was littered with detritus of all kinds; bums hung out there. But it was still an aestheticization of trash (which was even more obvious in the second exhibition of “The Street” at the Reuben Gallery two months later, made from the rarefied residues of the first one).

Secluded in the country after these two exhibitions, Oldenburg drew this lesson from them: “A refuse lot in the city is worth all the art stores in the world.”4 It was at this point that he began seriously elaborating the figure of the Ray Gun, at the same time that he prepared the objects he would soon sell for over a year (intermittently from 1961 to 1963), in his studio-shop The Store—ostensibly slapdash and oversized “replicas,” made of cloth soaked in plaster and garishly colored, of perishable foodstuffs, or of tiny objects of contemporary consumption.

The two projects were related (moreover, The Store was placed under the rubric Ray Gun Manufacturing Company, as indicated by the poster announcing its opening): their essential stake, the question of recycling. The Store’s idea takes off from the premise that all avant-gardist daring is assimilable, recuperable by middle-class culture (“The bourgeois scheme is that they wish to be disturbed from time to time, they like that, but then they envelop you, and that little bit is over, and they are ready for the next”). The projected solution to this dilemma: skip over the illusory stage during which art pretends to escape the condition of the commodity. Art objects “are displayed in galleries, but that is not the place for them. A store would be better (Store—place full of objects). Museum in b, [bourgeois] concept equals store in mine.”5 The Store would thus function like any other, each piece sold being immediately replaced on the shelves by another, often made on the spot (like any other store, but this is not to say that the prices, even though modest, would be those of the corner grocery—it wasn’t a matter of “democratizing” art, but of avoiding the detour of its aesthetic sublimation): “Store is cloaca; defecation is passage,” writes Oldenburg.6

The solution was provisional, and Oldenburg knew very well that the objects he sold in his Store would end up in a museum; but it’s from that end that the Ray Gun attacks the problem of recycling. At the outset (in “The Street” show), it was a question of a parodic science-fiction toy, whose image Oldenburg took over by simplifying it. But he quickly saw that it didn’t take anything to make a Ray Gun: any right angle would suffice, even blunted, even barely perceptible. The Ray Gun is the “universal angle”: “Examples: Legs, Sevens, Pistols, Arms, Phalli—simple Ray Guns. Double Ray Guns: Cross, Airplanes. Absurd Ray Guns: Ice Cream Sodas. Complex Ray Guns: Chairs, Beds.”7 Mondrian didn’t need to reduce everything to the right angle: everything is already a right angle. During the time of The Store,

6. Ibid., p. 23. The list of prices can be found in Store Days, pp. 31–34. Rarely under $100, even going up to $899.95 (Oldenburg mimics the commercial ploy of avoiding round numbers).
Oldenburg made huge numbers of Ray Guns (in plaster, in papier mâché, in all kinds of materials in fact), but he soon saw that he didn’t even need to make them: the world is full of Ray Guns. All one has to do is stoop to gather them from the sidewalks (the Ray Gun is an essentially urban piece of trash: Oldenburg produced their anagram as Nug Yar: New York). Even better: he didn’t even need to collect them himself; he could ask his friends to bring them to him (he limited himself to accepting or refusing the find’s addition into the corpus, according to purely subjective criteria). Finally, there are all the Ray Guns one can’t move—splotches on the ground, holes in the wall, torn posters—but which one could photograph. The “inventory” is potentially infinite. And what should be done with this invasive tide? Put it in the museum.

But what museum would want such a proliferation of objects (objects signifying, for all that, nothing but their very proliferation)? Only a simulacrum of a museum could be imagined. The idea for one emerged in 1965 but would not be achieved until 1972, for Documenta V, in Kassel. A selection of Ray Guns was presented in a special wing of the Mouse Museum (a kind of giant Duchampian Boîte en valise, whose ground plan was in the schematic shape of Mickey Mouse’s head—a Double Ray Gun, it should be remarked in passing), and decorously classified in various vitrines according to whether they had been made by the artist, simply altered by him, made by others, or only found (without alteration). The Mouse Museum was reconstructed in 1979. Since then, Ray Guns have once again been piling up on the shelves of Oldenburg’s studio.

But Oldenburg was not the only one to have cruised the city’s trash cans. In France, beginning in 1949, this was also the option pursued by the décollagistes. Oldenburg was countering Abstract Expressionism’s pathos (which had become purely rhetorical); for their part, Raymond Hains, Jacques Villeglé, and François Dufrène weighed in against art informel and its metaphysical pretensions. But they were also turning against what had, in its own day, been one of the most radical modernist inventions, and which had since become rather anodyne (already in 1930 Carl Einstein noted in Documents: “There was a time when collage played the part of the acid-thrower [when it was] a means of defense against the happy chance of virtuosity. Today it has degenerated into easy riddles and is in danger of lapsing into the fakery of petit-bourgeois decoration”). No need for virtuosity, no need for glue, it is enough to strip off posters from the hoardings where they have accumulated, themselves already partially lacerated by anonymous vandals. This is important (it’s what constitutes the total difference between the position of the French décollagistes and that of the Italian, Mimmo Rotella, who wanted the privilege of being the sole lacerator for himself): the

8. Ibid., p. 67.
stripped-off poster is only fragmentarily legible, at best. And moreover, it is not a matter of one poster but of a veritable mattress of posters, of many skins whose identity has been destroyed by irregular tearing (carried out over time): the strata merge into one another; the lettering grafts together; the words cannibalize one another; information is little by little reduced to undifferentiated noise. The décollages are like Arman’s Poubelles (particularly effective when they showed that nothing would remain from linguistic exchange but a little pile, as in L’Affaire du courrier of 1962): they declare that all activity, but above all human communication, finishes up as uniform cinders.

This type of entropic deliquescence of language had been exploited by Dubuffet in 1944, in his exceptional series of Messages, made on newspaper, imitating the little notes that one tacks to the door of a friend when he or she isn’t home. But even if it is with difficulty, one can still recover enough linguistic matter (and even sentences) from these scribbled snatches to be able to imagine various scenarios (“I will wait for you until 8:00 Come back,” “The key is under the shutter Wait for me,” “That will teach you”). Nothing of the sort from the décollagistes (who probably did not know these rare works by Dubuffet and couldn’t bear the rest of his production). With them entropy is even redoubled, since the advertising poster already belongs to “noise” before ever having been attacked: torn, it has simply become a more ridiculously evident vanity. As for Dufrêne, he only bothers to show its reverse side: it’s six of one, half a dozen of the other.

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SWEATS OF THE HIPPO. Were we only to flip casually through Documents, the first text Bataille published there—“Academic Horse”—which thus functions in the journal as a kind of manifesto, presents itself as a simple study in comparative numismatics. An example of Greek money is shown in relation to its deforming, Gaulish imitations. But as soon as we really start to read the text, things heat up a bit. In it, with a Manicheanism whose excessiveness he insists on, Bataille is opposing two worlds: the noble one of Greek antiquity, and the other, savage one of those barbarians who are our French ancestors. The former takes the horse as its emblem (“one of the most accomplished expressions of the idea, with the same claims, for example, as Platonic philosophy or the architecture of the Acropolis”); the latter chooses hideous monsters. Bataille compares these fantastic creatures to spiders (already presaging the famous image from the paragraph on the informe), to gorillas (another of our ancestors, more distant in time), and to the hippopotamus.

This last animal had little chance of being known by the Gauls (Bataille doesn’t say that their coins represent it but that their imaginary monsters displayed “an obscure resemblance” to it, “insulting the correctness of the academic animal,
the horse among others, in the same way as it does”).

1 Why the hippo (to which Bataille refers twice in the article)? He could, for example, have chosen the camel, whose aspect “reveals, at the same time as the profound absurdity of animal nature, the cataclysmic and fallen nature of that absurdity and stupidity,” as he would express it somewhat later in Documents. The answer is simple: linguistically speaking, the huge mammal is the grotesque version of the all-too-dignified hippos—its caricature.

The hippo is fat; it sweats; it is in danger of melting, as—occasionally—are paintings.

At the end of March 1944, Dubuffet gave Jean Paulhan one of his recent pictures as a gift. Several days later it had begun to melt. If we are to believe Michel Tapié, who reported the episode two years later, embellishing it as he did so, Dubuffet was “hugely” amused “by these adventures which he characterized as hippo sweats.” In fact, the painter wasn’t all that happy, for the phenomenon was ongoing, due to the untested materials he was then employing (asphalt, for example). Two years later, and despite all his precautions, yet another gift to Paulhan had begun to sweat:

I am very alarmed by this haematidrosis phenomenon concerning the Homme des murailles. I had carefully chosen a painting about which nothing of the like could be expected, and this painting was the only one that seemed to me . . . completely reliable. Nothing more alarming than these oozings, which stain anything placed under the picture in the dirtiest manner. I am astounded. And with great unease I imagine what the other pictures are doing (those which aren’t reliable). I ask Germaine to forgive me. Perhaps it’s the heat of the stove that has set off some ingredient forming the composition of the encrustations? I think nonetheless that one could rehang the painting in the vertical position and nothing similar would recur. Otherwise, I will take it back and cure it of its wish to run, by heating it with a soldering torch for example, so that everything that wants to run could do so once and for all.

