

A large, bold, black logo consisting of the letters 'A' and 'D' intertwined. The 'A' is a simple triangle with a horizontal bar, and the 'D' is a thick, rounded shape. The logo is positioned in the upper left corner of the page.

AD

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ARCHITECTURAL DESIGN

NOVEMBER/DECEMBER 2013

PROFILE NO 226

GUEST-EDITED BY JONATHAN MOSLEY  
AND RACHEL SARA

A thick, red, curved line that starts on the left, curves upwards and then downwards, ending on the right. It is positioned in the middle of the page, above the title.

THE ARCHITECTURE OF  
TRANSGRESSION

Behruz Tachami, Advertisement for Architecture (Transgression), 1976-7

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**If you want  
to follow  
architecture's  
first rule,  
break it.**



ARCHITECTURAL DESIGN

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JONATHAN MOSLEY  
AND RACHEL SARA

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# THE ARCHITECTURE OF TRANSGRESSION

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Towards a Destabilising Architecture

*Jonathan Mosley and Rachel Sara*



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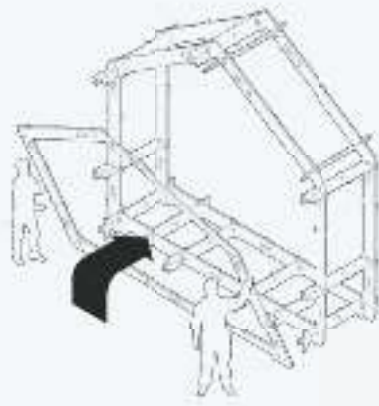
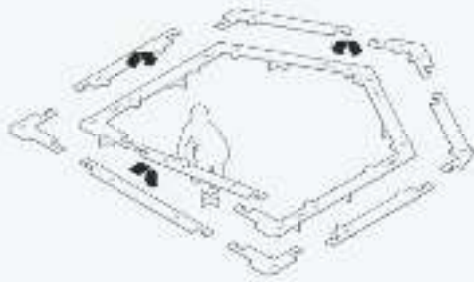
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*The architecture of transgression is  
'an architecture that disrupts our  
expectations, that goes beyond, or slips  
between, visible, accepted norms.'*

— Guest-Editors Jonathan Mosley  
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Front cover: Sophie Warren and Jonathan Mosley with Can Altay, *Rogue Game, First Play, Spike Island, Bristol, 2012*. © Sophie Warren and Jonathan Mosley

Inside front cover: Detail from Bernard Tschumi, *Advertisement for Architecture (Transgression)*, 1976-7. © Bernard Tschumi

06 | 2013



## EDITORIAL

*Helen Castle*

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In 2013,  $\Delta$  opened the year with innovation.<sup>1</sup> It now closes it with transgression. Though innovation and transgression are different by definition – innovation is focused on creativity and transgression is all about overstepping boundaries and conventions – they do share in common a lively and disruptive spirit: innovation relies on a certain level of playfulness just as transgression requires a daring naughtiness. Perhaps most significantly, innovation and transgression share the same desire to go beyond established limits and to question the given. It is this that makes them most potent for architecture, with the power to provoke and probe current conventions. To have a fertile design culture, architecture has to be a dynamic art that is constantly moving, so that the centre is relentlessly challenged and propelled forwards by those operating at the margins. The best design work never comes out of complacency; it is produced in a jostling atmosphere in which peers and young whippersnappers are constantly angling for position.

It is the way in which transgression stands apart from innovation that makes it most pertinent today, with its focus on crossing social and political boundaries. As described by Louis Rice in this issue, the Occupy Movement in 2011 realised the power of physical occupation of urban space even if it was temporary (see pp 70–5). Most aptly for practice, transgression helps us to test out the possible futures of architecture and design, as suggested by Alastair Parvin's article on open-source architecture (pp 90–5). This can be through the activities of practices, working nimbly at a small scale, in a manner that can be paralleled with the incremental model of digital innovators who in the last decade have by iterative means explored the potential of a project or a product only through increments. High-risk design research that is prepared to transgress all known boundaries, given limits and conventions will become particularly necessary if architecture is to become fluid enough to reorganise and reshape itself in the shifting tides that new technologies bring.  $\Delta$

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### Note

1. Pia Ednie-Brown, Mark Burry and Andrew Burrow,  $\Delta$  *The Innovation Imperative: Architectures of Vitality*, Jan/Feb (no 1), 2013.



Sophie Warren and Jonathan Mosley, *Spectator or Player?*, 2012  
 top left: One door, two doorways, one space beyond; an architectural intervention which brings into question different modes of spectatorship on the threshold to a gallery, forming here an entrance to *Rogue Game* at Spike Island, Bristol (see cover of this issue for an image of the playing arena).

Sophie Warren and Jonathan Mosley, *Utopian talk-show line-up*, 2013  
 top right: A detail of the setting for the event series, constructed in each location by a graphic framework, a page from the *Beyond Utopia* book, rescaled and then occupied by readers and objects to create a live discursive territory.

Rachel Sara, 'Carnival: Performed Transgressions', in Louis Rice et al, *architecture + transgression*, The Architecture Centre, Bristol, 2012  
 bottom: This exhibition and essay celebrate the role of carnivalesque events such as zombie walks, street parties, illegal raves, and even knit bombing and skateboarding as transgressive spatial practices that have the power to critique, deformalise and rejuvenate the formal city.



## ABOUT THE GUEST-EDITORS JONATHAN MOSLEY AND RACHEL SARA



Architecture and Transgression is an emerging research and practice-as-research group at the University of the West of England (UWE) in Bristol, UK. The guest-editors of this issue of  $\Delta$ , along with other colleagues at this experimental Bristol school, are developing exploratory, cross-disciplinary and international projects, collaborations and publications. They are hosting the Architectural Humanities Research Association 10th International Conference on Transgression in November 2013, with associated publications to follow in 2014 ([www1.uwe.ac.uk/et/research/transgression](http://www1.uwe.ac.uk/et/research/transgression)).

