

# Creature Comforts: Toward a Duckered Shed

If I say that my somewhat extravagant imagination yielded simultaneous pictures of an octopus, a dragon, and a human caricature, I shall not be unfaithful to the spirit of the thing...but it was the general outline of the whole which made it most shockingly frightful...

— H.P. Lovecraft, “The Call of Cthulhu”

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In the preceding quote, H.P. Lovecraft appears to be describing an extraordinary creature, the alien demon Cthulhu. Yet according to Graham Harman’s interpretation, Lovecraft is also describing the difficult task one faces when using language to describe such an extraordinary creature. Harman points out that while Lovecraft’s narrator conjures specific qualities of the monster in the reader’s mind, his evasive description deliberately shifts readers’ attention away from these parts and towards the “the spirit of the thing” and the “general outline of the whole.” For Harman the passage illustrates Lovecraft’s philosophical sensitivity to the gaps and tensions that exist between the world as it is and the world as we experience it, not to mention the language that we use to describe those worlds and the language that we use to create new ones. It is this precise sensitivity that compels Harman to elevate Lovecraft above the classification of pulp-fiction Kitsch and into the realm of literature, worthy of serious cultural consideration. For Harman, products of pop-culture such as tee-shirts and posters that represent a literal depiction of Cthulhu (as octopus-dragon-man) undermine the achievement of Lovecraft’s writing.<sup>1</sup> Yet for architecture, this capacity to flicker between its own disciplinary language and the excessively literal visual products of pop-culture is a boon, especially when those products are cartoon-like creatures, and its agenda is the production of new worlds and new audiences.

Among a certain cohort of contemporary architects who have taken up architecture’s task of world making and audience building, the problem of complexity (both visual and functional) has been set aside in favor of a looser, lighter, more playful sensibility. The focus of the work is varied in scope and medium, yet what binds it together is its belief in the speculative potential of architecture to create new ways to live in the world, and its use of low-resolution, figural form and cartoon-like representation to communicate that potential in an optimistic and accessible way. A specific trend or subset among this work is an interest in figure and profile that manifests as explicitly zoomorphic -- that is, forms that resemble

creatures (or beasts or critters or monsters, depending on your tastes). Though unabashedly whimsical in appearance, these projects are motivated by a sincere interest in architecture's capacity to build new audiences, and use the figural forms of creatures in a literal and dead-pan manner to attack that interest head on.

In the projects that we will look at below, the geometries of actual animals (real and imaginary) are simplified to low resolution, ambiguous shapes, some through the smooth curvatures generated by digital technology and others through the extrusion and Boolean operations of primitive or simplified geometries. These operations produce objects that possess body parts such as heads, legs, necks, tails and eyes that endow the object with a specific disposition and posture, though never the fully articulated legibility of a known animal. Flickering back and forth between the familiar and the surprising, these abstracted creature shapes send a deliberately mixed message to those encountering them for the first time. Their parts hang together just enough to understand them as "creature" yet loosely enough to prevent the instant recognition of an icon. We understand such creatures as the content of our stories and imaginations, and we are surprised to see them in "real" life. Their simple outlines offer a bold, but gentle suggestion that the material of the world as we know it may be rearranged to produce a new world as we imagine it. Lovecraft's passage discussed above illustrates several versions of the flickering that is of interest here, a flickering that takes place between reality and imagination, part and whole, meaning and feeling, high-culture and kitsch.

#### HOW CREATURES GET THEIR SHAPE

Influenced by the writings of R.E. Somol, this territory is defined by an optimistic interest in the plastic politics of architecture, and differentiates itself from the legacy of the critical project in order to resuscitate modernism's projective ambitions.<sup>2</sup> In his 2006 essay "Green Dots 101" Somol outlines two dominant camps of architectural signification after modernism: the constative, or critical, practices of articulation (Kenneth Frampton's tectonics) and notation (Peter Eisenman's index) are held in contrast to the performative,<sup>3</sup> or projective, practices of decoration (Robert Venturi's shed) and figuration (John Hejduk's characters). If the former tend to favor the authentic, natural and truthful qualities of place and trace, then the latter are distinguished by an embrace of the artificial, conventional and arbitrary qualities of the surface and the ready-made.<sup>4</sup>

The latter of the two genealogical threads come together in the contemporary project of graphic expediency, which synthesizes the differences brought together in collage to produce a logo:

In addition to projecting an artificial style of life and coalescing new audiences, the logo in its architectural manifestation enacts a hybrid state of *figural decoration* by overcoming previous alternatives (e.g. of duck and shed), largely through intensifying the incongruence of mass and surface, and condensing them into the monolith of a *saturated shape*.<sup>5</sup>

This saturated shape is defined by five clearly stated characteristics: the multiplication of a single element, the elimination of scale through a single defining outline, a profile that is "precise but vague," a saturated wrapping to produce a monolithic appearance and a small set of seemingly arbitrary holes punched through the volume.<sup>6</sup> The outcome of these procedures is a shape whose whole is privileged above and beyond its parts, and which, despite its legible profile,

claims not to offer any explicit reading or meaning. As a fourth option in Charles Sanders Pierce's trilogy of signs (icon, symbol, and index)<sup>7</sup>, Somol's logos are performative rather than descriptive: "They don't represent anything...but they might, in certain circumstances, *do* something."<sup>8</sup>

While the projects that we will look at later are clearly indebted to Somol's ideas about shape and logo they are a subset that takes a swerve in its own direction. Several characteristics that distinguish Creatures from Shapes include: a legibility of parts that produces tension within the clearly outlined profile of the whole; an interest in the multiplicity of subjective experiences or interpretations of the Creature's disposition or character; a suggestion of narrative that situates the individual creature within a larger collective context; the application of graphics or colors in opposition to constituent parts that amplify tensions with regard to readings of the whole; a tendency among creatures to gather in groups. The overall effect of the Creature is defined by intensity, intimacy, immediacy and interaction. Somol describes the logo as otherworldly, an aloof and disinterested monolith landed from another planet. Creatures may first appear otherworldly but are actually inner-worldly and gregarious – emerging from the depths of dreams and fantasies, they are monsters in closets, or perhaps, monsters from our favorite horror stories, as well as imaginary friends.

### THE UNCONSTRUCTED CREATURE

The nature of the Creature is intrapersonal and interpersonal, rather than extra-terrestrial, and in that way helps to redefine the subject in its relationship to a collective. That redefinition begins by revisiting the relationship between subject and object via Heinrich Wölfflin's psychological interpretation of our interaction with objects:

We judge every object by analogy with our bodies. The object – even if completely dissimilar to ourselves – will not only transform itself immediately into a creature, with head and foot, back and front; and not only are we convinced that this creature must feel ill at ease if it does not stand upright and seems to fall over, but we go so far as to experience, to a highly sensitive degree, the spiritual condition and contentment or discontent expressed by any configuration, however different from ourselves.<sup>9</sup>

This radical empathy towards objects is a productive bedfellow for Albert Pope's essay "The Unconstructed Subject of the Contemporary City" in which he argues for a new version of anthropomorphic representation made possible by Paul Smith's concept of the multiple subject position where:

...the subject is no longer described...as the equivalent of the 'individual' but rather can be conceived as a set of variable qualities that are taken up as a way of negotiating interpretations and thus of understanding and coping with social relations.<sup>10</sup>

If we define ourselves through this multiplicity of identity, "...a continual and continuing series of overlapping subject positions..."<sup>11</sup> then we may also read Wölfflin differently. With our identities no longer fixed to a single individual experience, we are no longer bound to project a fixed anthropocentric affect onto objects of architecture. Rather there is new potential to project the sensibility of the object back on to ourselves and therefore, for architecture to teach us a new way to feel.

This potential effect of architecture on the modern subject was not absent in the work of Le Corbusier<sup>12</sup> yet his subject is confined to the rational humanist perspective that separates and isolates the human mind from the animal. According to Le Corbusier, feeling and emotion is moderated through the rational mind: "... If intuition is the sum of acquired knowledge....then feeling or sensibility is the emanation of these acquisitions. Its basis, therefore, is a rational one."<sup>13</sup> Nothing makes this clearer than Le Corbusier's preoccupation with the wandering horizontal line of the donkey as the basis of the (chaotic and congested) medieval European city in opposition to the straight and upright lines of rational human planning that define the modern city.<sup>14</sup>

While maintaining an unapologetic insistence on the superiority of the rational, Le Corbusier simultaneously acknowledges the animal within himself:

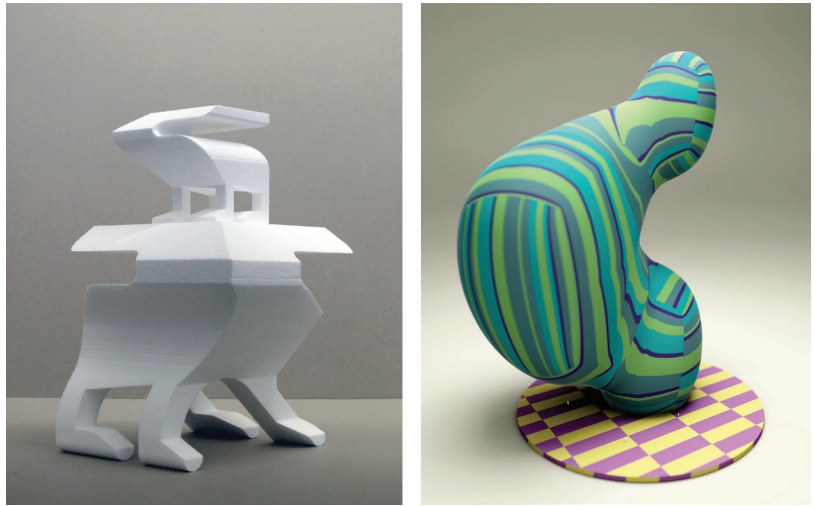
I am a donkey, but a donkey with an eye: the eye of a donkey capable of sensations. I am a donkey with an instinct for proportion. I am and always will be an unrepentant visualist. When it's beautiful it's beautiful...The Modulor lengthens donkeys' ears (here I refer to another donkey than my aforementioned self).<sup>15</sup>

Though the animal within the human is acknowledged, the animal nature of the human mind is tempered, and improved upon, by the rational and the geometric to create order, clarity, exactness and beauty. With the Five Points of Architecture Le Corbusier distilled the needs of the modern subject to a formula that produces an efficient and healthful machine for living. Nevertheless, they may also be read as a formula for a proto-creature. With piloti as legs, ribbon window as a slit for eyes and roof garden providing a spunky little hair-do, it is easy to see Villa Savoye as a stealthy little crab-like creature, ready to shuffle away across the lawn at the first sign of trouble. Whether or not it was intentional, this resemblance introduces a reading of Le Corbusier's work as an architectural milestone foreshadowing the construction of the creature.

The rational architectural language established by Le Corbusier's five points became the formal basis of John Hejduk's idiosyncratic Masques. These folly-sized architectural characters possess figural, zoomorphic profiles composed by architectural elements that negotiate between the anonymity of typology and the eccentricity of personality. Columns become legs; spikes and antennae become hair; hallways and stairs become appendages, arms and noses. As a deliberately vague abstraction of an animal, the Masques are loaded with affect, with ideas about narrative and character translated into creature-like form. Once invented and at play in Hejduk's urban architectural scenarios, these characters travel with him from city to city. On one hand they are prosthetic extensions of Hejduk, physical manifestations of a psychogeographic network that passes through and across the cities of Europe.<sup>16</sup> On the other hand they represent the potential of architecture to hold multiple simultaneous positions in the shaping of urban civic space, to possess an authority and an agency in its own right, yet at a scale where this authority is not totalizing but contingent and transient.

## CONTEMPORARY CREATURES

While we see that the creature is not an entirely new phenomenon in architectural production, the contemporary interest in the creature reinvigorates the investigation of the creature's potential with a new set of preoccupations and ambitions. On one hand the creature's appearance is an extension of the revived interest in figuration as a mode of architectural communication, yet one that



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straddles Pierce's classifications of sign as icon, symbol or index. On the other hand it advances an alternative agenda in the production of architectural affect.

Leaning towards the communication end of this spectrum, *Critters* (Figure 1) is a project by Angela Co, executed in association with the *Possible Mediums* workshop and exhibition series<sup>17</sup> as a formal exercise that generates animal shapes through a combination of extrusion and Boolean operations. The *Critters* are described as simultaneously iconic (where likeness promotes legibility) and indexical (where the shape of an animal's body is a trace of its interaction with its environment). Carved from cubic primitives, the series of "ambivalent objects" emerge from the projection of two unique animal profiles, articulated with sufficient specificity to suggest the idea a certain kind of animal (a rabbit, a crab, a bird), yet with a low enough resolution to allow for interpretation by its viewers. The specificity of the animal profiles is articulated through its parts – ears, legs, feet, beaks etc., which are carefully selected and composed to create the impression of an actual animal figure but that add up to a not-quite coherent or logical whole. The potential for interpretation is enhanced by the interaction of two distinct animal profiles, which produces a multiplicity of postures and dispositions as one circles around the resulting three-dimensional object.

