Headless Bellies and Other Forms of Architectural Allusion

For those focused on the frontier of architectural form making, there is immense pressure on matters of form. Familiar methods have revealed their dangers: the gradient shifts, elegant curves, and intricate geometries of computational design and digital fabrication have become tropes and signifiers of the recent past; shapes and graphics are too quick—something seen, consumed, and excreted in the blink of an eye; metaphorical gestures fall prey to the snags of language and symbolism; and abstract formalism is too autonomous and impenetrable to engage the world. And so, it makes sense that much attention and conversation has recently shifted to the imperiled status of the architectural object and how it comes to be—and thus on the origins of architectural form itself.[1]

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This pressure has led some architects to the conclusion that our obsession with context and networked relations has caused us to neglect our disciplinary core: the architectural object. David Ruy, in particular, has articulated the way in which the preoccupation with external forces, networks, and systems over the last two decades has led to an emphasis on "architectural intelligence" over "architectural objects." Given that "architectural intelligence" is difficult to define and to argue for as worthwhile to the outside world, architectural authority and power have significantly diminished. Drawing from Graham Harman's object-oriented philosophy, Ruy argues for a conception of architecture that rejects relationism and turns to the architectural object, embracing its strange and withdrawn qualities.[2]

Implicated in this critique is architecture's relationship to subjectivity and its investment in the people who will ultimately view, occupy, and live among our work. In object-oriented philosophy there is no subject; what is typically understood to be a "subject" is actually an object, like everything else. This results in a radical re-conception of the architect, as maker, and of the viewer, as receiver—for now all entities are considered objects and the knowing, enlightened subject disappears from the equation. Following this logic to its conclusion, it becomes apparent that in order to place renewed focus on architecture's agency as a physical, material object in the world it should relinquish any concern for contextuality and human experience.

This abandonment of the subject-object correlate (termed "correlationism" by Quentin Meillassoux[3]) is appealing to a certain set of contemporary designers

1

who are unabashed in their obsession with architectural things—in their materiality, their morphology, their detail, and their fabrication. These designers are working to assert the power of an object, or a thing, to produce newness—be that new thoughts, culture, or even knowledge—and as such, they are working to reinvigorate architecture's broader influence. Importantly though, these designers do not completely discard the notion of the architectural subject; rather, they restructure the standing hierarchy between subjects and objects. Typically, architecture is contingent upon an assumption that ideas precede objects or that culture precedes artifacts and therefore, that subjects come before objects. Inverting this relationship allows for a new conception of objects where *they* form *us*, *they* establish *us*, *they* constitute *us*. In this way objects are able to influence subjectivities—not simply the other way around.

This alternative object-subject relationship is described in Bill Brown's essay, "Thing Theory." He lays out a distinction between "objects" and "things" where "things" are "what is excessive in objects, as what exceeds their mere materialization as objects or their mere utilization as objects."[4] Whereas we look *through* objects, we look *at* things; objects are discrete while things are amorphous. In turn, things are liberated from the historical contexts and functional responsibilities of objects to do new work organizing the "temporality of our animate world" and constituting new object-subject relationships. This conception of a thing empowered can be seen in recent architectural work focused on the production of forms that are both familiar and elusive—conjuring babies, rocks, animals and the like. This work is the focus of this paper and what I call **allusive form**.

In essence, allusion refers to architectural quasi-forms that are evocative and provocative but unknowable and unnameable. They are evocative because they

Figure 1. One of a collection of plush toys, Mustacio by Bittertang possesses features that are familiar such as an eye, a quasi-mouth, and lower appendages. However, the figure never resolves into one, nameable creature (such as a dog or bunny); instead, its undeniably strange presence points away from the spectacular and towards more murky aesthetic territory.

2

can be identified as being "almost" many things, but are none of them. They are provocative because they draw on elemental associations with the body, sexuality, and decay. They are unknowable in part because they are unnamable, but also because they do not reveal their material and formal origins. What follows is an illustrated account of allusion as a method of architectural form making that skirts the pitfalls of previous methods by placing emphasis on, and agency within, things themselves while simultaneously anticipating a viewing subject.