Jonathan Mosley is a practising artist/architect and holds a senior lectureship in architecture in which he leads Design Research and the final-year studio of the Master of Architecture programme. In practice, his collaborative studio, founded with artist Sophie Warren, produces trans-disciplinary projects and acts as a site of critical exchange between architects, artists and theorists. The projects create conceptual and spatial frameworks, employing participatory strategies to construct situations for collective encounter. The studio produces installations, events and publications. An immersive live installation, with Can Altay, that transgresses and displaces the logics of the multi-use sports hall, *Rogue Game* has been exhibited at Spike Island, Bristol (2012); Casco, Utrecht (2011); and The Showroom, London (2010). The game proposes in the same space the simultaneous play of three or more sports. The project *Beyond Utopia*, with Robin Wilson, created an imaginary architectural scheme for a vertical urban common for central London as a planning application. This playful provocation, documented as a screenplay entwining reality and fiction, forms the focus of the book *Beyond Utopia* (2012) published by Errant Bodies Press with responses to the work by Maria Fusco, Brandon LaBelle, Marie-Anne McQuay, Paul O'Neill, Elizabeth Price, Jane Rendell and Lee Stickells. The studio is currently developing an international series of live events of rapid-fire readings that explore how to play Utopia. Part speculative forum, part game show, the *Utopian talk-show line-up* (2013) opens a discursive space as a testimony to the collective desire to imagine difference. The events will take place at Eastside Projects Birmingham; The Showroom, London; Pro QM, Berlin; and the Townhouse Gallery, Cairo ([www.warrenandmosley.com](http://www.warrenandmosley.com)).

Dr Rachel Sara is Programme Leader for the Master of Architecture programme at UWE. She studied architecture to doctoral level at the University of Sheffield, and has contributed to a range of academic architectural journals, books and conferences. Her research work particularly explores 'other' forms of architecture; specifically examining architecture without architects through investigations of the performed architecture of the carnival and the transient architecture of the campsite. This influences her studio teaching, where she runs 'live' community-based projects, as well as exploring the relationship between architecture and dance. She is a director of the Design Research Group at UWE, is a PhD and masters supervisor, and teaches Design Research and Design Studio. She was co-curator of the 'Transgression: Architecture without Architects' exhibition at the Bristol Architecture Centre in 2012, and co-authored the associated book, *architecture + transgression*.  $\Delta$

# SPOTLIGHT





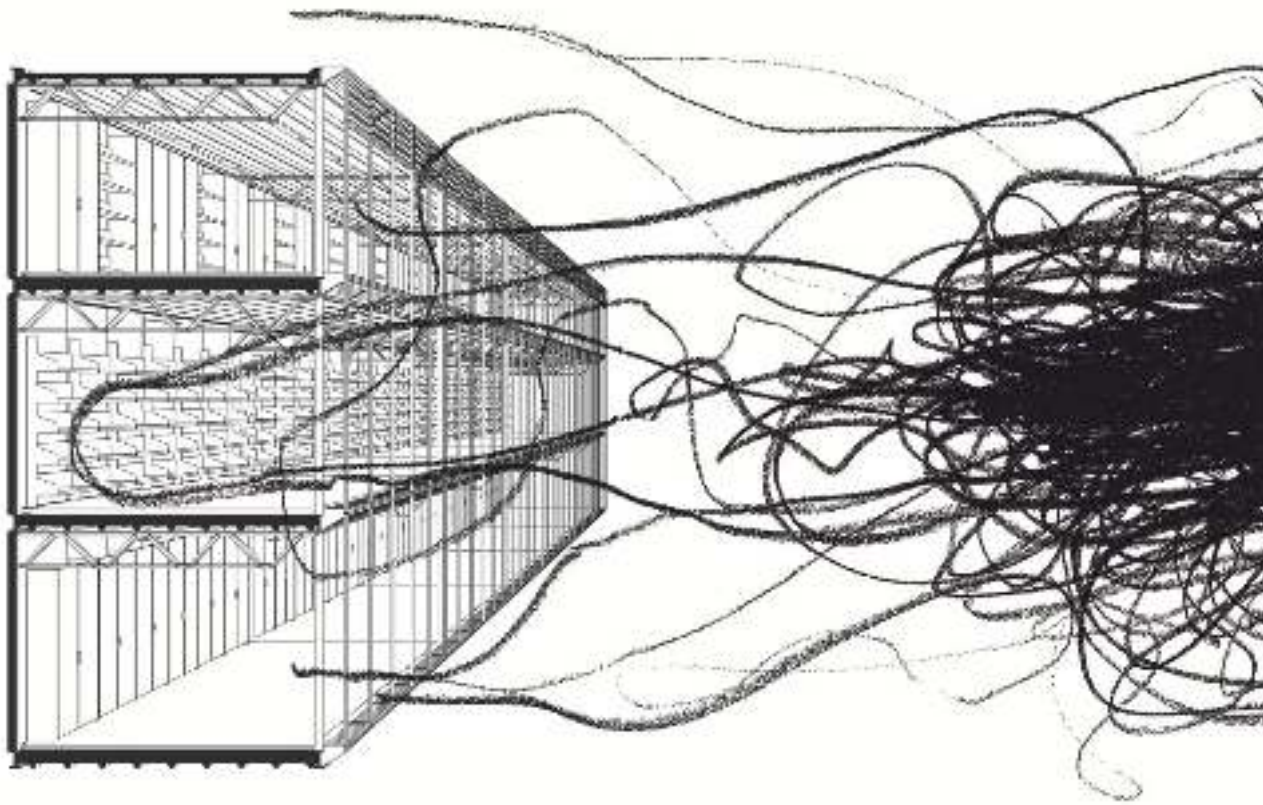
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## EXYZT

### **Metavilla, French Pavilion for the Venice Architecture Biennale, Venice, 2006**

Shown under construction, the scheme was conceived both as a collective building and living experience within the context of the exhibition and as an embassy for French design.

