

REKOMBINATRIX

ON THE WORK OF DORIAN GAUDIN AND MARTIN ROTH

BY NADIM SAMMAN

The Minimalist-inspired surface design of today's consumer electronics represses the issue of complexity, offering the general public a material-spatial ideology of resolution and containment. And yet, today, boundaries between synthetic and living flesh, code and creature, social and virtual bodies, are highly unstable. As ever more objects are drawn into networks, what once might have been an individual object is, instead, a node; closed systems are cracked, and weird new conjunctions obtain. For artists attuned to this condition, such as Martin Roth and Dorian Gaudin, a pressing task presents itself: to explore emerging travesties of spatial organization and material identity. Furthermore, while doing so, to investigate agency, authorship, and—ultimately—control.

There is a barely concealed bloody-mindedness about Dorian Gaudin's sculptures; a willfulness that seems to issue less from the voice of a particular 'artist' than a capricious demiurge. It is in this dramatic mode that his work addresses the material-spatial regime of our current technological order—a regime that precipitates spasms of violent breakdown and recombination across the board. This is a space where inhuman systems—from algorithms to oil slicks—might as well be gods, re-sculpting bodies or grafting them together, without trepidation and certainly without permission. This is a regime that functions like a black hole, pulling heterogeneous objects towards a central void where, as a result of their close proximity, they begin to smash into one another, break up, compress, hybridize and mutate.

Gaudin's sculptures, though made by hand, point away from human volition. They suggest violent sculptural powers lurking just beyond "culture's" event horizon. In a series of wall based reliefs, surfaces are assaulted, twisted, banged out of shape and broken. Processed industrial materials such as riveted aluminum are folded and punctured. Curved angles are roughly cut out of what were once right-angled shapes; extraneous figures such as triangles penetrate cuboids without ceremony. Some metallic edges are sharp, others ragged. Nothing about these combinations looks 'natural': things are forced against themselves; against others; jammed together. They rub-up; they poke; they pull apart; they tear through. Formally speaking, this series of works performs the outcome of collisions between various geometric and material syntaxes. With their notes of buffed metal, however, they also recall car crash shrapnel, aeroplane fuselage, and space junk. If one parses these (anti)compositions for a hint of symbolism, it appears to obtain in the tension between material becoming and unbecoming, and the limits of legibility.

Gaudin's monumental installation *Untitled* (2011) is also concerned with these issues. Comprising a series of wooden blocks that recall rough-hewn bricks, each attached to a mechanical pulley system, the sculpture 'performs' a process of collapse and reconstruction. When the pulley process has reached its conclusion the sculpture resembles an upright wall. Release/disengagement of the mechanism precipitates the wall's breakdown or metamorphosis into a pile of ersatz rubble. A reverse process sees it rebuilt, and so on, recalling the labor of Sisyphus—cursed to roll a boulder from the base of a mountain to its summit, only to have it roll back down again as soon as the task is complete, over and over, for eternity. In this respect *Untitled* might be said to rehearse the existential refrain of repetition and futility. But Gaudin's piece is not *just* an image of a wall. Moreover, it contains no figurative Sisyphus. Rather than

staging a human-type operator, the sculpture's *mechanical* system is, specifically, that which is on (open) display. This machine never gets tired, nor does it have the capacity to lament its task—as Sisyphus must. But its labor is still an issue: pulling the strings, the machine is a sublimely indifferent builder-destroyer. Though it may not be conscious it nevertheless operates according to a program. What program?—Why? Like so many technical processes that shape our contemporary space, it is hard to read—inscrutable. That said, this opacity doesn't limit its capacity to order matter. In this respect, *Untitled* centers on a figure of inhuman operation; an occult power and *other* agency conditioning a built environment.