Allusive forms share a number of common traits that unite their dispositions, if not their aesthetics:

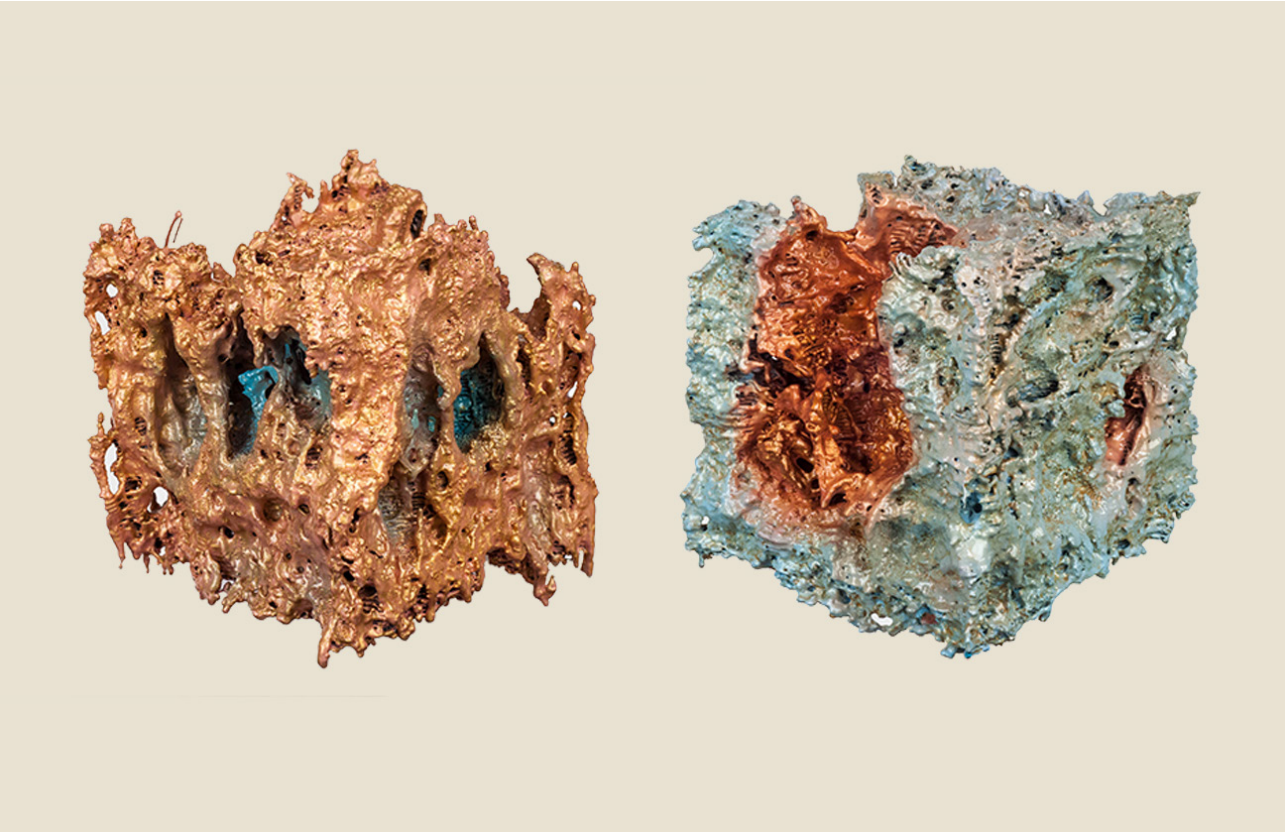
They are familiar to us and thus do not register as spectacular. (Figure 1)

Allusive form by definition is implicit rather than explicit; it is familiar yet unnamable. Things appear as quasi-faces, quasi-appendages, quasi-animals. One might discern a "leg" (loosely defined as an appendage on the lower half of a body that provides support) but never a leg or anything else that benefits from the conventions of nomenclature (Superman was never allusive, just hard to see: "It's a bird, it's a plane, it's Superman!") Spectacularity is catalyzed by either absolute foreignness (the first full-view image of Earth taken by Apollo 17 in 1972, for example) or by very large scale. As such the allusive is not spectacular and therefore avoids the dangers of trends, fads, and fickle interest.