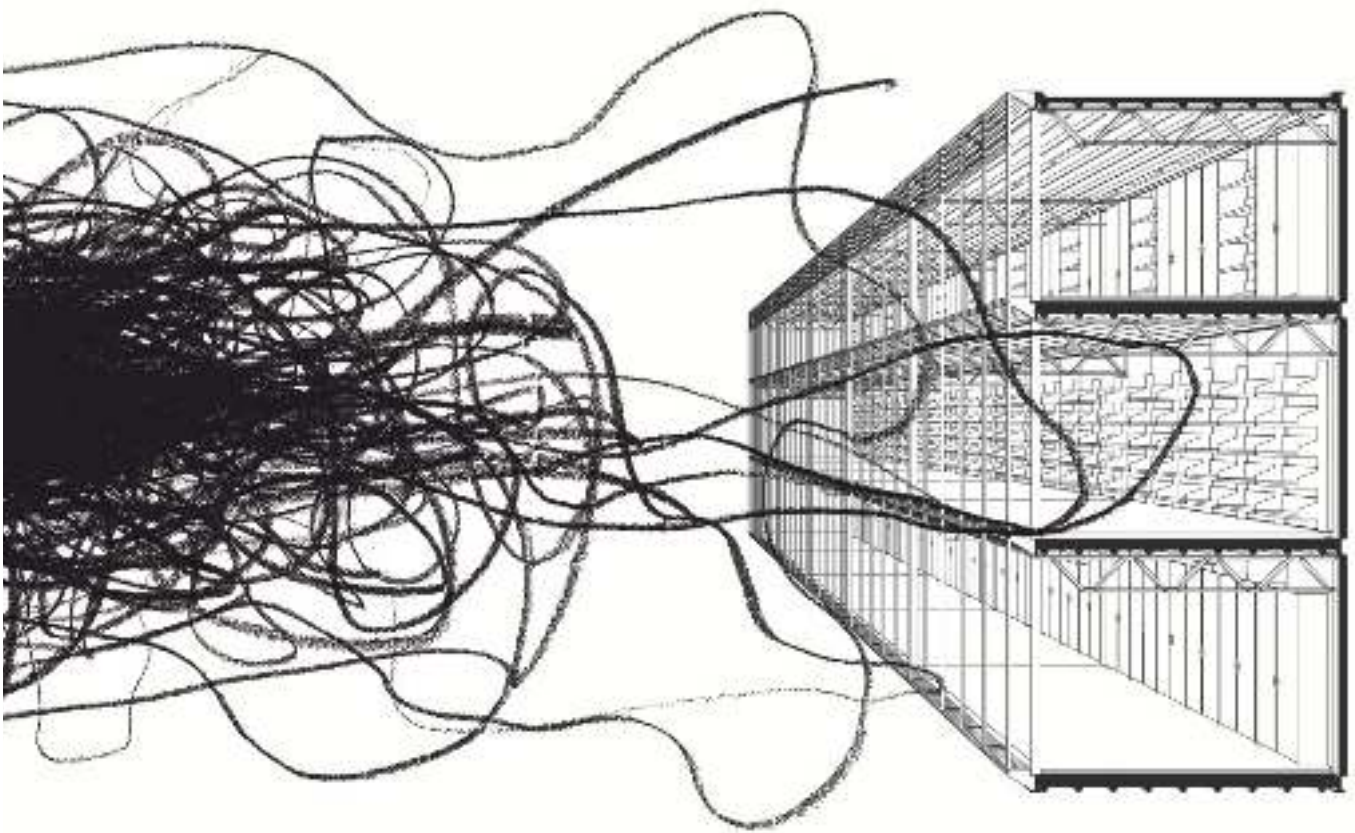




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**Didier Faustino/Bureau  
des Mésarchitectures**

**Alumnos 47 Foundation, Mexico City,  
due for completion 2014**  
The project creates two programmed areas  
with a more loosely programmed interstitial  
zone.