Despite the playful tone (and the ritual excuses to Mrs. Paulhan for the mess in her living room), we feel the artist’s alarm: What would he do if all his highly encrusted (haute pâte) canvases began to ooze? We can imagine the effect


that this news would have on his collectors. Later, Claes Oldenburg wished that such a catastrophe would strike the hanging sculptures he had sold in his _Store_. “Perhaps, I have imagined, since most of the pieces were made at about the same moment, with what later proved to be insufficient thickness of wire, they will all drop at once, all over the world.”

Nothing like this for Dubuffet (which is why his work participates only exceptionally in the _informe_): in his case, despite all his materiological researches, the painting most frequently remains an “academic horse.”

Melting is an entropic process _par excellence_, and perhaps this is one of the reasons Bataille was so interested in the Icarus myth. As Edward Ruscha showed with his _Liquid Words_, melting means falling into in-difference. Liquid is what is always everywhere the same. And it’s toward just such a uniformity, as Michel

Leiris reports it, that Miró was also aiming in his so-called *Portraits* of 1929: they expressed "this liquefaction, this implacable evaporation of structures . . . this flaccid leaking away of substance that makes everything—us, our ideas, and the ambience in which we live—like jellyfish or octopi."6

It was only a matter of depicted fusion there, but what happens when this becomes the very process of the work? The same thing, but more clearly and more immediately, without the distance of representation, since the very materiality of the work is engaged.

To make his *brûlages* (1939), Raoul Ubac submitted the photographic emulsion of the negative to the heat of a little hot plate: the images literally liquefied, just like the melted glass from Mont Pelée which doubtlessly had fascinated him (this deformed object, the result of a volcanic eruption, was one of the mascots of the Surrealist group with which he was associated). Exactly thirty years later, Gordon Matta-Clark fried positive prints with some gold leaf that melted in the pan and fused with the photographic emulsion (he sent his *Photo-Fries* as Christmas presents, one of which went to Robert Smithson). After this first experiment, Matta-Clark made a whole series of works having fusion as their principle: one type, often carrying the title *Glass Plant* (1971), magnifies the action of the Mont Pelée eruption by transforming collected bottles of beer or soda into repulsive ingots; another type had agar (the gelatin one gets from algae) as its base, which he cooked in large sheets with many different substances (yeast, sugar, concentrated milk, vegetable juice, chicken bouillon, sperm oil, etc.), then mixing it with yet other substances (mold cultures, trash gathered in the

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6. Michel Leiris, "Joan Miró," *Documents* 5 (1929) p. 264. Georges Didi-Huberman relates this text to a brief review of an Arp exhibition, published two issues later, where Leiris writes that this artist "makes his forms buckle and, systematically, making everything almost alike, overwhelms illusory classifications and the very scale of created things" (*Documents* 7 [1929], p. 340). See Didi-Huberman, *La ressemblance informe ou le qui savoir visuel selon Georges Bataille* (Paris: Macula, 1995), pp. 146–47. That everything becomes like everything else is entropy itself: the works by Arp soon attain this (they are "almost" there, Leiris says), and this for a brief moment, with his crumpled and torn papers (see, below, "Water Closet").
street, etc.) and left to dry. There is only one object left from this latter series, *Land of Milk and Honey* (1969), a kind of false, contorted, topographical relief; but these agar-based works were initially shown as a group, when their organic materials were still in a state of chemical mutation. The installation of these ephemeral works, thin reliefs suspended in space by a network of ropes, was called Museum: a museum dedicated to the glory of the picture-as-hippopotamus.

—YAB

7. One could relate Matta-Clark’s interest in mold to Oldenburg’s self-portraits in Jell-O from 1966, soon covered in mold and thrown in the garbage. And we should also refer to the sculptures made of stale porridge (“emitting a faint but sickly smell and . . . the color of cheese”) and of other perishable materials with which Schwitters peopled the temporary *Merzbau* he installed in the cabin of a camp in which he was imprisoned, as a German citizen, on his arrival in England in 1940 (Fred Uhlman, cited by John Elderfield, *Kurt Schwitters* [New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1985], p. 205). There were already perishable elements in the Hannover *Merzbau*. Moreover, all the firsthand reports of this first *Merzbau* insist on the fact that it didn’t stop growing, like a cancer which little by little invaded the architectural space, Schwitters adding new elements to it daily: entropic invasion *par excellence*. I thank Lauri Firstenberg (on Oldenburg) and Tim Rohan (on Schwitters) for having drawn my attention to these rotting works.

**THRESHOLE.** The first entry in the “Critical Dictionary” in *Documents*, signed by Bataille, is “Architecture.” In his seminal book, *Against Architecture*, Denis Hollier carefully explores the implications of this beginning as well as the ramifications of the architectural theme for Bataille: philosophy’s preferred metaphor (even marking the origins of art for Hegel, the philosopher against whom Bataille fought the most throughout his life), architecture is another name for system itself, for the regulation of the plan. Every monument is a monument of social order, a call to order issued to inspire fear (“The fall of the Bastille is symbolic of this state of things. This mass movement is difficult to explain otherwise than by popular hostility toward the monuments which are their veritable masters”). Architecture is the human ideal, the superego. Consequently, “an attack on architecture . . . is necessarily, as it were, an attack on man.”

Bataille does not, however, develop this latter idea. He inverts the poles of the metaphor. What he targets is not so much man’s image within architecture as architecture’s within man: whether it be the man of authority (“prelates, magistrates, admirals”) or man serving authority, architecture functions for him as an imaginary projection: he does his best to make himself into an “architectural composition” (“Man would seem to represent merely an intermediary stage within the morphological development between monkeys and tall buildings”). According to Bataille, one of the greatest achievements of modern painters (Picasso?) is to have attacked such a generalized petrification. He conceives of their aggressive assaults against
human anatomy as "a path ... [that] opens up toward bestial monstrosity, as if there were no other way of escaping the architectural straitjacket."

At first sight, it seems strange that Bataille gave up so quickly on the first vein of his thought (the charge against architecture is in fact a charge against man, that is, against the project) in order to pursue the rather traditional line of anatomical deformation in modern painting, but one that chimes with what one could call his aesthetic limitations (which, moreover, are those of the whole Documents group): burdened by a figurative conception of art, he doesn't conceive of a more ambitious aesthetic violation than that of launching a low blow against the human form.

On two occasions, however, Bataille would illustrate one of his texts in Documents with an image attesting to the vulnerability of architecture: the first photograph, accompanying the dictionary entry "Cheminée d’usine" (Factory Chimney) and published without any other commentary than its caption, shows "The collapse of a chimney stack, 60 meters [120 feet] high, in a London suburb"; the second, directly corresponding to a passage in the entry "Espace," shows the "Collapse of a prison in Columbus, Ohio": "Obviously," Bataille had written on the preceding page, "it will never enter anybody's head to lock the professors up in prison to teach them what space is (the day, for example, the walls collapse before the bars of their dungeons)." But there again the figurative limitation just mentioned keeps him from pursuing his architectural incursion any further: just as he doesn't see how art could strike harder against man than to alter his morphology, so he has difficulty surpassing the old anthropomorphic metaphor. Rather than reassessing Vitruvius, he prefers to abort and go on to something else.

It was only about fifteen years later, perhaps with the image from Documents in mind ("the project is the prison I wish to escape from"), that Bataille reintroduced architecture as the metaphor not of the human figure, but of the idealism of man's project: "Harmony, like the project, throws time into the outside: its principle is the repetition through which 'all that is possible' is made eternal. The ideal is architecture, or sculpture, immobilizing harmony, guaranteeing the duration of motifs whose essence is the annulment of time."

Thus the dream of architecture, among other things, is to escape entropy. This dream may be illusory on its face; but nonetheless this is something that must

3. For a reading that insists to the contrary on the anthropomorphic character of the two images used by Bataille, and which seems to make Bataille's "morphological" approach, here seen as a limitation, one of the strong points of his thought, see Didi-Hubermann, La ressemblance informe, pp. 66–67, 81–89.
be demonstrated—which is to say that one must "exit the domain of the project by means of a project." Such, precisely, would become the program of Robert Smithson (who, moreover, was not unaware of Bataille) and, in a different way, that of Gordon Matta-Clark.

The literature on the centrality of the concept of entropy for Smithson is vast, and this is not the place to rehearse it; it is enough to know that it is the pivot around which all of his work turns, in all its diversity. And from his first published text, "Entropy and the New Monuments" (1966), to an interview conducted just before his death, "Entropy Made Visible" (1973), Smithson spoke a lot about entropy as the repressed condition of architecture (he was always scathing about the naïveté of architects who believe themselves able to control the world). However, it was only very late (and fleetingly) that he became interested in architecture as a material for his work (perhaps because he believed that, given suburban sprawl on the one hand, and the proliferation of glass skyscrapers on the other, the repression of entropy would end up becoming completely self-evident?).