They are not representations of something else, but rather always just what they are. (Figure 2)

To allude is not to say, "this *is* that" or, "this is *like* that," but rather to say, "this *could* be that *or* that *or* that, but it is none of those things, and therefore it is exactly (or only) what it is." Allusion does not represent things; if it did it would

Figure 2. In the designer's own words, Rocks, by SIFT Studio, "…are rocks; not representations of rocks, not objects mimicking rocks, just rocks." By designing rocks SIFT Studio is able to manipulate the qualities of rocks towards unusual massing, figuration, and surface effects not seen in geological rocks.



3

be more properly called a metaphor or simile. Nor is it allegorical or narrative-based. Allusive forms do not tell a story and are not scaled representations of other things. At the risk of falling on circular reasoning, they are what they are.

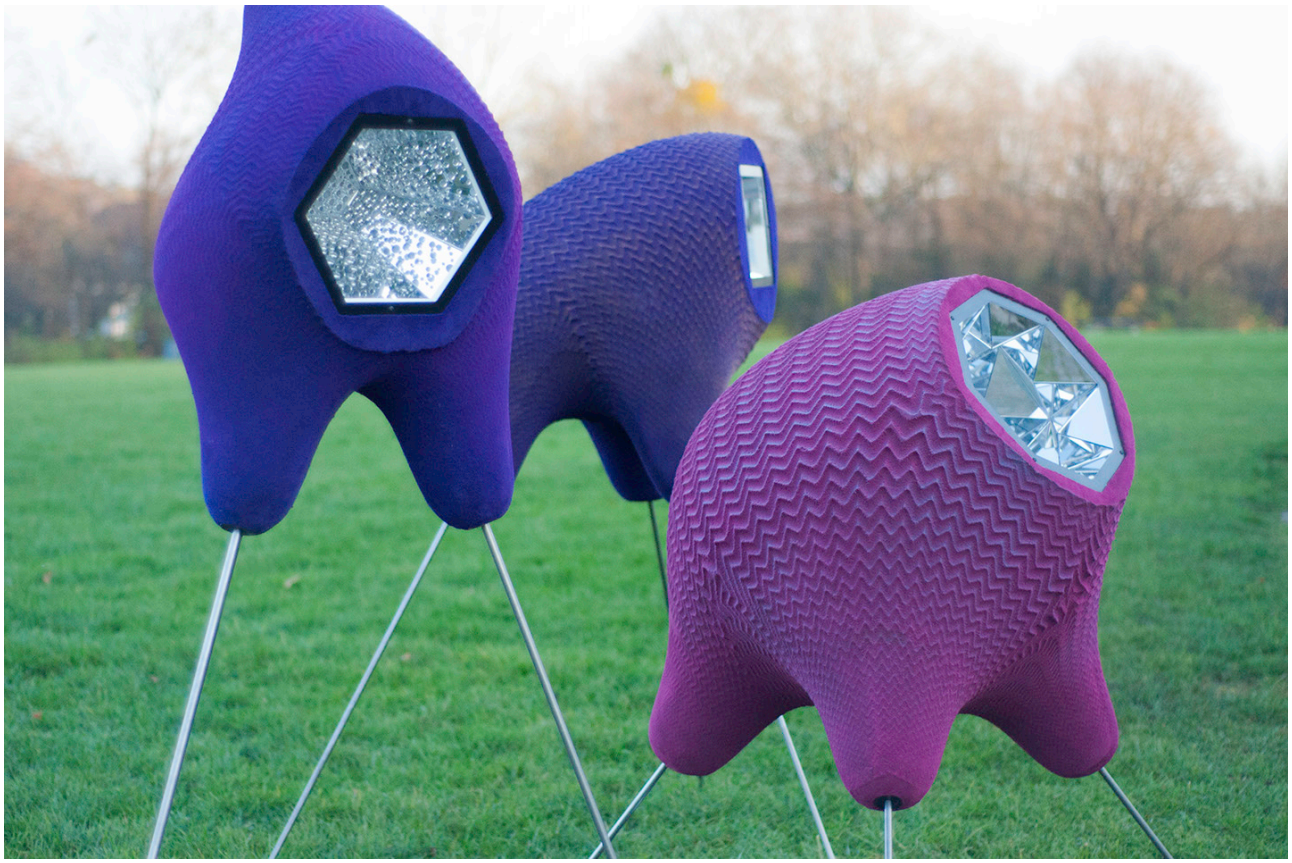
They are three-dimensional and therefore invite prolonged attention greater than something two-dimensional or graphic. (Figure 3)