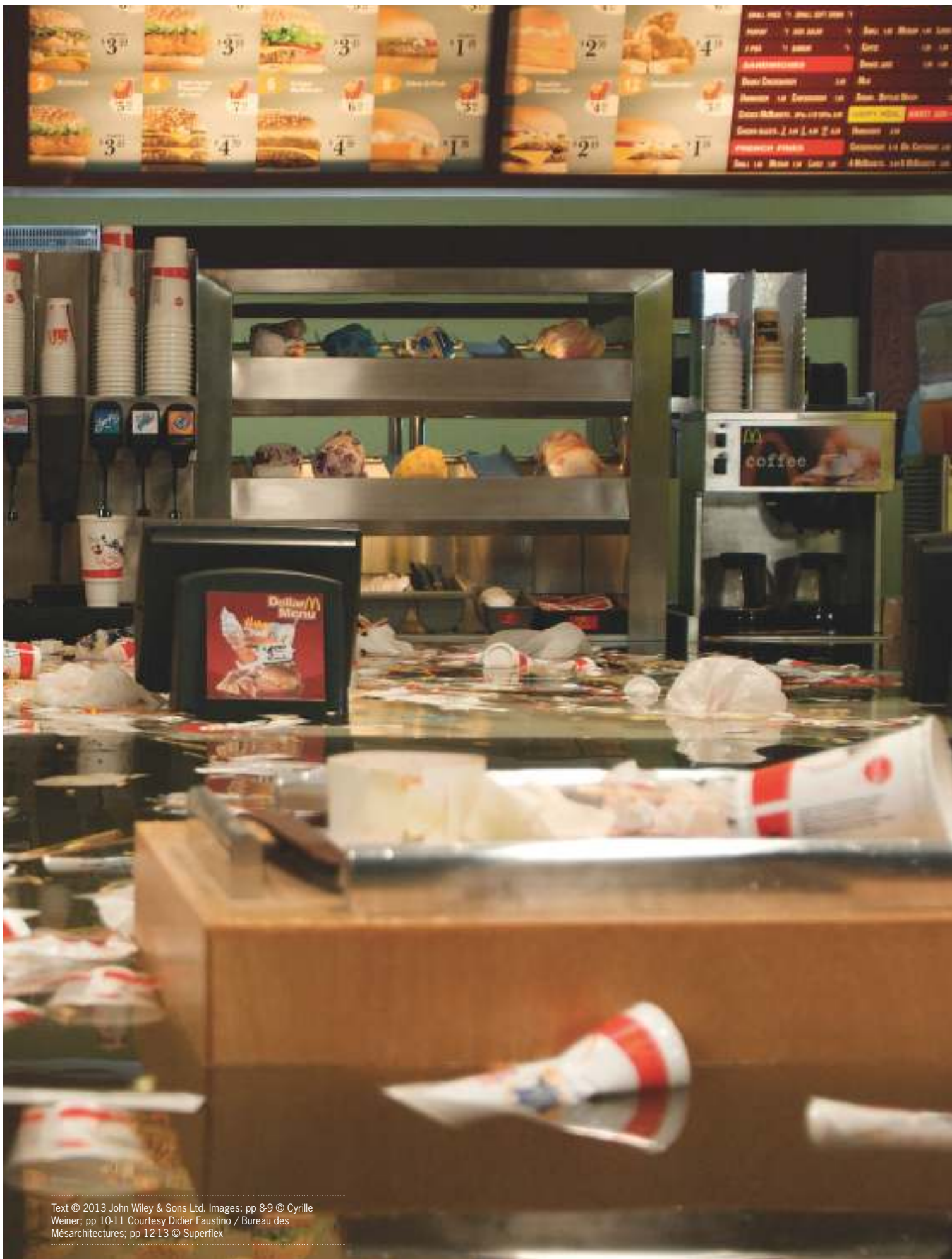


Superflex

*Flooded McDonald's*, film still, 2009  
The environment of the McDonald's is at times during the film partially familiar and partially exceptional, with the balance shifting towards the latter with a slow insistence.







Text © 2013 John Wiley & Sons Ltd. Images: pp 8-9 © Cyrille Weiner; pp 10-11 Courtesy Didier Faustino / Bureau des Mésarchitectures; pp 12-13 © Superflex

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INTRODUCTION

*Jonathan Mosley  
and Rachel Sara*

# THE ARCHITECTURE OF TRANSGRESSION TOWARDS A DESTABILISING ARCHITECTURE



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**Sunset with burning building, Helsinki, Finland, 2006**

Fuelling our desire for destruction, a burning building represents a violent shift from functional architecture to spectacle. This act of arson was in protest to the building being condemned by the city council to make way for a new concert hall. Previously the building had been used for low-budget events, from flea markets to parties.

A burnt-out house in Detroit, an improvised tent city in Madrid, a living, inhabited exhibition pavilion, a manual for constructing walking buildings, a flooded McDonald's and an incomplete theatre. Framed here as architectural outputs, all unsettle us – both literally and metaphorically – in our desire for stability; they agitate our understanding of architecture. All are unreasonable forms of architecture; they transgress the limits of accepted architectural endeavour.

To transgress is to go beyond the boundaries set by law, discipline or convention. It implies a naughtiness, or wayward behaviour, and acts as a challenge to the establishment. This challenge is not reactionary for the sake of reaction, but acts to question aspects of established practice that typically remain unchallenged. The transgression is therefore neither good nor evil – both are judgements dependent on context and personal position (one man's terrorist is another man's revolutionary); rather, it is a challenge that forces a recalibration of what is accepted, what is the norm.<sup>1</sup> Transgressive acts of architecture might be seen to be pushing at the boundaries of what architecture is, and what it could or even should be.

When the occupation of Tahrir Square in Cairo led to the toppling of Egyptian President Mubarak in February 2011, we were all reawakened to the political and cultural power of the

architectural act; an act of demarcating and redefining territory and of spatial occupation. It was a striking reminder of the potency of transgression as a provocative challenge to accepted norms of behaviour. Bernard Tschumi suggests that:

there is no social or political change without the movement and programmes that transgress supposedly stable institutionality – architectural or otherwise; that there is no architecture without everyday life, movement, and action; and that it is the most dynamic aspects of their disjunction that suggest a new definition of architecture.<sup>2</sup>

This act of transgression seemed to have been realised, if not by architects then by the people. Architecture was challenged to reawaken its political consciousness.