On the other end of the spectrum the *Clumsy Form* projects completed by Paul Preissner's third-year graduate studio at University of Illinois at Chicago are motivated by affect over meaning. As a Maya-based research studio with an emphasis on composition rather than scripting, the goal of the project was to generate awkward or funny forms. With this exceptionally subjective agenda, the success of the studio was dependent on both the expert manipulation of software to control surface articulation, and an iterative process of experimentation that would test subtle variations of form to ascertain the qualifications of "awkward" or "funny." Through such testing students could determine when a bulge, bend or twist was just enough to be humorous, or simply excessive and distracting.<sup>18</sup> Although there was no stated intention to do so, it is interesting to note that the more successful of the projects tend to suggest the shapes of creatures (Figure 1). In this way the work is indebted to Wolfflin's empathic reading of architectural form, where we associate a certain posture or proportion with the way it feels in our own body, and therefore read it as another kind of creature. Placed within an urban setting these forms resonate as new life occupying the city, interacting with its inhabitants and the adjacent buildings. Peeking out from among

Figure 1: *Critters*, Angela Co (left); *Clumsy Form*, Erin Patterson (right)

the sea of contextual, upright orthogonal structures, we see what Le Corbusier might have been afraid of: if not the irrational chaos of the donkey, and if not the straight lines of human rationality, then what new reality might this creature bring? It is entirely up to us to say.

## PARTY ANIMALS

If *Critters* and *Clumsy Form* represent two ends of a spectrum, then these next two small scale installation projects define a space in the middle where creature-ness is achieved through a combination of reading and feeling. Both *Confetti Tower* by Ania Jaworska and *Friends in Sunshine and in Shade* (Figure 2), a collaboration between Design w/Co and Cartogram, shrink the size of the creature to that of an over-grown piñata, taking very seriously the potential for interaction made possible by everybody's favorite party animal. The work of Ania Jaworska achieves a light and unobtrusive whimsy through its Modernist rhetoric of form follows function. Building simple and direct forms from well-known architectural elements such as towers, columns, windows doors and signage, Jaworska's work communicates through the playful and accessible symbolism of these familiar parts to construct a new whole that conveys a friendly message. In *Confetti Tower* the profile of an oversized exhaust pipe is elevated on four square pillars to create a happy little character that spits confetti from its mouth when activated. The tower is content to hang out among the crowd, until a passerby initiates an interaction, and then the message is clear: "let's celebrate!" The same may be said for *Friends in Sunshine*, a proposal for a pop-up sunglass store organized around four "friends" whose shapes are constructed as a three-dimensional tangram from a set of square, rectangular, triangular and parallelogram volumes. Again, a composition of familiar parts is assembled to create the semi-legible whole, whose profile shifts from one elevation to another creating the illusion that parts have been rearranged as you move around it. The part to whole relationship is further complicated by a graphic strategy that appears to slide colors out of alignment with their corresponding parts. The net effect of these strategies is a flickering of legibility that prevents classification of the project as icon, symbol or even logo, thus aligning the project with Harman's interpretation of Lovecraft and his description of Cthulhu.



## THE BELLY OF THE BEAST

The final set of projects demonstrates how creatures at various scales and settings interact with their environment and inhabitants through a carefully choreographed relationship to the activities that take place within the beast. *Yonderzoo House* (Figure 3) by Cosmo Design Factory is located in a pastoral setting along a

Figure 2: *Friends in Sunshine and in Shade*, Design w/Co & Cartogram (left); *Confetti Tower*, Ania Jaworska (right)