Like the Minimalists, Gaudin's sculptural imaginary embraces *real* space, rather than the rarefied 'siteless [transcendent] realm of abstract sculpture' where artworks do not address their surroundings or context. This is the kind of space that you and I walk around in. However, Gaudin's materialist *realism* is of a more speculative bent than the Marxian variant which influenced Donald Judd and others. Beyond concern for relations between objects and people, Gaudin seems interested in interactions between non-human objects and *other* non-human objects. His art suggests that such operations in 'real' space do not need a human viewer in order to *matter*. His is not so much a rejection of the Minimalist worldview, but a post-human widening of its frame—a maximalism.

Martin Roth shares with Gaudin a desire to subject Minimalism's anthropocentrism to what the philosopher Quentin Meillassoux has called the ontological 'great outdoors'. In recent works he approaches this task by bringing living denizens from the world beyond the gallery—animals—into Minimalist sculptures. These gestures serve to foreground non-human spatial and temporal scales, throwing anthropocentrism into provocative relief. Doesn't the Gregorian calendar's year zero begin with the birth of a specific person? In a related vein, creatures that live at an alternative temporal pace, or spatial scale, have long been objects of derision. The snail is a biblical symbol for the sin of sloth. Likewise, the Sloth is named after the sin itself. Man, being *the measure of all things*, comes up with the idea that there is 'nothing lower than a slug'. And so it goes, despite the fact that slugs and snails are part of one of the largest families of beings in the animal kingdom—running to over 40,000 species and 80% of mollusks. Forget speed. We need to think of Gastropods in terms of the high *frequency* by which they distributed across the globe, on land and in water; everywhere. By this token, Minimalism has been slow to get to them.

On the glass panes of Roth's replica Donald Judd sculptures, snails and slugs ooze their way through what we initially understand as art historical space-time, leaving trails of gunk behind them, messing things up. Can their activity really be boiled down to Roth attacking Judd's propensity for pristine surfaces, through a profane bio-sculptural gesture? Perhaps, but, *qua* Gastropods, the 'real' space of this art object—and its history—now seems to belong to the life and times of non-humans too. This is to say, these creatures are not *just* part of an artwork—they are also *working*. They are working at what snails and slugs do. While we cannot ascribe psychology to them, it seems clear that nothing about what they appear to want has to do with Minimalism—even if they are contained, physically, within its geometric steel and glass analogue. We cannot even say that Minimalism (or Roth's 'art', *per se*) is their

¹ According to Hal Foster; see his *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1996), 38.

terrain. When one considers the trails left upon the sculpture's glass panels they appear, rather, as so many traces of the snails' (in)difference to any human agenda whatsoever—an index of their ongoing, utter disregard for what we think about things.

There is something of *memento mori* in this, updated for our times. As an assemblage of sorts, Roth's Minimalist-Gastropod complex dramatizes 'underlapping' human and animal *movements*—of art, and slime. It is a real-time staging of inter-species cross-purposes, registering the fact that vectors of human enterprise and animal life never completely intersect. This is one reason we know snails and slugs aren't hallucinations: because they resolutely do not give much of a shit about us. At a time of shocking environmental change, when numerous species are threatened by human design, the value of a given culture cannot only be measured in relation to human bodies and purposes. The fact that these Gastropod's don't care, that they maintain their own measures, no matter how 'artistic' ours get, should give us a little pause.

There is obviously something iconoclastic about these slime trails on glass—analogous to wiped snot on a touchscreen. A Minimalist-lite style informs so much of our contemporary technological culture, from the product design of laptops and phones to apartments and typefaces. It is a monolithic visual language, whose slick plastic and glass surfaces suggest plenitude—a fullness or self-sufficiency that stands unquestionable. Its objects appear to set their own 'terms of use'—for everyone and everything—as they endeavor to regulate the universe. Minimalism (in its debased consumer form) is the sugar on a pill deployed to recalibrate the global sphere through total design—its binding agent the myth of frictionless integration. This minimalism is ventured as total control; total ideology. The task of sculpture today is to bump up against it and to crack it in the manner of a pirate re-engineer—stealing elements from it for repurposing. Otherwise, to be a bug in its system, charting trajectories as yet undesigned.

² It is simply absurd to imagine a snail's conception of Judd's rebuttal to Greenbergian high formalism and its own place in relation to this topic.