Simultaneously, the ongoing economic crisis in Europe and the US since 2008 has led to the partial collapse of existing structures that support the commissioning and production of architecture, and has thus prompted architects to branch out in other areas of practice, from speculative open-source projects to collaborative, temporary design-and-build projects. In order for architecture to remain relevant, to position and reinvent itself in changing times, it has had to move across perceived disciplinary limits, to explore an expanded field of architectural pursuit that dispels notions of reduction. Architectural practice has had to be explored in the broadest possible terms as both built and unbuilt work that affects the meaning, experience or understanding of our built environments, or, as Tschumi eloquently defined it, the 'pleasurable and sometimes violent confrontation of spaces and activities'.<sup>3</sup>

The temporal collision of these two imperatives, the political and the economic, emphasises a current case for exploring transgression in architecture. However, it also reminds us that what is transgressive is entirely dependent on the conventions of the time. In other words, transgressive acts are fluidly defined: they are positioned in relation to their temporal and cultural context. Marginal activities in one place or time are often subsequently subsumed, or as the Situationists would argue 'recuperated',<sup>4</sup> into the mainstream. In this way it is often the activities of the margins that come to be representative of the centre. For example, consider how Marcel Duchamp's 'readymade' artwork of a signed porcelain urinal titled *Fountain* while scandalous in 1917, has come to exemplify a significant part of 20th-century art practice.

So, the essays and projects gathered together in this issue of  $\Delta$  have to be understood as an investigation of the architecture of transgression that is bound to a particular moment in time, and a particular cultural viewpoint. Read in 20 years' time, some of these practices will have been recuperated while others will have ceased to have relevance. In this way the edge both reinforces and then redefines the centre, and what is transgressive both appears and disappears.

The concept of transgression is introduced through a powerful essay by the eminent sociologist, Chris Jenks (pp 20–3). An interview with Bernard Tschumi then locates transgression as a concept within architecture (pp 32–7). Throughout the other featured essays and articles, the issue attempts to illustrate and analyse the conceptual study through example. Curating a collection of 'examples' of transgressive



**Occupied space, Tahrir Square, Cairo, Egypt, 2011**  
A temporary, revolutionary mini-city of 50,000 people inhabits a (former) traffic intersection. It was this occupation that came to symbolise the movement to overthrow President Mubarak and his regime.



architecture is difficult. The financial and time investment needed to create buildings means that built architecture is unlikely to provide a radical challenge to existing structures of power (while also being funded by those very same structures). It should therefore be no surprise that the 'architecture' explored in this issue is often differently conceived.

The examples of transgressive architectures that are presented in the issue are introduced through four aspects of practice: intent, role, process and product. With each aspect, an example of transgression has been explored as an analogy to agitate the associated expectations of that aspect and to probe what may be considered transgressive in relation to each. Hence architectural intent becomes revolution; architectural product, Duchamp's urinal; role, cross-dresser; and process, carnival. These analogies are not categories within which to position certain architectural outputs or processes; inevitably the case studies discussed have a tendency to slide between such categorisations, or to sit across all of them. To categorise would also be ironic given the nature of transgression as a challenge to such divisions. Instead, the analogies are used simply as a filter, or a way of looking. Through the exploration of these analogies the potential of transgression for architecture is structured into theoretical areas by which we may recognise, even in their fluxive state, the possibilities of transgression for the progression of architecture.

Revolution implies an ambition to fundamentally change the way in which society works or is organised: it suggests a particular, radical intent, as well as inferring the use of action as a catalyst for change.



**Bernard Khoury, B018 music club, Beirut, Lebanon, 1998**  
This Beirut nightclub reconfigures an underground military bunker on the site of the Karantina massacre.

## Revolution

Revolution implies an ambition to fundamentally change the way in which society works or is organised: it suggests a particular, radical intent, as well as inferring the use of action as a catalyst for change. Underpinning the work within this issue is the political intent to manipulate space to challenge. This challenge is variously enacted upon existing structures of power, established processes of practice and normative architectural outputs. The projects presented here dispute Henri Lefebvre's sceptical view that architecture is limited to projecting the dominant structures of power in society.<sup>5</sup>

While all of the projects and essays are included for their critical intent, some are more actively revolutionary. Projects such as the Occupy movement described by Louis Rice (pp 70–5), the office for subversive architecture's urban interventions (pp 110–3), N55's manuals (pp 76–81), Superflex's *Flooded McDonald's* (pp 96–101), and Michael Rakowitz's *paraSITE* project described by Can Altay (pp 102–9), explicitly undertake critical architectural projects and urban interventions with the intent of changing society to a greater or lesser extent, by unsettling the existing situation.

It is perhaps telling that these rebellious architectural projects have largely been undertaken without those disciplined in architecture.<sup>6</sup> In the introduction to his *Architecture and Disjunction* (1976), Tschumi outlines three possible roles for architects: that we become conservative, or in other words that we conserve our role in giving form to the political and economic priorities of the hegemony; that we act as critics who expose the contradictions of society through our practice; and

Finally, we could act as revolutionaries by using our ... understanding of cities and the mechanisms of architecture ... in order to be part of professional forces trying to arrive at new social and urban structures.<sup>7</sup>

The absence of architects from the revolutionary (architectural) projects described suggests that architects largely remain located in the roles of critics and conservatives. It has fallen to those who have not been disciplined in architecture to take on the role of revolutionaries.

## Duchamp's Urinal

From time to time an event or object creates such a rupture in the paradigm within which it is acting that it comes to fundamentally change that paradigm so as to constitute a paradigm shift. Marcel Duchamp's submission of *Fountain*, a mass-produced urinal, to the Society of Independent Artists exhibition in 1917 was such an event and object. Ultimately the understanding of what might constitute art, its craft and authorship as associated with the act of making had to be rethought as a consequence of this work. This moment inspired the second aspect by which to analyse the architecture of transgression: the aspect of the architectural product.

Edward Denison and Guangyu Ren describe the work of 2012 Pritzker Prize winning architect Wang Shu as transgressive in the Chinese context of the cult of the new, in a way that invites other Chinese architects to consider the notion of progress and to practise in a different manner (pp 38–43). Similarly, Robin Wilson's comparative essay (pp



During the night, every few hours the roof is retracted, allowing smoke, heat and thumping music out while the mirrored ceiling raises up to allow glimpses down into the underworld, and reflections of car headlights above ground to penetrate beneath.