This interest began a little as a schoolboy joke: traveling in Mexico (a trip that gave rise to his famous "mirror displacements in the Yucatán"), Smithson brought back not photographs of the ruins of the "Vanished America," cherished by Bataille, but views of the ramshackle hotel in the process of partial renovation, where he had stayed in Palenque (it was above all the concurrence in the same building of reconstruction and signs of decrepitude—since the natural ravages seem to be accentuated by the activity of the masons—that interested him). A few years later, the "private joke" became public: to an assembly of architecture students who came to hear him speak of the famous Mayan ruins in the Yucatán, Smithson delivered a meticulous (parodic) analysis of the hotel.

But between the trip to Mexico and the lecture, indicating how deterministic the Palenque experience had been for him, Smithson attacked architecture head-on. The first project, Island of the Dismantled Building (or Island of Broken Concrete), conceived for a deserted island in Vancouver Bay, was abandoned because of opposition by local residents and the ecology movement (to create a ruin deliberately, without the slightest economic justification, as pure loss—well that's just too much!).

6. The translation of L'Érotisme (as 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. See the interview "Entropy Made Visible" (1973), in Smithson, Writings, p. 303. For the presence of Bataille's book in Smithson's library, see the catalogue of the exhibition "Robert Smithson: Le paysage entropique" (Marseille: Musées de Marseille, Réunion des musées nationaux, 1993), p. 256.
7. Robert Smithson: Le paysage entropique is the most recent work devoted to this question. Among the other texts one finds the excellent development by James Lingwood, "The Entropologist," pp. 29–36.
9. This project was itself a substitute for Island of Broken Glass, canceled at the last moment by the Canadian authorities (and there again under the pressure of the ecology movement). On this, see Hobbs, Robert Smithson, pp. 185–86.
Several projects of the same type followed, of which only the *Partially Buried Woodshed* was realized (on the campus of Kent State University in January 1970). Projected as a follow-up to *Glue Pour* and *Asphalt Rundown* (in the beginning it was to be simply the unloading of mud onto an inclined field at the university, made impossible, however, by frost), *Partially Buried Woodshed* is a “nonmonument” to the process Smithson calls “de-architecturization”: a dump truck poured earth onto the roof of an old woodshed to the point where its ridge-beam cracked.10 Architecture is the material, and entropy is the instrument (the way gravity served Pollock as instrument): Smithson merely accentuates this.

Yet, whatever his will to make the force of entropy constantly manifest, in a certain way Smithson resists it. He freezes the de-architecturization of *Partially Buried Woodshed* (in the contract conveying this work to the university, it is stipulated that everything should remain in the same condition—thus the Art Department is given the charge of “maintaining” the work), just as he would have built a higher platform for his *Spiral Jetty* had he known that the Great Salt Lake would completely submerge it.11 To condemn his work totally to entropic destruction, to accept completely that it be left to collapse into nondifferentiation, would have been to opt for its invisibility and thus to participate in the very repression he wanted to lift.

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10. *Partially Buried Woodshed* was to become a “monument” several months after its realization, when the National Guard killed four students at Kent State during a demonstration against the invasion of Cambodia: even non-monumentality is ephemeral.
This is exactly where Gordon Matta-Clark differs fundamentally. It should be stated, of course, that he began his work in a kind of emulation of Smithson. About to complete his architectural training at Cornell University, he met the older artist in 1969, at the time of the “Earth Art” exhibition, the general theme of which was site-specificity (Smithson executed Mirror Displacement, Cayuga Salt Mine Project, composed of eight different works, two of which are Slant and Closed Mirror Square). Smithson quickly became something of a mentor for Matta-Clark (a relationship acknowledged a few months later by the delivery of a Photo-Fry as a Christmas “greeting”), who rapidly absorbed Smithson’s ideas on entropy. However, while architecture represented only a passing interest for Smithson, Matta-Clark had accounts to settle with it (he left Cornell with a degree, but was disgusted), and he was not going to stop at half measures.

This was not so much a matter of attacking buildings themselves—it was not fundamentally their structure he wanted to get at (the ruptured roof beam of Partially Buried Woodshed was not enough for him)—as of striking at the social function of architecture. Moreover, he only worked on buildings slated for demolition. It’s true that he didn’t really have other choices (his only act against a building in use—and it was no accident that it was the famous Institute for Urban Studies in New York, where his former professors were installed—was instantly censured), and he wasn’t absolutely opposed to the idea (because it was utterly unfeasible) to cut into “inhabited or in any case still usable spaces” (“it would change your perceptions for a while”). But it was essential to his project that the buildings he transformed be urban waste marked for early destruction (“the reason for going to abandoned buildings in the first place,” he said, “was a fairly deeply rooted preoccupation with that condition; maybe not so much because I can do anything about it, but because of its predominance in the urbanscape or the urban condition”).

Even before he took to actual buildings, Matta-Clark considered waste as architecture: in 1970 he built a wall from trash mixed with plaster and tar

12. Invited to take part in an exhibition organized by the Institute, Matta-Clark knocked out the windows and in their place hung photographs of buildings in the Bronx all of whose windows had been broken. From the outset he had a very hostile attitude toward the exhibition. (Learning that Richard Meier, Charles Gwathmey, and Michael Graves were going to participate, he said, “Those are the guys I studied with at Cornell... I hate what they represent.”) Furious, the Institute’s director, Peter Eisenman, who also taught at Cornell during Matta-Clark’s time there, and whose recent architecture is in large measure a luxurious recycling of the latter’s “anarchitecture,” had the panes of glass replaced in several hours and withdrew the photographs from the exhibition. On this episode, see the testimony of Andrew MacNair in the catalogue Gordon Matta-Clark: A Retrospective (Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1985), p. 96, and the essay by Marianne Brouwer, “Laying Bare,” which traces a parallel between Matta-Clark and Bataille, although in a different way, in Gordon Matta-Clark (Marseille: Editions des Musées de Marseille, 1993), pp. 363–65.

13. Gordon Matta-Clark, interview with Liza Bear on Splitting, in Avalanche (December 1974), reprinted in Gordon Matta-Clark (Marseille), p. 375. A little further in the same interview Matta-Clark himself declares the impossibility of this wish, saying “It would be interesting to make changes in a place that people still lived in... to take, perhaps, a very conventional notion of a living space and alter it beyond use” (p. 376).

(Garbage Wall, which served as a set for a performance before being dismantled and thrown in a Dumpster); in 1971, another wall, the construction of which was shot for his film Fire Boy, was built out of trash massed under the Brooklyn Bridge and held together by a chain-link fence; in 1972, a whole house was constructed in a trash bin, or rather a trash bin transformed into Open House.

His first “anarchitectural” piece—to use one of his favorite expressions—plays on the linguistic equation: architecture = waste. This was Threshole (1973). Under this generic term Matta-Clark designed a certain number of cutouts resulting in the removal of the thresholds of apartments in abandoned buildings in the Bronx, often on several floors, opening the gloomy spaces to the light. (Threshole is also a trash hole, a cloacal opening like that of the Paris sewers he filmed in 1977 in Sous-Sol de Paris.) Following this rather dangerous first move (since Matta-Clark had no authorization to do this, and among other things risked being attacked in these deserted places), the artist abandoned his practice as urban guerrilla. This was not out of fear of the risk but because he didn’t want to limit himself to gnawing away at interior spaces that would remain invisible from the street, and because he wanted to change scale, and, with all official permits in place (not always without difficulty), to attack the building as a whole, like an object in crisis. From the elegant simplicity of Splitting in 1974 (a suburban house split vertically in two), or the laconism of Bingo in the same year (another house of the same type whose rectangular façade was divided into nine rectangles lifted away one by one with the exception of the central rectangle, which stayed in place like an absurd survivor of a cataclysm); to the formalism of Day’s End in 1975 (sail-like silhouettes cut out from the ribbed metal wall, the roof, and the floor of an immense warehouse on the docks of New York); to the allusion to optics contained in Conical Intersect, also in 1975 (a periscope bored through two neighboring houses, the last survivors before the construction of the nullity called Quartier de l’Horloge in the center of Paris, and pointing onto the Centre Pompidou in the process of construction); and up to the last Piranesiesque cutouts in an office building in Anvers (Office Baroque, 1977), or in neighboring houses in Chicago (Circus-Caribbean Orange, 1978); the negative spaces that Matta-Clark pierced into architecture are ever more complex and ever more visually, but also kinesthetically, stunning. To visit his final works was to be seized by vertigo as one suddenly realized that one could not differentiate between the vertical section and the horizontal plan (a perceptual nondifferentiation particularly dangerous in a piece of Swiss cheese full of holes reflecting one into

15. It is possible that Matta-Clark started by addressing the issue of the threshold for symbolic reasons: the threshold is one of the rare places to carry a strong semantic load even in the most banal of architecture, and to make a hole in it, by the very fact of materially suppressing it, is to underscore its apotropaic function (on the threshold—and its modern substitute, the doormat—see the article “Seuil” by Marcel Griaule in the “Critical Dictionary,” Documents 2 [1930], p. 103; trans. Iain White in EA, pp. 83–84). Whatever the reason, Matta-Clark didn’t continue in this figurative vein: to the contrary, his perforations tended toward an increasingly insistent dehierarchization of the architectural elements.
the other and in all directions), as if in order to learn “what space is,” it was first necessary that we lose our grip as erect beings.

