

Concrete Ecology: Brutalist Architecture with Félix Guattari

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After a 50-year period of mostly bad press, the last years have witnessed a new appreciation of brutalist architecture, part of which has to do with the recent trend of ‘eco-brutalism.’ Against that background, the amply illustrated talk argues that brutalist architecture is indeed inherently ecological, but in a way that is completely different from that ‘eco-brutalism’, which consists of applying ‘some nature’ to brutalist architecture, mostly in the form of plants, in the attempt to give it an ecological touch. In opposition to this ‘logic of application’, I argue that brutalism is in itself ecological, forming, as one might say, ‘an ecology without plants’. To modulate the expression ‘sculpture in the expanded field’ that Rosalind Krauss used in 1977 to define land art: brutalism is an ‘architecture in the expanded field’.

The talk takes its cue from *A Thousand Plateaus*, in which Gilles Deleuze & Félix Guattari show their appreciation of concrete as a building material. It is this concrete, which, in its untreated or exposed form was called ‘beton brut’ by Le Corbusier, that the ‘brutal’ in ‘brutalism’ refers to. Deleuze & Guattari’s appreciation of concrete is somewhat surprising, if one remembers that Jean Baudrillard had, only four years earlier, considered it a second-order simulacrum, just one step away from plastics. Equally surprising, ‘beton brut’ was also used in many works of land art. My argument is that if you can read Nancy Holt’s concrete *Sun Tunnels*, Michael Heizer’s concrete *City* and James Turrell’s ‘beton brut’ *Skyplaces* as brutalist, you can also read brutalist architecture as a form of land art.

To argue my case, I draw on this material affinity, as well as on the fact that land art and brutalism share an obsession with light, the fifth element that animates the four elements of air, water, earth and fire. In the relatively new theoretical field of ‘elemental criticism’ these elements are used to describe the specificity and ecology of architectural sites. Drawing on architectural works by Le Corbusier, Paul Virilio and Japanese brutalists, I argue that they use light as a medium to connect architecture and site, while at the same time keeping them apart.

This seemingly paradoxical logic also pervades Guattari’s treatment of brutalist architecture in his essay “The Architectural Machines of Shin Takamatsu”, in which he comments in particular on Takamatsu’s use of light and the immersion of his work in the urban landscape. The essay is a programmatic text about brutalist architecture and architecture in general that again surprising, in that it contradicts much of the critical reception of Deleuze & Guattari, which tends, like Andrew Ballantyne in *Deleuze & Guattari for Architects*, to argue that because Deleuze and Guattari favor movement over stasis – what they call the *planomenon* and the *ecumenon* respectively – they favor a minor,

nomadic and implicitly ecological architecture over a major, rigid and implicitly 'stately' architecture.

While Ballantyne finds Le Corbusier's brutalism 'stately' and unecological, Guattari's essay does not only show his appreciation of brutalism, it also argues for an ecology of architecture that escapes the dialectical dilemma between minor, presumably ecological, and major, presumably un-ecological architecture by introducing a third, seemingly paradoxical architectural position "in which the work is both complete as an aesthetic object and totally open to its context." The slogan for this ecological architecture is not the predictable 'less *ecumenon*, more *planomenon*!', but rather the more complicated slogan: 'more *ecumenon*, more *planomenon*!'. In terms of architectural form: 'more *closure*, more *openness*!'

According to Guattari's architectural ecology, concrete material architecture and abstract concept should not, like architecture and site, be considered as oppositional, nor should they aim for a complete insertion of the one into the other. Rather, they need to be considered as complementary. In terms of luminosity, the slogan for this complementarity is 'more *darkness*, more *light*!' In its conclusion, the paper illustrates this play of light and shadow, which art history calls *chiaroscuro*, by way of Le Corbusier's use of concrete light and abstract shadow in his Berlin *Unité d'Habitation*.

Until his recent retirement, **Hanjo Berressem** has taught American Literature at the University of Cologne, Germany. Apart from numerous articles on contemporary American fiction, media studies, ecology, and the interfaces of art and science, he has published books on Thomas Pynchon (*Pynchon's Poetics: Interfacing Theory and Text*, U of Illinois P, 1992), Witold Gombrowicz (*Lines of Desire: Reading Gombrowicz's Fiction with Lacan*, Northwestern UP, 1998), the notion of Eigenvalue (*Eigenvalue: On the Gradual Contraction of Media in Movement / Contemplating Media in Art [Sound | Image | Sense]*, Bloomsbury, 2018), Gilles Deleuze (*Gilles Deleuze's Luminous Philosophy*, Edinburgh UP, 2019) and Félix Guattari (*Félix Guattari's Schizoanalytic Ecology*, Edinburgh UP, 2019) and, in a series edited by Klaus Benesch, *Ökologien des Lesens: Für eine erweiterte Philologie*, Transcript, 2022.