**Lacaton & Vassal, Palais de Tokyo  
Centre for Contemporary Creation,  
Paris, France, 2001**

In the first phase of Lacaton & Vassal's refurbishment, they stripped back finishes to expose the bones of the building, undoing the notional 'white cube' of the gallery while adding cheap industrial 'readymade' elements such as the Herris fencing to construct high architecture.

44–51) examining a Lacaton & Vassal project, which left a Bordeaux square the architects were commissioned to redesign unchanged, and Construire's 'overdone' animalistic Le Channel complex, challenges the currently accepted notion of an architectural output with two extremes of production.

David Littlefield, in exploring architecture from the demolished homes of mass murderers to the Schröder House (pp 124–9), reminds us that meaning does not necessarily emerge solely from the object or building, but also from the actions that the building witnesses (Duchamp's *Fountain* was merely a urinal until the artist placed it in a gallery). He introduces the notion of transgression as being located in the gap between building and idea (or between the mass-produced urinal and its conception as art). Silvia Loeffler similarly explores this gap (pp 114–9), through the notion of blind spots in the city, where vandalism, graffiti or stencils appear, as the places where desire and belonging collide with the city. Didier Faustino also explores the interstices between the idea of a library and its actual use; between the two chambers of his *Sky Is The Limit* teahouse, and between the two people sealed by *Doppelgänger* in a kiss.

## Cross-Dresser

A cross-dresser adopts the clothing and often the characteristics of the opposite sex, but also simultaneously functions as his or her original gender. This quality of inhabiting more than one group or faction at once is the inspiration for the application of this third analogy to an aspect of practice. This aspect explores architecture that is produced by individuals or groups who are not disciplined in architecture, but who step across into the role of the architect, as well as architects who step across to deeply engage with the community with which they are working. The notion of cross-dressing is important as it reminds us that people working in this trans-disciplinary way are not merely stepping outside of their original discipline, but instead are inhabiting both simultaneously.

This introduces the notion of architecture without architects. Activists in the Occupy movement, as well as revellers in the minibar phenomenon described by Can Altay, both act upon space to alter or subvert its meaning and to appropriate it for their own ends in a social production of architecture.

Inversely structured is the community-led, engaged and empowering architecture of atelier d'architecture autogérée (aaa) described by Doina Petrescu and Constantin Petcou (pp 58–65), and EXYZT described by Alex Römer and Naïm Aït-Sidhoum (pp 66–9), in which it is the architects that step across in order to participate in collaboration with the community. In a crossing between roles, EXYZT become inhabitants, living in and systematically managing the places they build, whereas aaa facilitate the community taking ownership of the projects. The work of Lina Bo Bardi, as described in the article on pp 52–7, further explores an architecture that is flexible and 'loose' enough to be user-led, with an incompleteness that suggests continuity beyond the role of the architect.





## Carnival

The carnival is an event of public urban revelry that is open to anyone who wants to take part. The Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin describes the carnival in opposition to the 'official feast', as an event that:

celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions ... The utopian ideal and the realistic merged in this carnival experience, unique of its kind.<sup>8</sup>

He locates the carnival as outside of the official world and thus argues that it revives and renews the established order, as well as parodying it.

As an analogy, the carnival therefore introduces the notion of an architecture that transgresses the normative processes of production in a way that suspends accepted approaches, procedures and hierarchies. Kim Dovey discusses the need for architects working in informal cities to work in a different way, perhaps taking on more informal methods of practice (pp 82–9). Open-source projects like the WikiHouse described by Alastair Parvin (pp 90–5) and the process manuals of N55 (pp 76–81) suggest a manner of operation that circumvents the established model of architecture as a bespoke service to a singular commissioning client.

The liberation inherent in working outside of the established norms and prohibitions is keenly explored by Catie Newell (pp 24–31) whose work, intervening within a burnt-out house in Detroit, reveals an architecture of beauty and poignancy that is certainly in opposition to the 'official' feast of architectural production in both process and hierarchy. Similarly carnivalesque in its transience as well as its liberation from the everyday is *Flooded McDonald's* by Superflex, explored as an architecture of exception. In these works the temporary suspension of the established norms allows us to revisit our understanding of those norms and to recalibrate their meaning.

## Towards Destabilisation

The four analogies above suggest an architecture that disrupts our expectations, that goes beyond, or slips between, visible, accepted parameters. They suggest an understanding of transgression in architecture that expands the search beyond Tschumi's initial explorations of the paradox between concept and experience. They also highlight the slippery nature of transgression, since the centre swiftly recuperates what was once marginal. In the moments before this recuperation, at the point of revolution or carnival, transgression can be seen to cast new light on what is considered as the norm, and through doing so both re-energises and prompts a redefinition of the centre. This keeps architecture from stagnating and ensures that we are able to safeguard its relevance, by questioning what it could, and even should, be. Transgression destabilises in a way that invigorates, questions and incites change; the agitation it generates is essential to architecture's evolution. ▯

### Lacaton & Vassal, Palais de Tokyo Centre for Contemporary Creation, Paris, France, 2012

The second phase of Lacaton & Vassal's refurbishment excavated the lower floors and bowels of the building, extending the space for viewing art into the typically hidden service areas of the building, with their unexpected volumes.

Transgression can be seen to cast new light on what is considered as the norm, and through doing so both re-energises and prompts a redefinition of the centre.