But the unnerving beauty of the spaces developed by Matta-Clark’s perforations should not make one forget the critical dimension of his project (the error committed by all the architectural students for whom he is now the object of a kind of cult). Matta-Clark considered architecture a clownish and pretentious enterprise, and he would have been particularly enraged at having become a model, enraged to see his provisional disruptions of buildings stylized under the label of “deconstructionism” in the architectural projects of certain of his former professors at Cornell. If the architect takes himself for a sculptor, he masks his own role in capitalist society, which is to build rabbit warrens to the order of a real-estate developer. There was a sovereign contempt in Matta-Clark’s attitude toward architects: What I do, you could never achieve, since that presupposes accepting ephemerality, whereas you believe yourselves to be building for eternity. But architecture has only one destiny, and that is, sooner or later, to go down the chute, because it’s waste. His own project was to underscore this state of things, not to transcend it.

—Y-AB
WATER CLOSET. Nothing could be more surprising, in reading Literature and Evil, than Bataille’s very critical attitude toward Jean Genet, an author whose entire output should, as Jacques Derrida has remarked, have brought these two sensibilities together.\(^1\) Not only is he insensitive to Genet’s prose (“his tales are interesting, but not enthralling. There is nothing colder, less moving, under the glittering parade of words, than the famous passage in which Genet recounts Harcamone’s death”), but he assimilates the “splendor” of the style, in the passage in question, to “Aragon’s feats in the early days of surrealism—the same verbal facility, the same recourse to devices which shock,” which he had so vilified in the case of André Breton and his friends at the time of Documents.\(^2\)

We could see the mark of a certain frustration in this, since it’s Sartre’s Saint Genet, Actor and Martyr that Bataille is reviewing, a book in which he is mentioned in terms similar to those used by Breton in the Second Surrealist Manifesto (“Bataille tortures himself ‘upon occasion’: the rest of the time he is a librarian”).\(^3\) When he compares the beauty of the “famous” passage from Miracle of the Rose to that “of jewels, too elaborate and in a coldly bad taste,” Bataille, annoyed, would only be signaling to Sartre that he’s wrong about the merchandise, that it’s fake (“I’m not the one who’s the real phony, he is”: one is always someone else’s kitsch). But this would be to overlook the fact that several years earlier what he called Genet’s “baroquism” had appealed to Bataille and that Genet’s “bad taste” had seemed an effective tactic (“without the indefensible vulgarity of all this, the scandal would not come together and the defiance would not have this liberating quality”).\(^4\)

In fact, if Bataille is actually replying to Sartre in Literature and Evil, it’s by pretending to make an “alliance with him.”\(^5\) He begins by taking up Sartre’s argument (“Sartre himself noted a curiously difficult at the basis of Genet’s work. Genet, the writer, has neither the power to communicate with his readers nor the intention of doing so. His work almost denies the reader”), then he continues by saying that Sartre hasn’t carried this argument to its conclusion (namely, “that in these conditions the work was incomplete. It was a replacement, halfway from the major communication at which literature aims”).\(^6\) But there it’s a question of a pose assumed at Genet’s expense; for what Bataille means by communication has little to do with what this word means for Sartre (Bataille’s usage elsewhere had been the object of an acid criticism in “A New Mystic,” the review Sartre published

5. Derrida speaks of “an alliance, not easily explicable, with Sartre” (Glas, p. 217).
6. Bataille, Literature and Evil, p. 188.

in 1943 of *L'expérience intérieure*). It’s almost the exact reverse. He even admits as much a little earlier in the text: “Communication, in my sense of the word, is never stronger than when communication, in the weak sense, the sense of profane language or, as Sartre says, of prose which makes us and the others appear penetrable, fails and becomes the equivalent of darkness.” The “strong communication,” of which Bataille also says, a bit further on, that it isn’t different from what he calls “sovereignty,” isn’t accessible through current language. The latter is founded on the identity of terms to themselves, that of Good and Evil, for example, and above all that of the Ego, while the sovereignty Bataille speaks of concerns those moments of pure loss (laughter, ecstasy, tears, sexual pleasure) when identity abolishes itself.

The human being is dissolved in “strong communication,” by opening a tear in himself through which he loses “a part of his own being to the profit of the communal being,” as Bataille expresses it in the lecture that, on July 4, 1939, brought the College of Sociology to a close. Bataille takes as his first example physical love (“No communication is more profound; Two creatures are lost in a convulsion that binds them together. But they communicate only by losing a portion of themselves. The communication binds them only through wounds where their unity, their integrity disperse in the heat of excitement”); then he broadens his definition of communication as loss to different social phenomena

7. Ibid., p. 199.
(initiations, sacrifices, festivals). In fact, the underlying model here is the famous study by Roger Caillois, "Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia," that so struck Bataille several years earlier (this essay, published in 1935, was itself strongly indebted to Bataille's own "Notion of Expenditure," published in 1933), and it is to Caillois above all that this lecture was addressed. In fact, Caillois should have participated in this session of the College, but he canceled at the last moment: having departed suddenly for Buenos Aires, he left a text that Bataille refused to read in his absence, since it marked a profound disagreement that could not have been aired without being discussed. Everything transpired as if, with a delay, and under the pressure of a rupture through which all the compromises and misunderstandings were being brought to light, Bataille were reproaching Caillois for having drawn back from the consequences of his own entropic interpretation of the phenomenon of mimicry as "depersonalization by assimilation to space." In connecting animal mimicry and "legendary psychasthenia," the expression the psychiatrist Pierre Janet used to designate problems in spatial perception from which certain schizophrenic patients suffer, Caillois has of course attacked the anthropocentrism of Western metaphysics by breaching the clear frontier between man and animal. But as Denis Hollier remarks, he does this by having his essay nonetheless culminate "in a pleading for distinctions" without which the will to power of the intellectual he was would not


9. The first version of the text, as it appeared in Minotaure (no. 7, June 1935) didn't directly refer to the second principle of thermodynamics explicitly mentioned in the final version of 1938 in Le mythe et l'homme ("In fact, we touch here on this fundamental law of the universe that Carnot's principle notably brings to vivid light: the world tends toward uniformity") (Paris: Gallimard, coll. "Idées," 1972), p. 115. In place of this allusion came a development on Flaubert and his Temptation of Saint Anthony, which isn't a bad substitute. On Flaubert's fascination with entropy and the role this idea plays in his late work, in particular Bouvard et Pécuchet, see Eugenio Donato, "The Museum's Furnace," in Textual Strategies: Perspectives in Post-Structuralist Criticism, ed. Josué Harari (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1979), pp. 213-38.

10. "To these dispossessed souls, space seems to be a devouring force. Space pursues them, encircles them, digests them in a gigantic phagocytosis. It ends by replacing them. Then the body separates itself from thought, the individual breaks the boundary of his skin and occupies the other sides of his senses, feels himself becoming space, dark space where things cannot be put. He is similar, not similar to something, but just similar. And he invents spaces of which he is 'the convulsive possession'" (Caillois, "Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia," p. 90).
be able to exert itself ("distinctions between the real and the imaginary, between waking and sleeping, between ignorance and knowledge, etc.—all of them, in short, distinctions in which valid considerations must demonstrate a keen awareness and the demand for resolution"). So Caillois wanted to look at the "tear in being" from the outside; that is what Bataille indirectly reproaches him for.

And it is the same reproach he makes to Genet: in maintaining a "glass partition" between himself and us, Genet refuses to lose himself. Even more, he can't help but consolidate, even in its inversion, the identity he wanted to annihilate. Refusing to consider the prohibition (i.e., his relation to the world and to us), he is committed to failure; he is prisoner of the dialectic: "What is vile is glorified, but Evil becomes pointless. . . . In other words, Evil becomes a duty, just as Good does."