While allusion often leads to imageable or eidetic forms, they are never graphic. They employ three-dimensions instead of two and this multi-dimensionality contests the immediacy of the graphic to encourage new forms of prolonged architectural attention. Counter to the merits of "shape," which emphasizes vague silhouettes and "slack adaptability," allusive forms are invested in elongating the timespan of subjective engagement through specificity and extreme attention to morphological and material details.[5]

They rely on accumulation (intra-connections) rather than relation (inter-connections) to produce figuration. (Figure 4)

Allusive forms are not contextual. The logics of their morphology and materiality are internal. Rather than taking abstract entities (circulation flows or demographic data perhaps) and turning them into forms (a swoopy shape or a map perhaps) allusion leverages abstraction to calibrate an approximation of familiar forms. In this way the forms are an accumulation of traits and connections between them. The build-up of carefully attuned morphological features and material treatments coalesces to produce precise approximations—allusive forms. Allusion does not rely on estranging the known, because it does not move away from something towards something else. Instead, allusion refers to things that approximate other things by moving towards them, but never actually reaching them.

Figure 3. The cubic forms of Artifacts by SIFT Studio quickly give way to something less resolved. Shifting hues, iridescence, sunken cavities, and porous surfaces combine to produce surface and mass at the highest resolution. Comprehension cannot happen in an instant; it takes time.



4

Figure 4. The headless bellies of EADO's Peep Peep suggest vitality and creature-ness but cannot be identified as such. This suggestion arises from an accumulation of rotund shape plus protrusions plus missing "heads" and so on. The agglomeration of these features and qualities animates the peeps without tying them specifically to any one known entity.

They are blasé about technology. (Figure 5)

Allusive forms are often, if not always, produced using the most advanced tools of digital design and fabrication; however, they never showcase or celebrate these methods. The necessity of digital tools to both design and to materialize such things arises from the often-complex shapes, the intricate textures, and the internal parametric logics of each design. But in order to remain allusive—and elusive—the focus remains on overall shaping and molding of forms and on their materiality. There is no effort to reveal the sophisticated means by which the things are made. Quite the opposite: often there are efforts to conceal it. This nonchalance allows allusion to avoid the dangers of aestheticizing toolpaths, gradients, and thousands of distinct parts and to embrace the freedom and virtuosity digital tools provide without being limited by their sensibilities. Allusive forms offer idiosyncrasy and multiplicity in the place of "homogenous plurality."[6]

As a disciplinary conceit, allusion has affinities to French Neoclassicist notions of architectural character in its relationship to both biomorphism and artifice. For a time, architectural character was considered an expression of human emotion and behavior and due to its association with the classical orders it remained somewhat anthropomorphic.[7] Similarly, allusion often refers to some type of animate form (perhaps more zoomorphic than anthropomorphic), conjuring bodies and vitality. However, where the classical orders maintain a relationship to mimesis and the notion that architecture (and art) imitates life, allusion fundamentally differs. Rather than imitating life, in allusion, "the boundaries between alive and not alive and material and immaterial have become increasingly blurred, so that what was considered as alive can become thing-like and what was considered as dead is able to show signs of life."[8]

5

Through the eighteenth century, the conception of architectural character shifted from one focused on the expression of sensation or utility to one focused on developing a universal language of expression by means of abstraction. And thus it moved away from anthropomorphic references to more dehumanized ones.[9] Allusion too utilizes abstraction, but with a radically different motivation. Abstraction is not used in service of the universal, or the infinite, but rather in a search for multivalence; abstraction allows allusion to operate in the oxymoronic realm of approximate specificity.