### Notes

1. Chris Jenks, *Transgression*, Routledge (London), 2003.
2. Bernard Tschumi, *Architecture and Disjunction* (1976), MIT Press (Cambridge, MA and London), 1996, p 23.
3. *Ibid*, p 4.
4. 'Recuperation' is described by the Situationist International as a process whereby subversive ideas are trivialised then sterilised by mainstream conservative powers so that they may be safely reincorporated into mainstream society.
5. Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, Blackwell (Cambridge, MA, Oxford and Victoria), 1991.
6. Chris Jenks introduces himself as not 'disciplined' in architecture in his essay 'Transgression: The Concept', on pp 20–3 of this issue of  $\Delta$ .
7. Tschumi, *op cit*, p 9.
8. Mikhail Bakhtin, 1965, quoted in Pam Morris, *The Bakhtin Reader*, Edward Arnold (London), 1994, p 199.

# TRANSGRESSION

## THE CONCEPT

Eminent sociologist and author of *Transgression* (2003), **Chris Jenks** provides an essential introduction to transgression as a cultural concept. He explores its philosophical roots, its emergence in the radical uncertainty of the early 20th century, and how it came to be most closely associated with the provocative writings of the French intellectual Georges Bataille.



Interior of a brothel

Notions of taboo and the erotic threaten our sense of order and stability.

I write this as a sociologist, interested but not disciplined in architecture. What I shall attempt in this brief article is an exposition of the idea of transgression as it derives from a particular order of thinking in cultural discourse. This argument will derive from the inspirations of a select and interrelated cluster of European thinkers working against a backdrop of the debate between Hegelian and Nietzschean philosophies. Essentially, Georg Hegel envisioned an inevitable historical process eliding 'spirit' (being) and 'reason' (knowing) in the coherent and systematic progress of humankind. Friedrich Nietzsche on the other hand divorced these two elements, 'ontology' and 'epistemology', prioritised the former, through 'the will to power', and relativised the latter. This grand move has empowered modern philosophies, through both Post-structuralism and Postmodernism, to elevate the impact of individual cognition and simultaneously question all claims to truth. The door to transgression is open.

Transgression is a difficult and at times elusive concept. Though generated in the 1930s it has only in the last 30 years re-emerged with any prominence in the arts, humanities and social sciences.<sup>1</sup> The passage of 'modernity' has embedded a now canonical order/disorder problem within our thinking around intellectual, moral and aesthetic categories in the arts and sciences. No epoch has existed that did not think of itself as modern, however the 'modernity' that is cited in contemporary cultural discourse is that which emerged through the industrialisation, urbanisation and rapid acceleration in the division of labour marked by the rampant capitalism of the mid-19th century and beyond. Such unprecedented change impacted significantly on the social, cultural and political structures and understandings of its time and, solidified through two World Wars, gave an impression of order and the ability of humankind to control, or at least manage, its destiny – a view supported by the growth of science. Transgression, as a necessary potential, tilts at and threatens to enfeeble and unsettle such stability; it propels our certainties and conventions into the vortex of excess, eroticism, violence, madness and carnival. This cult of unreason was championed by Georges Bataille and the Surrealists, but also in the work of Antonin Artaud, Arthur Rimbaud, Guy Debord and Mikhail Bakhtin – this lineage is neither definitive nor exclusive.

Questions about the core, the fundamental basis of knowledge, have always been raised, but in liminal zones within culture, such as the avant-garde, radical political movements and counter-cultural traditions in creative practice. However, we might argue that such questions have moved from the liminal zones into the centre. An insecurity has entered into our consciousness, enshrined in the notions that 'all that which is solid melts into air' and 'the centre cannot hold', yet the insecurity itself becomes a convention and the academy adjusts by mainstreaming the postmodern as both an ontological form and an epistemological style. When Jean-François Lyotard announced the death of grand narratives, he did not anticipate the launch of a genre.<sup>2</sup>

The really telling point about radical uncertainty is that it is untenable. It is only through having a strong sense of the 'known' or the 'shared' that we can begin to understand or account for that which is outside, at the margins, indeed that which defines the consensus. Albert Camus's 'outsider', the cognitive rebel, speaks only of loneliness.<sup>3</sup> The inspiration of the grand libertine, the Marquis de Sade, the possibility of breaking free from moral constraint has become an intensely privatised project. If we recognise no bond, we recognise fracture only with difficulty – how then do we become 'free of' or 'different to'?

Transgression is a social process. Transgression is that which transcends boundaries or exceeds limits. However, we need to affirm that human experience is the experience of limits, perhaps, as Bataille tells us, because of the absolute finitude of death.<sup>4</sup> Constraint is a constant experience in our action; it needs to be to render us social. Paradoxically, the limits to our experience and the taboos that police them



**A psychiatric patient is forced to stand**  
Madness is a challenge to ordered society, a threat to the impression that we can control our own destinies.

**A young boy aims a pistol at the photographer, c 1915**  
With each rule comes an inherent desire to break the rules, or disobey.



are never simply imposed from the outside; rather, limits to behaviour are always personal responses to moral imperatives that stem from the inside. This means that any limit on conduct carries with it an intense relationship with the desire to transgress that limit. Transgressive behaviour therefore does not deny limits or boundaries; rather, it exceeds them and completes them. Every rule, limit, boundary or edge carries with it its own fracture, penetration or impulse to disobey. The transgression is not a component of the rule. Excess, then, is neither an aberration nor a luxury; it is, rather, a dynamic force in cultural reproduction – it prevents stagnation by breaking the rule and it ensures stability by reaffirming the rule. Transgression is not the same as disorder; it reminds us of the necessity of order – think of the catastrophic attack on the Twin Towers and the subsequent 'war on terror'.