What would Bataille's astonishment have been, had he been able to read "What Remains of a Rembrandt Torn into Little Regular Squares and Flushed Down the Toilet," published in 1967 (after his death)? The text consists of two fragments of a book on Rembrandt on which Genet had worked for some years, the

13. Ibid., p. 187.
huge manuscript which he had torn up and thrown "in the toilet" in 1964, taking a vow, which he only broke much later, never to write again. It is organized in two columns. The right-hand one, narrow and in italics, concerns Rembrandt properly speaking (the text would not have been out of place in Documents almost forty years earlier: "It is from the moment when he depersonalizes his models, when he strips all identifiable qualities from objects, that he gives to both the most weight, the greatest reality. . . . He presents himself in his mania for smearing, mad for color, losing the pretense to superiority and the hypocrisy of the simulators. This can be felt in the late pictures. But it has been necessary that Rembrandt recognize and accept himself as a being of flesh—did I say of flesh?—of meat, of blubber, of blood, of tears, of sweat, of shit, of intelligence and tenderness, of still other things, to infinity, but none denying the others, or better, each saluting the others"). The second column, larger, gives the key to this reading of Rembrandt through the axis of the informe. In it, Genet describes at some length a kind of epiphany, experienced in a train in 1953, that profoundly shook his relation to writing (he had already alluded to this in Giacometti's Studio): "One day in a train compartment while looking at the traveler seated across from me I had the revelation that every man is worth every other," and this sudden knowledge brought with it a "methodical disintegration." By chance, his glance crossed that of the rather ugly passenger who had just raised his eyes from his newspaper (or rather, "my glance . . . melted into his"): 

What I experienced I could translate only in these terms: I was flowing out of my body and through my eyes into the traveler's at the same time as he was flowing into mine. . . . once the accidents—in this case repellent—of his appearance were put aside, this man concealed and then let me discover what made him identical to me. (I wrote that sentence first, but I corrected it with this one, more exact and more devastating: I knew I was identical to this man.)

The identity of the self is canceled in this revelation. It is disseminated, since if all men equal one another, "each man is every other man." "No man was my brother: each man was myself, but temporarily isolated in his individual skin."

17. Ibid., pp. 21-24. This passage is translated in White, Genet, p. 401.
Genet’s attitude is, of course, different from Bataille’s, notably in that this entropic dissolution, which the author of On Nietzsche would no doubt have lived joyously, seemed to him a tragedy (“Soon nothing will count”), a crack announcing the end of all erotic investigation, since that is only possible by supposing that “each being has its individuality, that it is irreducible and that physical form accounts for this.” But the important thing here is that, doubtlessly without Genet’s knowing it, the epiphany on the train connects with Bataille’s thought about “communication” such that, “Essentially all beings are only one. They repel each other at the same time that they are one. And in this movement—which is their essence—the fundamental identity is annulled.”

Even if he sometimes signed his books Lord Auch, Bataille didn’t tear up the manuscripts he was unhappy with, much less throw them down the toilet (except, perhaps, the manuscript for a book called W.C.). Certain artists, however, wondered what would remain of a work if it were torn up, or rather what would remain of the concept of the work of art if the very act of tearing (an essentially entropic process: irreversible, reducing everything to sameness) were to be the sole technique.

In a text directed against the interest in entropy in recent art (the book, dating from 1971, had its sights fixed on Robert Smithson and Andy Warhol, among others), Rudolf Arnheim quotes from Jean Arp’s memoirs:

Around 1930 I did my first papiers déchirés. A human opus now struck me as being inferior even to disconnected work, as being totally removed from life. Everything is approximate, even less than approximate, for if you peer more sharply and closely, even the most perfect painting is a filthy, wart-infested approximation, a dried-up pap, a desolate landscape of lunar craters. What arrogance is concealed in perfection. Why strive for accuracy and purity if they can never be attained? I now welcomed the decomposition that always sets in once a work is ended. A dirty man puts his dirty finger on a subtle detail in a painting to point it out. That place is now marked with sweat and grease. He bursts into enthusiasm and the painting is sprayed with saliva. A delicate picture of paper, a watercolor is thus lost. Dust and insects are also efficient destroyers. Light makes colors fade. Sunshine and warmth create blisters, loosen the paper, leave cracks in the paint

19. Ibid., p. 28.
21. On this manuscript, written before The Story of the Eye, a chapter of which seems to have escaped destruction and to have been used as the introduction to Blue of Noon, see Hollier, Against Architecture, pp. 117, 130. Auch is an abbreviation for aux chiottes, that is, “down the toilet.”
and make it chip. Moisture creates mildew. The work decomposes and dies. Now, the death of a painting no longer devastated me. I had come to terms with its ephemeral-ness and its death, and included them in the painting. Death, however, grew and devoured the painting and life. This decomposition ought to have been followed by the negation of all action. Form had turned into formlessness, the finite into infinity, the individual into totality.  

Few artists will so clearly tie entropic dissolution to the debacle of the *informe*, but obviously this isn’t why Arnheim, one of the few guard dogs of Gestalt psychology, quotes this text. It’s rather its conclusion that excites him, where Arp explains how, faced with the example of Sophie Taueber’s work, he abandoned this direction in his work to rediscover “clarity.” Arp’s torn papers, those from the beginning at least (around 1932–34), mark his work with the seal of a violence he would quickly abandon and to which he would never come back. The crisis over, he platitudinously drivels: “I believe, even more than I did in my youth, that a return to an essential order, to a harmony, is necessary to save the world from endless bedlam.” A burst of applause from the Gestalt Man.

Others took up tearing where Arp had left it: Cy Twombly, for instance, in a series of collages where bits of crumpled paper, the fallout from who knows what disaster, coagulate on the page; Richard Serra, who begins methodically to tear a sheet of lead on the ground and leaves his act interrupted in a sort of *et cetera* that invites us mentally to continue it; Christian Bonnefoi, who beginning in 1979, in a series of works titled *Babel*, sets himself to tear his canvas in the direction of its thickness to the point where all identities—the over and the under, the before and the after—are confused.

The most radical, however, was undoubtedly Lygia Clark, who found a response, very close to Bataille’s, to the question of knowing “what remains of a

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22. Quoted from *Arp on Arp: Poems, Essays, Memories*, ed. Marcel Jean (New York: Viking Press, 1969), pp. 246–47. Cited in Rudolf Arnheim, *Entropy and Art: An Essay on Disorder and Order* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), p. 54. The book is dedicated to the memory of Wolfgang Köhler, one of the founders of Gestalt psychology. We should note that Arp, just before beginning his series of torn papers, was rather close to the *Documents* group. The review published two articles on his work (one by Carl Einstein in 1930, in its last issue, and a brief review by Michel Leiris—in no. 6, 1929, pp. 340–42—where one can easily compare the tone with that of the souvenir text by Arp himself). See Arnheim, pp. 53–54.

work torn in little bits thrown into the toilet.” Properly speaking, it is not an issue of tearing or of work, but of the tearing up of the concept of work. It is a question of an experience that made everything as upsetting for the artist as the encounter on the train had ever been for Genet. It is a “proposition,” as she says, that dates from 1964 and that she called “le Cheminant” (Trailing). The point of departure is a Möbius strip, that cardinal image of topology that had been exploited in sculpture by Max Bill (the fact should be noted: Max Bill had a whole group of followers in Brazil, and it was against them that Lygia Clark and her friends launched Neo-Concretism in 1959). Anyone can make a Trailing beginning with a paper Möbius strip:

Then take a pair of scissors, stick one point into the surface and cut continuously along the length of the strip. Take care not to converge with the preexisting cut—which will cause the band to separate into two pieces. When you have gone the circuit of the strip, it’s up to you whether to cut to the left or to the right of the cut you’ve already made. This idea of choice is capital. The special meaning of this experience is in the act of doing it. The work is your act alone. To the extent that you cut the strip, it refines and redoubles itself into interlacings. At the end the path is so narrow that you can’t open it further. It’s the end of the trail.24

Nothing is left on the floor but a pile of paper spaghetti that one can put in the trash (so as not to plug up the W.C.). The act of “trailing” marks one of those moments of “strong communication” dear to Bataille (“At the outset, the Trailing is only a potentiality. You are going to form, you and it, a unique, total, existential reality. No more separation between subject and object. It’s an embrace, a fusion”). “There is nothing before, nothing after.” Nothing, if not a certain consciousness of time and the beauty of its irremediable loss. As with Genet’s epiphany, a train trip played a role in this discovery, but this time retroactively, as confirmation: “The Trailing only took on meaning for me once, crossing the countryside by train, I experienced each fragment of the landscape as a temporal totality, a totality in the process of forming, of producing itself before my eyes, in the immanence of the moment.”25 The absence of the work is sometimes ecstatic.

—Y·AB

X MARKS THE SPOT. Some time in 1965 Bruce Nauman made a plaster cast of the space under his chair. Perhaps it was late in the year, after Donald Judd’s “Specific Objects” essay had appeared, or perhaps earlier, for example in February, in relation to Judd’s review of Robert Morris’s Green Gallery exhibition, or in October, after Barbara Rose had published “ABC Art,” her own bid to theorize Minimalism.1 In any event, Nauman’s cast, taking the by-then recognizable shape of a Minimalist sculpture, whether by Morris or Tony Smith, or Judd himself, was more or less cubic, grayish in color, simple in texture… which made it no less the complete anti-Minimalist object.