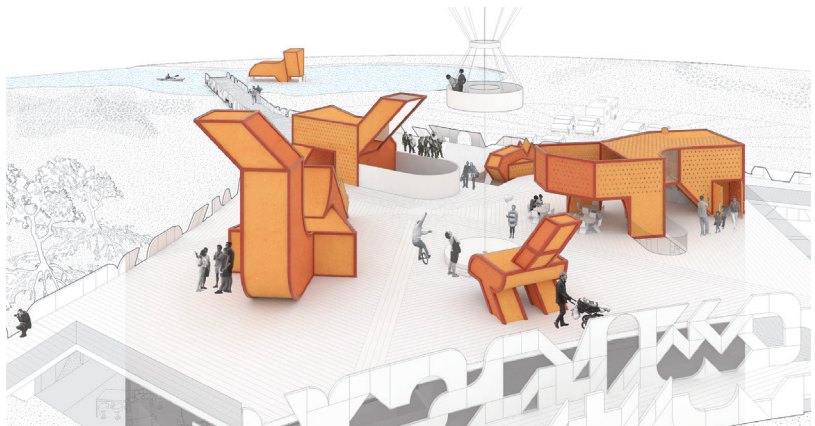




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West-facing mountain-side in upstate New York. Four formally distinct creature volumes are aggregated to create the home's massing along the North-South axis of the site. The home is organized around two parallel hallways that run through and connect each creature to one another. While each volume houses its own set of programmed spaces, the overlap between creatures provide moments of programmatic ambiguity, mixing and overlap. The creatures' profiles hybridize the roofline of modernist pavilions with the shed roof of local barn vernacular. These profiles are then extruded and adjusted through Boolean operations for openings and overlaps. Though composed entirely in elevation to exaggerate the flattened profile of each shape, the creature volumes are overlaid and shifted in plan to produce a three-dimensional reading that simultaneously demonstrates a literal and phenomenal transparency.

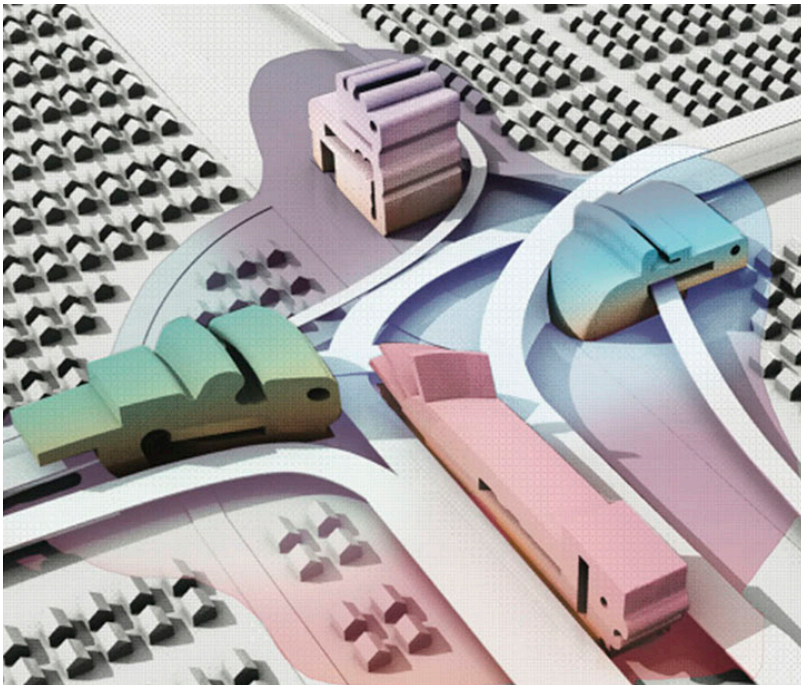
While Yonderzoo House uses the aggregation of creature-volumes to distribute the mass of the house along a stretch of hillside, the *Gulf Coast Bestiary* (Figure 4) by Cartogram embeds four discrete creature-volumes within the two story section of a zoological rehabilitation center to facilitate moments of public interaction with the otherwise restricted program of the center. These creatures rise up out of the low-rise roof line to create focal points along the center's main axis of entry that house public program. The intersection of creature and building is read in both plan and section, where the foot print of the beast penetrates through its floor plates to mark figural enclosures within the otherwise open plan. The explicit connection between creature shape and program (each shape is based on a local endangered fauna) places the project firmly within the realm of the iconic, though in this particular case its icon status is not simply intended to convey established meaning to an existing constituency<sup>19</sup> but to edify a new public around issues of environmental awareness. The iconic presence is a refreshing addition to an environmental program that would typically tend to keep a low formal profile that prioritizes its functional programmatic needs.



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Figure 3: *Yonderview House*, Cosmo Design Factory

Figure 4: *Gulf Coast Bestiary*, Cartogram



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Moving from icon to monument, *La La Land* by Nazifa Virani (in a graduate research studio led by Sarah Dunn at UIC) proposes a new form of public landmark that serves as a threshold to Los Angeles along its iconic freeway system. These massive creatures are comparable to the Arc de Triomphe in their capacity to reframe major infrastructural thoroughfares through monumental architecture. However, this proposal is more directly indebted to Charles Ribart's 1758 proposal for an occupiable Elephant fountain than it is to the existing triumphal arc that currently marks the end of the Champs Elysee. As an occupiable creature, the monument's sections are defined by vaulted spaces of a range of scales which host a maze of nested public programs such as public bath houses, meditation chambers and shrine. The forms are generated by a single extrusion of a creature-like profile. As most of its viewers are speeding by in their cars, the immediate reading of the singular logo profile is important to the legibility of the project and its capacity to initiate a shared identity for the newly formed publics occupying its interior amenities. Although the creature's profile is not immediately recognizable as a specific animal, its bulbous protrusions of heads, ears, eyes and tails create an instant familiarity and intimacy within the otherwise unwieldy form and scale of these infrastructural monuments.

