Quasi-Infinities and the Waning of Space

For many artists the universe is expanding; for some it is contracting.

By ROBERT SMITHSON

“A round four blocks of print I shall postulate four ultramundane margins that shall contain indeterminate information as well as reproduced reproductions. The first obstacle shall be a labyrinth¹, through which the mind will pass in an instant, thus eliminating the spatial problem. The next encounter is an abyssal anatomy theatre². Quickly the mind will pass over this dizzying height. Here the pages of time are paper thin, even when it comes to a pyramid³. The center of this pyramid is everywhere and nowhere. From this center one may see the Tower of Babel⁴, Kepler’s universe⁵, or a building by the architect Ledoux⁶. To formulate a general theory of this inconceivable system would not solve its symmetrical perplexities. Ready to trap the mind is one of an infinite number of “cities of the future”⁷. Inutile codes⁸ and extravagant experiments⁹ adumbrate the “absolute” abstraction¹⁰. One becomes aware of what T. E. Hulme called “the fringe… the cold walks… that lead nowhere.”

In Ad Reinhardt’s “Twelve Rules for a New Academy” we find the statement, “The present is the future of the past, and the past of the future.” The dim surface sections within the confines of Reinhardt’s standard (60” x 60”) “paintings” disclose faint squares of time. Time, as a colorless intersection, is absorbed almost imperceptibly into one’s consciousness. Each painting is at once both memory and forgetfulness, a paradox of darkening time. The lines of his grids are barely visible; they waver between the future and the past.

George Kubler, like Ad Reinhardt, seems concerned with “weak signals” from the “void.” Beginnings and endings are projected into the present as hazy planes of “actuality.” In The Shape of Time, Remarks on the History of Things, Kubler says, “Actuality is… the interchronic pause when nothing is happening. It is the void between events.” Reinhardt seems obsessed by this “void,” so much that he has attempted to give it a concrete shape—a shape that evades shape. Here one finds no allusion to “duration,” but an interval without any suggestion of “life or death.” This is a coherent portion of a hidden infinity. The future criss-crosses the past as an unobtainable present. Time vanishes into a perpetual sameness.

Most notions of time (Progress, Evolution, Avant-garde) are put in terms of biology. Analogies are drawn between organic biology and technology; the nervous system is extended into electronics, and the muscular
Any art that originates with a will to "expression" is not abstract, but representational. Space is represented. Critics who interpret art in terms of space see the history of art as a reduction of three dimensional illusionistic space to the same order of space as our bodies." (Clement Greenberg—Abstract, Representative, and so forth.) Here Greenberg equates "space" with "our bodies" and interprets this reduction as abstract. This anthropomorphizing of space is aesthetically a "pathetic fallacy" and is in no way abstract.

Although animate things remain our most tangible evidence that the old human past really existed, the conventional metaphors used to describe this visible past are mainly biological." George Kubler, The Shape of Time: Remarks on the History of Things

The study of anatomy since the Renaissance lead to a notion of art in terms of biology. Although anatomy is rarely taught in our art schools, the metaphors of anatomical and biological science linger in the minds of some of our most abstract artists. In the paintings of both Willem deKooning and Jackson Pollack, one may find traces of the biological metaphor, or what Lawrence Alloway called "biomorphism." In architecture, most notably in the theories of Frank Lloyd Wright, the biological metaphor prevails. Wright's idea of the "organic" had a powerful influence on both architects and artists. This in turn produced a nostalgia for the rural or rustic community or the pastoral setting, and as a result brought into aesthetics an anti-urban attitude. Wright's view of the city as a "cancer" or "a social disease" persists today in the minds of some of the most "formalist" artists and critics. Abstract expressionism revealed this visceral condition, without any awareness of the role of the biological metaphor. Art is still for the most part thought to be "creative" or in Alloway's words "phases of seeding, sprouting, growing, loving, fighting, decaying, rebirth." The science of biology in this case, becomes "biological-fiction," and the problem of anatomy dissolves into an "organic mass." If this is so, then abstract-expressionism was a disintegration of "figure painting" or a decomposition of anthropomorphism. Impressionistic modes of art also suffer from this biological syndrome.

Kubler suggests that metaphors drawn from physical science rather than biological science would be more suitable for describing the condition of art. Biological science has since the nineteenth century infused in most people's minds an unconscious faith in "creative evolu-

Plate probably drawn for Spigelius (1627)

Willem deKooning

Jackson Pollock

The biological metaphor is at the bottom of all "formalist" criticism. There is nothing abstract about deKooning or Pollock. To locate them in a formalist system is simply a critical mutation based on a misunderstanding of metaphor—namely, the biological extended into the spatial.

Art Forum, September 1965, The Biomorphic Forties

A. The Guggenheim Museum is perhaps Wright's most visceral achievement. No building is more organic than this inverse digestive tract. The ambulatories are metaphorically intestines. It is a concrete stomach.
"In principle, nothingness remains inaccessible to science. Martin Heidegger, An Introduction to Metaphysics"

"The unity of Nature is an extremely artificial and fragile bridge, a garden net." T. E. Holme, Counsels

"It came to him with a great shock that not one of the robots had ever seen a living thing. Not a bug, a worm, a leaf. They did not know what flesh was. Only the doctors knew that, and none of them could readily understand what the words 'organic matter' meant." Michael Shaara, Orphans of the Void

THE VANISHING ORGANISM

The biological metaphor has its origin in the temporal order, yet certain artists have "detemporalized" certain organic properties, and transformed them into solid objects that contain "ideas of time." This attitude toward art is more "Egyptian" than "Greek," static rather than dynamic. Or it is what William S. Burroughs calls "The Thermodynamic Pain and Energy Bank"—a condition of time that originates inside isolated objects rather than outside. Artists as different as Alberto Giacometti and Ruth Vollmer to Eva Hesse and Lucas Samaras disclose this tendency.