Several years later, when the tide against Minimalism had turned, and the attack on Minimalism’s industrial metaphor—its conviction in the well-built object, its display of rational tectonics and material strength—was in full swing, this reaction would move under the banner of “Anti-Form,” which is to say a set of strategies to shatter the constructed object and disperse its fragments.2 But Nauman’s cast, which he repeated the following year in two other forays—Shelf Sinking into the Wall with Copper-Painted Plaster Casts of the Spaces Underneath (1966) and Platform Made up of the Space between Two Rectilinear Boxes on the Floor (1966)—acting well before anti-form, does not take this route of explosion, or dismemberment, or dissemination. It does not open the closed form of the fabricated object to release its material components from the corset of their construction, to turn them over to the forces of nature—gravity, wind, erosion—which would give them quite another articulation, one cast in the shadow of natural processes of change. Rather, it takes the path of implosion or congealing, and the thing to which it submits this stranglehold of immobility is not matter, but what vehiculates and subtends it: space itself.

Nauman’s attack, far more deadly than anti-form—because it is about a cooling from which nothing will be able to extricate itself in the guise of whatever articulation—is an attack made in the very name of death, or to use another term, entropy. And for this reason, the ambiguity that grips these residues of Nauman’s casts of interstitial space, the sense, that is, that they are object-like, but that without the title attached to them like an absurd label, one has no idea of what they are, even of what general species of object they might belong to, seems particularly fitting. It is as though the congealing of space into this rigidly entropic condition also strips it of any means of being “like” anything. If the constant utilitarian character of Minimalist objects—they are “like” boxes, benches, portals, etc.—or the more evocative turn of process works, continued to operate along the condition of form, which is that, having an identity, it be meaningful, it is the ultimate character of entropy, Nauman’s casts force us to realize, that it congeal the possibilities of meaning as well. Which is to say that this conception of

1. Donald Judd, “Specific Objects,” Arts Yearbook 7 (1965); Judd, “Reviews,” Arts (February 1965); Barbara Rose, “ABC Art,” Art in America (October 1965).
entropy, as a force that sucks out all the intervals between points of space, not only understands the “Brownian movement” of molecular agitation as slowed to a stop, but also imagines the eradication of those distances that regulate the grid of oppositions, or differences, necessary to the production of meaning.

Although he never, himself, pushed his own concerns with entropy into the actual making of casts, Robert Smithson had always considered casting as a way of theorizing entropy, since he had written about the earth’s crust as itself a giant cast, the testimony to wave after wave of cataclysmic forces compressing and congealing life and all the spatial intervals necessary to sustain it. Quoting Darwin’s remark “Nothing can appear more lifeless than the chaos of rocks,” Smithson treasured the geological record as a “landslide of maps,” the charts and texts of the inexorable process of cooling and death.3 For each rock, each lithic band is the evidence of whole forests, whole species that have decayed—“dying by the millions”—and under the pressure of this process have become a form of frozen eternity. In a movingly poetic text, “Strata: A Geophotographic Fiction,” he attempted to prize apart these layers of compression, alternating blocks of writing with strips of photographs showing the fossil record trapped within the magma of the rock, as the demonstrative presentation of wave after wave—Cambrian, Silurian, Devonian, Permian, Triassic, Jurassic—of wreckage.

Smithson realized, of course, that the very act of textualizing this material

was one of building spatiality back into it, of producing those oppositions and differences necessary to open the surface to the intelligibility of reading and the organization of form. He quoted the paleontologist Edwin Colbert saying: “Unless the information gained from the collecting and preparing of fossils is made available through the printed page, assemblage specimens is [sic] essentially a pile of meaningless junk.” It was the conflict between the “junk” and the “text” that seemed to fascinate him.

If fossils are nature’s form of casting, the turn taken in art world concerns in the 1970s and ’80s led away from Smithson’s attention to the natural, by moving deeper into the terrain of industrial culture that Minimalism had been exploring from the outset, although by now this had become a kind of Minimalism crossed with Pop art. For the concern was no longer with the tectonics of industrial production so much as with its logic, which is that of serialization, the multiple, and replication. And although casting is a paradigm of any process of reduplication, of
spinning out masses of copies from a single matrix or mold, it was the photographic rather than the cast form of the duplicate that increasingly took hold of the art world's imagination. For the photograph brought with it the simulacral notion of the mirage, of a reality that had been engulfed within its own technology of imitation, a fall into a hall of mirrors, a disappearance into a labyrinth in which original and copy are indistinguishable. The photograph seemed capable of raising the problem of reality in the grip of what Baudrillard would call "the mirror of production" in a way that the mere cast could not.

Itself emerging from this culture of the multiple, Allan McCollum's work was, however, not to move along this photographic construal of simulacra. Rather, it was to cycle back to the issue of casting by entering into a relation with the very most classical enunciation of the matrix or original as a kind of ontological ideal from which all existent objects are modeled. This eidos, or form, could also be thought of as the genus that contains within itself—as a kind of ideal repertory—the "footprint" for all actualization of its form of life into species.

Proceeding, then, to an exploration of the generic, McCollum's work became an ironic rewriting of modernist art's own attempts to reduce individual media—painting, sculpture, photography, etc.—to their very essence as genres, or aesthetic norms. However, anti-formal to its very marrow, McCollum's reduction was not to an abstract condition—flatness, say, or opticality—but to a generic type ("painting" as a blank canvas with a frame around it; "sculpture" as a kitsch bauble, a shape meant for mass production) that could serve as the model from which to generate potentially endless numbers of copies. It was thus the industrialization of the eidos that interested him, as he struck a kind of blow against the reproductive as natural or ideal (the constant reclaiming of species "identity") and presented it instead as a force of proliferation of the same, a kind of silting up of the space of difference into an undifferentiable, entropic continuum. In this sense, proliferation, as the endlessly compulsive spinning out of "different" examples,
came full circle in the 1980s to join hands with the 1960s effacement of difference, as McCollum’s nightmare of mass production began to reinvent Smithson’s fantasy of mass extinction, thus bringing about a convergence of the two over the importance of the fossil record.

If the fossil as the “natural copy” fascinates McCollum, this is because it brings the generic—in the form of the industrialization of *eidos*—into collision with the biological genus, realized through the fossil in the form of its own genetic eradication, marked only by the mold of one or more of its members left in passing. The production of dinosaur tracks is a particularly interesting example of the natural cast, one that had fascinated Smithson as well, at the time of his “Geophotographic Fiction.” Such tracks are made by the heavy animal’s having walked through mud-covered peat bogs, leaving large negative depressions that were filled in by the mud, which eventually hardened into solid rock “casts” of the footprints while the peat around these tracks reduced into coal. In the Utah sites these were revealed as the coal was removed from around them, leaving the footprints to protrude from the roof of the mine.

The specificity of these casts as evidence, their testimony to the passage at a particular time and place of the movement of a now-vanished animal, would seem, of course, to give them a particularity that is far away from McCollum’s earlier practice of the cast as a form of the “generic”: that endlessly proliferating series of increasingly meaningless signs. Working against the grain of the multiple, these casts would seem instead to have the character of something absolutely unique, something that had existed in a specific place, and to which this object mutely points: *X Marks the Spot*, as the title of a book on criminal deaths, reviewed briefly by Bataille, put it—the trace of an utterly contingent “this.”

If, however, McCollum’s impulse is to treat these “trace fossil” footprints as though they were readymades, and to parade them both as burgeoning sets of multiples and as the gaudily colored items from the most kitsch of souvenir shops—thus industrializing not just the generic but also the genetic—this is not simply from an irreverence for the idea of primal life. It is, rather, to go back to the kind of content that Nauman had built into his casts of particular spaces—which understood the very specificity of the trace itself (the “this”) as a form of entropy, a congealing of the paradigm. Once more it is to join the proliferation enabled by the mold or matrix to the X that congeals the very possibility of space even as it marks the spot.

—RK


YO-YO. We could see it as the relatively sophisticated, commercially produced equivalent of the little object Freud’s infant grandson made famous, as he threw the spool onto his cot to make it disappear behind the bedclothes and then pulled on the string attached to it to draw it back into view, the first gesture accompanied by a mournful “fo-o-ort” and the second by a joyous “da!”1 And the yo-yo is servicable in this connection in yet another dimension, since its very name cycles around the field of linguistic principles that the “fort/da” instrument articulates.

For yo-yo belongs to a whole series of childish terms, the very earliest being mama and papa, but subsequent ones being caca and peepee, in which the wild sound of infantile babbling is suddenly articulated, or spaced, or cut out, not just into perceptible rhythmic regularity but into the freestanding condition of the signifier, through the act of repetition. For it is repetition that doubles back on the first sound to mark it as deliberately phonemic by the very fact of beingrepeatable. Thus, as Jakobson says, the basis for the transition from wild sound production to verbal behavior is, precisely, reduplication, since it is the repetition of the first sound by the second that serves to signal “that the uttered sounds do not represent a babble, but a senseful, semantic entity.”2 Thus for Jakobson, it is duplication that is “linguistic essence,” since it transforms sounds to phonemes by marking, or re-marking them, by establishing that they “are to be recognizable, distinguishable, identifiable; and in accordance with these requirements, they must be deliberately repeatable.”3

“Fort/da” is not, however, one of these redoubled vocables, although the game played by means of it—in both its verbal and mechanical guise—did involve constant repetition. “Fort/da” is, instead, a game of rhythmic separation and reconnection, in which something disappears from sight and is recognized again, both disappearance and return accompanied by language that penetrates this activity almost to the point of becoming its support. For Freud articulates the “fort/da” as allowing for the rise of linguistic representation in the negation of the object (throwing it away simultaneously with producing a substitute for it in the form of a verbal sign: “fort”) and in the separation of the field of the represented (the sign, the fantasy image) from that of the real (“da!”). Indeed, it is in this founding act of negativity that Freud locates the intellectual feat on which language as well as culture in general will be instituted.