Additionally, architectural character has been conceived as that which exceeds structure and functionality and allows architecture to be received as a creative "work of art."[10] This acknowledgment of architecture's excessiveness points to its artificiality and coincides with allusion's rejection of the natural and the contextual in favor of speculative constructs. In dictionary terms the word "speculative" describes something that is both conjecture and risky; as such, allusion typifies the speculative. By nature it is based on incomplete (even concocted) information and involves a certain level of risk in its status as a proposition that may fail. This allegiance to artifice should not be mistaken for one to the synthetic, or the fake. As discussed above, allusive forms are always real in that they do not represent anything other than themselves.

Despite their initial affinities, architectural character and allusion quickly depart ways. Whereas character traditionally conveyed meaning, allusion conveys personality. If the physical character of a city was meant to both represent and discipline the moral character of its citizens, allusion is a physical means of affecting viewing subjects without recourse to representation or protocols. Allusion is not didactic, symbolic, or self-important; it is clever, literal, and self-conscious.

Figure 5. Portions of 48 Characters by LADG are produced through analog means and others through CNC machinery. Some of the forms were rigorously modeled using advanced digital modeling software; others were crafted by hand. Who can tell the difference? Does it matter?

As evidenced by the projects shown here, allusion can be seen in the work of a number of emerging practices that are combining close attention to formal articulation with a desire to affect viewing subjects in novel and unexpected ways. This work opens up distinctive, yet capricious aesthetic territory that can swerve from cute to disgusting, from cuddly to repugnant, but always with an eye towards provoking subjects and engaging audiences. It imbues architectural things with the power of performance as it anticipates an audience while shielding architectural form making from the pitfalls of outdated methods. As a speculation on the role of realism in contemporary design, allusion asserts the ineffable reality of things—a reality that exceeds scientific proof to encompass the unknown. Allusion accepts the murkiness of working with the unknowable and claims an instrumentality for things in any case: "They too act, they too do things, they too *make you do* things."[11] As a disciplinary proposition allusion claims a sustained role for human subjects in the reception of architectural things and offers new possibilities to architectural form making.

ENDNOTES

1. The most institutionalized example to date is the symposium, "SPECULATIONS ON THE REAL: Graham Harman & the OOO Challenge to Contemporary Architecture" held at Syracuse University School of Architecture's Fischer Center in New York City in September 2014.

2. This very brief outline of David Ruy's argument is drawn from his article: Ruy, David. "Returning to (Strange) Objects." *Tarp Architecture Manual*. New York: Pratt School of Architecture, 2012: 38-42

3. "By 'correlation' we mean the idea according to which we only ever have access to the correlation between thinking and being, and never to either term considered apart from the other." Meillassoux, Quentin. *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*. London: Continuum Publishing Group, 2008: 5

4. Brown, Bill. "Thing Theory." *Critical Inquiry* 28 (Autumn 2001) : 5.

5. I'm referring here to Bob Somol's conception of architectural shape: Somol, R.E. "12 Reasons to Get Back into Shape." *Content*. Eds. Office of Metropolitan Architecture and Rem Koolhaas. Köln: Taschen, 2004: 86-87

6. "Homogenous plurality" is the characterization of the architectural style resulting from digital design and fabrication given by Ferda Kolatan in his description of the session topic for this conference, "Beyond Relationism."

7. Lavin, Sylvia. *Quatremère De Quincy And The Invention Of A Modern Language Of Architecture*. Cambridge, Mass: The MIT Press, 1992: 145-6

8. Thrift, Nigel. "Understanding the Material Practices of Glamour." *The Affect Theory Reader.* Eds. Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth. Durham: Duke University, 2010: 296

9. Lavin, Sylvia. *Quatremère De Quincy And The Invention Of A Modern Language Of Architecture*. Cambridge, Mass: The MIT Press, 1992: 145-6

10. Ibid., 139

11. Latour, Bruno. "Why Has Critique Run out of Steam?" *Critical Inquiry* 30 (Winter 2004) : 242-3.