The point of investigating transgression is to demonstrate its presence in, and impact upon, contemporary life. A primary, albeit unintentional feature of modernity is the desire to transcend limits – limits that are physical, racial, aesthetic, sexual, legal, national and moral. Nietzsche tells us that the passage of modernity has enabled the oppression and compartmentalisation of the will. People have become fashioned in a restricted, but nevertheless arbitrary way. Ironically, modernity has thus generated an ungoverned desire to extend, exceed or go beyond the margins of acceptable or normal performance. Clearly, transgression becomes an important postmodern topic. John Jervis agrees; he locates the transgressive process wholly within the realm of the moral. He reveals the rich and oppressive tendency in Western society to exclude and marginalise that which it finds disagreeable and by implication to unify, consolidate and homogenise that which sustains as its core of comfortable familiarity.<sup>5</sup>

**Georges Bataille, 1 January 1935**

Bataille was a French intellectual whose writing explored a provocative variety of themes, from murder and sacrifice to transgression in marriage and in incest.



Transgression rests on the idea of sovereignty in action. There is a persistent theme in both French and German philosophy that espouses the ultimate plasticity of humankind. Through modernity, such thinking was entwined with the politics of capitalism, industrialisation and the rapidly accelerating division of labour in society. One element of such thought celebrates the limitless potential of the self, but another forward-looking element massages the reciprocity between humankind and machines. Simply stated, if humankind harnesses technology then sovereignty becomes supreme, which in turn is a materialist reduction of human pliability and suggests our finest manifestation is as a cyborg (the world of *Terminators* and *Robocops*). However, the Great War taught us to treat this supremacy with both ambivalence and suspicion, a negative dialectic resonant in J Robert Oppenheimer's words when decades later he had created the atomic bomb: 'I am become death, the destroyer of worlds.'<sup>6</sup> The continued mobilisation of technology opens up a potentially ungovernable politics and hubris; humankind built titanic ships, but not titanic people or states.

The major philosophical turn towards transgression came about through the subversion of Hegel that occurred in the 1930s in Paris. Hegel's philosophical system leads to sovereignty and the triumph of the spirit through the completion of Reason's project; this would be the 'end of history', humankind beyond development. However, following Alexandre Kojève,<sup>7</sup> a cluster of French intellectuals, including Bataille, refashioned the dialectic into a new form of struggle for recognition – the previously unspoken element of desire was awakened in modern thinking, a powerful and unlimited driver of human action. The manifesto for transgression had been written.

Bataille was an extraordinary figure and although he would claim no monopoly over the term, his work, perhaps beyond all others, is most closely associated with the concept of transgression. He spent 20 years of his adult life as librarian at the Bibliothèque Nationale, but no part of his being or doing fits the conventional stereotype of the librarian as introvert. He was subject to violent interludes, which subsequent treatment subdued, but as Allan Stoekl tells us, no force ever stanchied his intellectual violence.<sup>8</sup> Bataille was obsessed by and wrote erratically on such topics as 'death', 'excess', 'transgression', 'eroticism', 'evil', 'sacrifice', 'Fascism', 'prostitution', 'de Sade', 'desire' and other more conventional topics, but always in an unconventional manner. There was an intense energy, wildness and vandalism about Bataille that make the bizarre concoction of his medieval scholarship, Marxist studies, association with Surrealism, involvement in secret societies, rumours of human sacrifice, pornographic writing, and drunkenness and fornication all coherent parts of his total persona. Clearly larger than life, decadent and depraved, admired by a close group of scholars in his time and yet appearing as only a minor figure in the European intellectual landscape. Since his death he has been resurrected as the new intellectual avatar, the unspoken father of heterology and the 'post-', the 'prophet of transgression'.<sup>9</sup>

Despite the growing contemporary preoccupation with Bataille's work, his ideas remain labyrinthine, obscure, multi-fuelled, fierce, neglectful of tradition and simultaneously poetic and repulsive. He does not seek agreement. He often appears to be working through the motivations of the Sadean 'sovereign man'. His topics are dictated through his own libidinal force and his desire will be heard. He has been described as 'the impossible one, fascinated by everything he could discover about what was really unacceptable'.<sup>10</sup> All this does not, however, imply randomness or nihilism; his work is coherent, but the narrative is internal. Bataille was intensely engaged in the Hegelian struggle for recognition. His rage is against the economics of capitalism and the economics that this mode of production inserts in the relationships between people. He is godless yet his fear stems from the loss of God and the subsequent threat to individual sovereignty. Having exhausted the limits of Marxism, he wants to counter the negation of Hegel with a revaluation of values recommended by Nietzsche – he seeks to replace dialectics with genealogies. And he wants to focus on the unconscious. In the guise of pornographer he 'goes to the limit', ironises the pornographic tendencies of capitalist social structures, and plays with the metaphors that reveal patterns of exclusion, expulsion and dehumanisation that remain rife in the 21st century.

Michel Foucault provides a brilliant prolegomenon to Bataille's concept of transgression. He begins with modern sexuality, the new age delimited by De Sade and Sigmund Freud and freed from the grasp of Christianity, yet the old vocabulary of sexuality provided depth and texture beyond the act's immediacy. In the absence of God, with morality no longer obeisant to spiritual form, we achieve profanation without object. The Godless vocabulary of modern sexuality achieves limits and prescribes ends in the place previously held by the infinite. 'Sexuality achieves nothing beyond itself, no prolongation, except the frenzy which disrupts it.'<sup>11</sup> Freud further prescribes our limits through sexuality by employing it as the conduit for the unconscious. Sexuality today has no continuity with nature. As God is dead, then there is no limit to infinity, there is nothing exterior to being and consequently we are forced to a constant recognition of the interiority of being, to what Bataille calls sovereignty – the supremacy, the rule, the responsibility, and the mono-causality of the self. This vertiginous experience Foucault describes as the limitless reign of limit and the emptiness of excess.

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