And many linguists agree with him. For if Freud claims that all denial—every “no” or every “fort”—nevertheless necessitates the positive presentation of the object to consciousness, since “Negation is a way of taking notice of the

3. Ibid.
repressed," he is describing the fact that in the order of language negation isn’t simply expulsion but is, first, admission, since as linguists would say, language “must explicitly pose in order to suppress,” or “a judgment of non-existence necessarily has the formal status as well of a judgment of existence.” As Emile Benveniste writes,

Don’t we see here that the linguistic factor is decisive in this complex process and that negation is in a certain way constitutive of the denied contents? . . . The subject’s discourse can multiply denials, but not abolish the fundamental property of language which is to imply that something corresponds to what is stated, something and not “nothing.”

Negation and verbal representation are thus articulated onto one another, and Freud ends his essay with the celebrated statement: “The accomplishment of the function of judgment is rendered possible in the first instance because the constitution of the symbol of negation has permitted thought a first degree of independence in relation to the consequence of repression and at the same time from the coercion of the pleasure principle.”

But if yo-yo seems to tie into the fort/da’s linguistic structure more through its own mechanical enactment of negation and return than through its linguistic doubling, it was to be Julia Kristeva’s argument that negativity and rhythm are necessary to one another in the constitution of the speaking subject, so that in her view fort/da and yo-yo would indeed map onto each other and in all their dimensions. This is because Kristeva, anxious to forge a connection between the somatic and the psychic (and thus ultimately, the symbolic), sees the pulsatile beat of the drives as the bridge between the body’s flexion—the spasmodic movement of the glottal or anal sphincters, for example—and the repetition necessary to language’s fundamental spacing, or articulation. It is from this beat that Kristeva sets up what she calls a “chora”: “The chora, as rupture and articulations (rhythm) precedes evidence, verisimilitude, spatiality and temporality. The chora is not a sign nor is it a signifier. It is, however, generated in order to attain to this signifying position. It underlies figuration.” And to this chora she gives the value of the semiotic: “The semiotic is articulated by flow and marks: facilitation, energy transfers, the cutting up of the corporeal and the social continuum as well as that of signifying material, the establishment of a distinctiveness and its ordering in a pulsating chora, in a rhythmic but nonexpressive totality.”

8. Ibid., p. 40.
Now if Kristeva invokes the term "chora" here, it is not to echo that part of Plato's definition in the *Timaeus* that portrays the chora as amorphous, but the part that sees it as maternal: being the matrix, the nurse, the becoming-imprinted. For the rhythmic body is also that of the maternal support to which the nursing infant continues to be connected until what Kristeva calls a "semiotic break" is performed, which in separating from the mother's body, institutes the first big rejection, and thus the ground for the child's "no," the no on which intellectual negation will be constructed. The rhythmic maternal (yo-yo) thus combines with negation's rupture (yo/y0) to produce the speaking subject; a subject who if, as Benveniste reminds us, never speaks about "nothing," is the semantic subject as well.

And it is in just this sense that yo-yo is incompatible with everything that the operation "pulse" or "beat" attempts to demonstrate about the work of the *informe*. For "pulse" does not open onto the rhythmic work that Kristeva describes, as that

9. Kristeva writes: "Neither model nor copy, the *chora* precedes and underlies figuration and thus specularization, and is analogous only to vocal or kinetic rhythm. We must restore this motility's gestural and vocal play . . . on the level of the socialized body in order to remove motility from ontology and amorphousness where Plato confines it in an apparent attempt to conceal it from Democritean rhythm. The theory of the subject proposed by the theory of the unconscious will allow us to read in this rhythmic space, which has no thesis and no position, the process by which significance is constituted. Plato himself leads us to such a process when he calls this receptacle or *chora* nourishing and maternal" (ibid., p. 26).
10. Ibid., p. 47.
rhythm puts in place both the stability of form and the fullness of meaning. Indeed, far from representing the rhythmic alternation of the pleasure principle’s + and -, the pulsation of the “beat” turns around the death drive’s condition of shock, of “bad form,” of a repetition always undergirded by the rupture of total extinction, and thus a rhythm of + and 0.

In this sense it is important to distinguish between Lyotard’s sense of matrix, which is generative of bad form, and Kristeva’s very different matrix, which is rhythmic, maternal, productive; since the first does the work of the informe while the latter is given over to form.

Within the field of artistic practice, various challenges to the positive, productive, maternal idea of the matrix have been organized, none perhaps so lethally effective as the production of the “a-chrome” as ultimately developed by Manzoni. For the a-chrome was Manzoni’s version of monochrome painting carried out by taking the world’s materials—pleated cloth, pebbles, bread rolls—and covering them over with a uniform coating of kaolin, thereby producing a strange combination of abstraction (monochrome) and readymade (anything massed onto the picture plane). This productive strategy, insofar as it employs a clay coating, obviously equates matter (and its proliferation) with mater (or earth, and its fecundity). But increasingly, after 1961, Manzoni identifies proliferation with non-natural materials, in fact with toxic industrial products such as Styrofoam or glass wool. So that in what would seem like an invocation of the matrix in the placenta-like or cushioning surfaces of works like the Nuages, there is in fact the entirely antimaternal implication of the overproduction of artificial, nonbiodegradable matter, which can only proliferate as waste.

—RK

ZONE. Bataille conceived of a kind of thermodynamics in reverse. In his view, because the sun’s energy is in a state of superfluity, we are condemned to an ever-increasing overproduction, and it is this cosmic imbalance that is at the root of the cyclical character of certain regulatory mechanisms—like war—that are activated by a buildup of unspent energy (war, an unproductive expenditure, represents the sudden release of an excessive amount of energy at the point when the pressure has become too great, like steam escaping through the safety valve of a pressure cooker). This model, which began to be formulated in 1933 in “The Notion of Expenditure,” but which Bataille would further elaborate in The Accursed Share (1949), seems at first glance to depend on a law totally contrary to that of entropy. Yet the outcome Bataille has in mind would be every bit as eschatological as Carnot’s own original prediction of the progressive cooling-down of the solar system.
Of course, Bataille is supremely optimistic: aware that, if it keeps traveling down the same road in its race against the overproduction of energy, humanity one day will condemn itself \((a \text{ for} tiori\) if it sets the solution of war aside, as increasingly endangering its survival), he sees nothing less than a radical change of attitude that would force man to accede to sovereignty (voluntary renunciation of usefulness and of the accumulation of riches; propagation of non-productive expenditures). But he doesn't exclude the possibility of failure.

At the time of *Documents*, in any case, such optimism was unwarranted, and, more than a potential liberation, Bataille dreamed of a necessary, perfectly entropic, corollary of overproduction: namely, the noncompactible burgeoning of unassimilable waste. Using dust as its emblem, he begins by noting the repression to which this waste-production is subject: “The storytellers have not realized that the Sleeping Beauty would have awoken covered with a thick layer of dust.... Meanwhile dismal sheets of dust constantly invade earthly habitations and uniformly defile them.” He then alludes to the Sisyphean battle of the “cleaning ladies,” armed each morning with their feather dusters and their vacuum cleaners to combat this daily tide. Finally, he concludes that the battle is uneven and hopeless: “One day or another, given its persistence . . . dust will probably begin to gain the upper hand over the servants, pouring immense amounts of rubbish into abandoned buildings and deserted dockyards.”

One of the inscriptions of time (whose irreversibility is demonstrated by the law of entropy), dust is, semiologically speaking, an index. In this it is like photography, but its trace is of duration. Duchamp put his finger on this indicial quality quite precisely, when he let dust accumulate in layers of differing thicknesses (and thus different “curations”) on his *Large Glass* in order to obtain degrees of transparency and of varied colors once a fixative was applied (*Elevar de poussière*, the photograph he had Man Ray take at that point, is an index of an index).

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1. Georges Bataille, “Poussière,” *Documents* 5 (1929) (“Critical Dictionary”), p. 278; reprinted in *OG*, vol. 1, p. 196; trans. Iain White in *EA*, pp. 42–43 (translation slightly modified). In the same issue, the second article “Homme” of the “Critical Dictionary” appeared (see supra, “To Introduce a User’s Guide”): What would Bataille not have added had he known that dust is in large part constituted of human exfoliations? In the following issue of *Documents* the famous text on the “big toe” appeared.