Giacometti's early work, The Palace at Four A.M., enigmatically and explicitly is about time. But, one could hardly say that this "time-structure" reveals any suggestion of organic vitality. Its balance is fragile and precarious, and drained of all notions of energy, yet it has a primordial grandeur. It takes one's mind to the origins of time—to the fundamental structure. Giacometti's art and thought conveys an entropic view of the world. "It's hard for me to shut up," says Giacometti to James Lord. "It's the delirium that comes from the impossibility of really accomplishing anything."

There are parallels in the art of Ruth Vollmer to that of Giacometti. For instance, she made small skeletal geometric structures before she started making her bronze "spheres," and like Giacometti she considers those early works "dead-ends." But there is no denying that these works are in the same class with Giacometti, for they evoke both the presence and the absence of time. Her Obelisk is similar in mood to The Palace at Four A.M. One thinks of Pascal's "fearful sphere" lost in an Egyptian past, or in the words of Plotinus the Stoic, "shadows in a shadow." Matter in this Obelisk opposes and forecloses all activity—its future is missing.

The art of Eva Hesse is vortiginous and wonderfully dislocated. Trellises are mumified, nets contain discarded lumps, wires extend from tightly wrapped frameworks, a cosmic derailment is the general effect. Cables go on and on; some are cracked open, only to reveal an empty center. Such "things" seem destined for a funerary chamber that excludes all mention of the living and the dead. Her art brings to mind the obsessions of the pha-

20 The following is part of a manuscript that describes The Palace at Four A.M. It was dictated by Giacometti to André Breton for publication in the magazine Minotaure (No. 3-4, 1937, p. 42) and later translated by Ruth Vollmer into English (see the magazine Transformation published by Wittenborn). This object has taken form little by little; by the end of summer 1932 it clarified slowly for me, the various parts taking their exact form and their particular place in the ensemble. Come autumn it had attained such reality that its execution in space did not take more than one day."

21 A Giacometti Portrait. The Museum of Modern Art

22 Ruth Vollmer, Obelisk (1962)

23 Quoted from Enооруж, in Concepts of Mass in Classical and Modern Physics (Harper Torch Book TB571) by Max Jammer, page 31. On the same page Jammer goes on to say, "Proclus, the other great exponent of Neoplatonism in the East, accepts Plotinus' doctrine but with one important modification: the passivity or inertia of matter follows from its extension. The decline of the concept of 'painting' and 'sculpture' seem to be the result of this problem of spatial extension from matter. Space becomes an illusion on matter."
C. In her _LoaKooN_ based on the sculpture by Pergamon? second century B.C., we discover an absence of "pathos" and a deliberate avoidance of the anthropomorphic. Instead we are aware only of the vestigial and devitalized "snakes" looping through a lattice with cloth bound joints. Everything "classical" and "romantic" is mitigated and undermined. The baroque aesthetic of the original _LoaKooN_ with its flowing lines—soft and fluid—is transformed into a dry, skeletal tower that goes nowhere.

TIME AND HISTORY AS OBJECTS

At the turn of the century a group of colorful French artists banded together in order to get the jump on the bourgeois notion of progress. This bohemian brand of progress gradually developed into what is sometimes called the avant-garde. Both these notions of duration are no longer absolutes modes of "time" for artists. The avant-garde, like progress, is based on an ideological consciousness of time. Time as ideology has produced many uncertain "art histories" with the help of the mass-media. Art histories may be measured in time by books (years), by magazines (months), by newspapers (weeks and days), by radio and TV (days and hours). And at the gallery proper—_instant_—time is brought to a condition that breaks down into "abstract-objects." The isolated time of the avant-garde has produced its own unavailable history or entropy.

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

\[ 10 + 1 + 1.10 + 1.100 + 1.1000 + 1.10,000 + \ldots \]

25 A. Eva Hesse, _LoaKooN_, 1965

26 Lucas Samaras, _Untitled_, 1963

27 Self-love, self-observation, self-examination, and self-awareness result in an isolated mind. This kind of mind would tend to produce a fictitious "reality" detached from organic nature. _Monsieur Tresse_ by Paul Valéry is perhaps the greatest elucidation of Narcissism. He watches himself, he manipulates, he is unwilling to be maneuvered. He knows only two values, two categories, those of knowledge reduced to its use; the possible and the impossible. In the strange head, where philosophy has little credit, where language is always on trial, there is scarcely a thought that is not accompanied by the feeling that it is tentative...

28 In _13 French Science-Fiction Stories_ edited by Damon Knight (Bantam paperback, F2817) is a story by Charles Hnneberg called _Moonfish_. "The Interplanetarians were landing in these sands. They were of many kinds. Much later, the Pharaoh Pyramdcheches III noted: 'They fell from the sky like the fruits of a fig-tree that is shaken; they were the color of copper and sulphur, and some had eyes.'

29 The following book elucidates this idea: _Abstraction and Empathy_ by Wilhelm Worringen. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd., 1953; translated from the German _Abstraktion und Empathie_, 1908. "In so far, therefore, as a sensuous object is still dependent upon space, it is unable to appear to us in its closed material individuality. And 'Space is therefore the major enemy of all striving after abstraction.'

30 A. Don Judd has been interested in "progressions" and "regressions" as "solid objects." He has based certain works on "inverse natural numbers." Some of these may be found in _Summation of Series_ by L. B. W. Jolley, a Dover paperback.