## CONCLUSION

In each of the preceding project descriptions there is an echo of the flickering that we encountered with Lovecraft and Harman at the beginning of this essay. Navigating the gaps and tensions between parts and whole, between sensual perception and cognitive reading, between the rational and the non-rational, these creatures resist classification as iconic despite projecting an aura of straightforward legibility. On one hand, these projects flaunt their literal, and potentially goofy, portrayal of a live being in order to invite interaction and participation with a wider public collective. However, as an image that is projected through the disciplined language of architecture, this impression belies the complexity of their performative agenda. By asking its audience simultaneously to read or interpret meaning *and* to feel an intuitive psychological connection with

Figure 5: *La La Land*, Nazifa Virani



## ENDNOTES

1. Graham Harman, *Weird Realism: Lovecraft and Philosophy* (Winchester, UK: Zero Books, 2012) 24-27.
2. "...postwar American formalism in architecture was a reaction against the perceived failure of the projective ambitions of modernism. Ultimately, the critical project...came out of the formalist project and inherited its anti-modernist legacy...The critical retained formalism's animosity to the big idea and the projective operational ambitions of modernism." from "What?...Wow!: A conversation between R.E. Somol and Ellen Grimes," in *A/X* vol. 1 (Fall 2008) 38.
3. "Unlike the more common constative statement, which describes some aspect of the world and therefore can be judged in terms of its truth or falsity...performatives operate in such a way that the saying of it makes it so. Transformative or promissory, performatives are not descriptions or representations of this world, but establish the construction of another..." from R.E. Somol, "Green Dots 101" in *Hunch: Rethinking Representation* No. 11 (Winter 2006/7) 29.
4. Ibid. 30.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid. 35.
7. "The icon is distinguished by similitude...The symbol is understood by convention or rule...the index is understood as a record of a process or an event..." from Peter Eisenman, "Duck Soup" in *Log*, No. 7 (Winter/Spring 2006) 140.
8. R.E. Somol, "Green Dots 101". 37.
9. Heinrich Wölfflin, *Renaissance and Baroque*, trans. Kathrin Simon (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1966) 77.
10. Albert Pope, "The Unconstructed Subject of the Contemporary City," *Slow Space* (Monacelli Press: New York, 1998) 167.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid. 164.
13. Le Corbusier, *The City of Tomorrow*, 33-34.
14. Ibid. See also Catherine Ingraham, *Architecture, Animal, Human: The Asymmetrical Condition* (New York: Routledge, 2006)
15. Le Corbusier.
16. Anthony Vidler, "Vagabond Architecture" in *The Architectural Uncanny: Essays in the Modern Unhomely* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1992) 214.
17. Founded by Kelly Bair, Kristy Balliet, Adam Fure and Kyle Miller *Possible Mediums* is a series of events (workshops, exhibitions, symposium) organized around the work of a diverse group of designers and educators whose work is classified under one of four sub-themes: *Figural Projections, Tactile Objects, Excessive Volumes and Active Models*. [www.possiblemediums.com](http://www.possiblemediums.com)
18. This process resembles the practice of early cartoonists and caricature artists who eschewed drawing from life and instead drew from feeling and experimentation – manipulating the minimum number of lines possible while testing the proportion of a nose, chin or mouth to evaluate the kind of character or affect it conveyed. See E.H. Gombrich "The Experiment of Caricature" in *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1960) 330-358.
19. "What?...Wow!: A conversation between R.E. Somol and Ellen Grimes," in *A/X* vol. 1 (Fall 2008) 43.

the architectural object as subject, the creature encourages construction of multiple subject positions. As an alternative to the alienated modern subject, the multiple subject position overcomes the burden of contradiction with a more optimistic attitude about our capacity to associate with a multiplicity of collective identities. By advancing the legacy of Hejduk's *Masques* through the lens of contemporary formal techniques that embrace a pop-sensibility, these creatures re-instantiate architecture's political agency, as equals rather than as objects, to support these various identities through interaction rather than inscription.