Ashes occupy the same indicial plane, or more precisely cigarette ash (in that the implied duration is relatively standardized—the phenomenology of cigarettes being different from that of pipes or cigars, which go out once one no longer puffs on them; the cigarette burns all by itself, a fire with little variation). This is what Man Ray considered at almost the same moment (in 1920), as he photographed the contents of an ashtray dumped onto the floor to make an image he called New York and collaged, along with a map of Paris, into a work titled Transatlantique, the city being an ashtray overflowing with butts. As for Duchamp, in order to mark the entropic irreversibility of time, he photographed cigarettes stripped of their paper skins to make the cover of a book whose title is La Septième Face du dé (The Seventh Side of the Die): an unusable die would mark the stoppage of the calendar, just as the cigarettes would become unsmokable.

But dust, Bataille also says, pours immense amounts of rubbish ("immenses décombres") into "abandoned buildings, deserted dockyards," which is to say the area called the "zone." It would even seem that its irreversible invasion must end by chasing "the servants" away and emptying all "earthly habitations" of their occupants, transforming them into "deserted dockyards" (dust in the zone: there again you have a double index). On an urban scale, the zone is what dust is at the scale of the single dwelling: it's the waste that inevitably accompanies production (which is necessarily, we should remember, overproduction).

As an organism, the City always, of course, tries to combat entropic proliferation at the same time that it generates it; as a capitalist enterprise, it always invents new means of recycling waste. In one of his most devastating books, Real Estate Opportunities, Ed Ruscha reproduces—without comment—


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thick layers of dust, was a sign in Duchamp's studio that read "Dust breeding. To be respected" (Victor [Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou, 1977], p. 65).
twenty-five photographs of empty lots within the (very flaccid, as we know) urban fabric of Los Angeles. Each brandishes a “For Sale” sign, and although the lots are likely to have been sold by now, thus having been reintegrated into the circuit of production (the book dates from 1970), some are full of brambles, the temporal index of a real-estate market that wasn’t in full swing when the photograph was taken. Even temporarily, these plots are negative spaces (some remaining so for a very long time, even indefinitely, especially if the hemorrhaging spreads to neighboring lots), and in any case they will be replaced by others. The zone would thus seem assimilable, yet always renews itself (it’s the Hydra of Lerne), and it is necessary that it grow: the present turning of the planet into a mammoth trash can is the sad confirmation of this prognosis. (Robert Smithson, relying on the work of the economist Nicholas Georgescu-Roegen, would doubt the efficacy of ecological recycling: it is, he says, “like looking for needles in haystacks.”)³

Sometimes the entropic buildup is less spectacular; sometimes the waste is clean. Nonetheless, it threatens the urban map, and the city always tries to eliminate it. New York City’s auctioning off of mostly unusable, interstitial spaces, at twenty-five dollars apiece, is one of the most incongruous examples of

this battle lost in advance (to return dead zones to commercial circulation is to try to prevent the invasion of dust). Gordon Matta-Clark, at the time when he had just begun to make his holes in condemned buildings, had the insight that here it was a matter of economic voids, of holes he didn’t even need to pierce, and he became a buyer—not to join in the battle against entropy (quite to the contrary), but to demonstrate its repressed occurrence in the urban context. He documented his acquisitions on panels, one to a plot, showing the title of the property, the map of the area, and photographs:

They were a group of fifteen micro-parcels of land in Queens, left-over properties from an architect’s drawing. One or two of the prize ones were a foot strip down somebody’s driveway and a foot of sidewalk. And the others were curbstone and gutter space. What I basically wanted to do was to designate spaces that wouldn’t be seen and certainly not occupied.4

That wouldn’t be seen, not so much because they would be inaccessible (although this was true in some cases),5 but because they had no use-value whatever and only a purely nominal exchange-value: these are fake commodities, fake real-estate properties (the title of the work, perhaps the most conceptual Matta-Clark ever did, is Reality Properties: Fake Estates, which puns on the fact that reality is an archaic term for real estate). They didn’t interest Matta-Clark unless they had no economic value whatever.

Of course, the zone is visible (even though we prefer to block it from sight), but not the turning-into-the-zone: we only see the zone once it’s in place, just as we don’t see dust until it has settled. The Society of Use produces multitudes of these remainders that are imperceptible until the point of no return has been reached (again duration is always implicated). Let’s take the example of outdoor parking lots: it took Ruscha’s photographing thirty or so of them from a helicopter one Sunday


5. “When I bought those properties at the New York City Auction, the description of them that always excited me the most was ‘inaccessible’” (Gordon Matta-Clark [Marseille], p. 373). One wonders, then, what the documentary photograph on the corresponding panel would have consisted of.
when they were empty for one to notice that they are a mighty sewer, a machine for the production of oil spots (*Thirtyfour Parking Lots in Los Angeles*, 1967). Of course, from time to time (precisely when the point of no return is about to be reached), they are given a new coat of asphalt, but the spot always reforms and inevitably wins, for the battle against the invader is a losing one—perhaps this is what the Fluxus “performance,” during which a group of friends vigorously cleaned a piece of sidewalk on Fifth Avenue, sponges, brooms, and scouring pads at the ready, wanted to show.6

Ruscha is the great census-taker of these little nothings that eat away at the city, but above all he sees the city itself as dust, as a mounting tide of nondifferen-

tiation (and the galloping spread of suburbia proves him right). For he takes urban dust as the greasy version of a "cleaner" evil that is characteristic of advanced capitalism and its mass media, namely entropy as defined by information theory (the informational content of a message is in inverse proportion to its entropy). This theory, whose effects are pervasive in all of Ruscha's pictorial production, notably his word paintings, designates everything that hinders or even is useless to the transmission of the message as "noise"; and, by extension, everything that has no informational content, everything that is repeated, predictable, redundant—all of that is nothing but dust. In this sense the city itself, as a megalopolis, has become pure noise, pure zone.

Robert Smithson went to look for the zone in the great industrial suburbs of New Jersey. "Completely controlled by" his Instamatic, he discovered many "ruins in reverse, that is—all the new construction that would eventually be built," returning with photographs of ridiculous "monuments" (for example, "concrete abutments that supported the shoulders of a new highway in the process of being built"). But he needn't have gone so far. Even though his first book, Twenty-Six Gasoline Stations (1963)—one for each letter of the alphabet—covers a rather great distance, reproducing the gas stations, photographed deadpan from the opposite side of the road, that he encountered between Oklahoma City and Los Angeles, Ruscha stayed mostly within the same urban perimeter for his

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“monument” hunts. In Every Building on the Sunset Strip (1966), which moreover struck Smithson very forcefully, he exhaustively shows, in a “panorama” form composed of sixty-two accordion-folded pages, all the buildings of the most famous section of Sunset Boulevard. (One can “read” the book in both directions, since the two sides of the boulevard symmetrically oppose one another on each page, one right side up, the other upside down: at one end number 8100 is reflected in 8011; at the other number 9176 corresponds to 9171, although, of course, this almost perfect correspondence of even and odd numbers is rare in the book.) It should be said that it was not only buildings that were photographed—there are also street intersections, occasional lawns, cars whose drivers are rarely seen—since it was a matter of a complete inventory. No effort was made, however, to mask the discontinuity of the recording process: the photographic joins are crude, a way of showing that the very technique of information—the discontinuous “bit”—necessarily produces a certain quotient of entropy. In other books, Ruscha abandons the principle of exhaustiveness and concentrates instead on a building type (Some Los Angeles Apartments of 1965, Nine Swimming Pools and a Broken Glass of 1968), or even on the palm trees that are more populous in Los Angeles than pedestrians—trees whose diversity surprises the tourists (A Few Palm Trees, 1971). Always the same uniformity, always the same anonymous quality, but without the somewhat denunciatory tone that we find in Dan Graham when, in Homes for America, he makes a survey of prefab housing developments “designed to be thrown away,” or the perverse admiration of Robert Venturi in front of Levittown or Las Vegas. Simply the recognition of the same (that, for the most part, Ruscha’s books use the same format and identical typeface, provides an example), and the same as nothing. Speaking of the Sunset Strip, which he photographed at noon to accentuate its desolate quality, Ruscha writes: “All I was after was that store-front plane. It’s like a Western town in a way. A store-front plane of a Western town is just paper, and everything behind is just nothing.” Hollywood, the beehive of the media at the center of Los Angeles, needs no help imagining ghost towns full of dust.

—Y-AB

8. Smithson, “A Museum of Language in the Vicinity of Art” (1968), in ibid., p. 91. The allusion to the Ruscha book comes in a section titled “Spectral Suburbs,” where the suburbs are described as an “immense negative entity of formlessness” that “displaces the center which is the city and invades the country.” The interpretation of the suburbs as the overflow of “formless masses of urban residue,” taken from Lewis Mumford, had strongly impressed Guy Debord, who comments on it in The Society of the Spectacle in 1967. Debord touches briefly on parking lots, whose proliferation also struck Ruscha.


10. Ed Ruscha, cited in David Bourdon, “Ruscha as Publisher (or All Booked Up),” Art News (April 1972), p. 34.