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Reflections on stainlessness

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Abstract
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We must be willing to ask the question 'what for?' of survival. —Reza Negarestani, *Cyclonopedia*

We don't need to see anything out of the ordinary. We already see so much. —Robert Walser, *A Little Ramble*

To Shine

Our major cultural artefacts, or at least those endorsed by dominant culture, such as museums, monuments, statues and the like, suggest through their passive advocacy of stainlessness a paradoxical commitment to both permanence and progress. [1] Not unlike their non predecessors in the late-nineteenth century, whose Jugendstil organism created a metallic imaginary that provided Baudelaire with the title for his most well known collection of verse, *Les Fleurs du Mal*, the evils of our shiny, contemporary wish images remain obscure, not least because their capacity to reflect cultural values is necessarily distorted. [2]

Whether one is pacing the promenade leading to Frank Gehry’s Walt Disney Music Hall in Los Angeles, cautiously approaching Nied Kohn’s undulating Ionic façade that sits at Technoramas – The Swiss Science Center, or finding one’s bearings among the glistening consumption of Michigan Avenue beneath Anish Kapoor’s Cloud Gate in Chicago’s Millennium Park, we witness how our current epoch extenuates a piquant but parastatic value: metallic surfaces are synonymous with progress. The more polished, refined, expansive and contiguous these metallic surfaces, the greater the representational carrying capacity for our most lauded
What force compels this aesthetic of mineralization? How did our proliferation of 'stainlessness' (as a quality) take place so rapidly, reaching an almost unthinkable acclamation in its contemporary ubiquitous dispersion? Most importantly, what precedents within a materialist history of the Anthropocene could help orient our attempts to think the force of the human species, which has proven itself more than capable of antagonizing the vast scale of the earth through the mineralization of its surface? To be without any orientation beyond the surface of the earth is, etymologically at least, to be in a state of disaster, in what follows we will provoke questions of cosmic contingencies, labour unrest, and aesthetic mediation (in the sense Georges Bataille gives to this term), as a means to write this disaster into the history of a force best agitated by the threat of its own erasure.

Pseudonymously

Human life is exhausted from serving as the head of, or the reason for, the universe. To the extent that it becomes this head and this reason, to the extent that it becomes necessary to the universe, it accepts solitude.

- Georges Bataille, Victims of Excess

The pseudonymously named force known most commonly as Homo sapiens is expanding its territory of influence, or, perhaps more correctly, that force is beginning to recognize its reflection within the expanded fold of its operations. No longer confined to the organic register of biology — although by no means freed from it as a constant condition — humans are a geologic force with an impact now comparable to the asteroid that ended the Cretaceous period by annihilating the dinosaurs sixty-five million years ago. To grasp this force of the human, to be capable of understanding the consequence for our biological species—being as it manifests a geologic reformation, several problematic assumptions must be laid to rest. First, despite our knowledge claims regarding reasonability or rationality, the overall activity of the human species is entirely acausal; the aggregate impact of human actions on the surface of the earth is without direction, creating positive feedbacks that increase the force of the human without the requirement of a unified program, or the necessity of direction or leadership in the broad sense. Second, the force of mineralization on the tellurian surface suggests the need for a significant reappraisal of concepts like environment and ecology; necessary, then, is a concept of environment that would include not only biospheric interests, but would instead allow the human species to be located within a general economy that is not even indifferent to its superficial planetary interests, concerns and affictions. [3]

Finally, if we want to begin to think the operational character of the human species not merely as a form of intentionality or vehicle of ideology, but as a force, we must avoid assuming any purpose for this force in advance of our analysis, as if the human was meant to realize some broader destiny or to operate indescribably to some imaginary criteria of progress.

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Etienne Turpin, Ph.D., is the 2011-2012 Walter B. Sanders Research Fellow at the A. Alfred Taubman College of Architecture and Urban Planning, University of Michigan, where he is teaching seminars on design research, architecture theory, and Walter Benjamin’s Arcades Project. His research project at the College focuses on the turn to the Anthropocene within geological discourse, and its potential effect on architecture and design; this research will help complete a longer study of relations among architecture, philosophy and geology, titled Temble is the Earth, as well as an exhibition and attendant publication entitled Stainlessness: A User’s Guide to the Anthropocene. Etienne is also a founding editor of the architecture, landscape and political economy journal Scapegoat.
NOTES:

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[3] Recent publications that suffer from this all-too-biospheric conception of nature include, but are not limited to, Jane Bennett’s Vibrant Matter and Timothy Morton’s Ecology without Nature. As the saying goes, there is a ditch on both sides of the road, but you only crash into one side at a time: for Bennett, the “thingnness” of her alleged materialist political theory remains entirely caught up in the relation to and support of human intellect in regard to other, biospheric liberalism: Morton seems less inclined to accept this position, yet his own tautological position is confident that an appreciation of nature’s so-called “dark ecology” will reveal the appropriate comportment for human life toward the biosphere.