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PARASITES: INITIAL REPORT AND RESEARCH CONTEXT

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Submitted:

Abstract

This research explores the potential for using behaviors and strategies of parasites as a model for sculptural propositions in the built environment, and investigates how these interventions might resonate with concerns in architecture, urbanism and socio-cultural politics.

Keywords: site-specific, sculpture, parasite, sound, movement, architecture, socio-cultural politics.

This project has been sparked off by a recent artistic intervention at a dilapidated edifice in Paris, the *Fondation Avicenne*, designed by architect Claude Parent in 1968 (Fig. 1). The building's "body" was constructed from top to bottom, suspended within an exterior "skeleton" of six colossal iron pillars - a particularity that retained our attention. Confronted with the monumental "dead" mass of the building, we thought about the behavior of parasites, which, most naturally, infest and profit from a vulnerable body. Working on a tight budget, we devised simple electromechanical "parasites" that we attached magnetically to the upper part of the iron pillars. With their "proboscis" the parasites prodded their "host", making the monumental architecture resonate in a subdued manner. The impacts also caused brief detachments of the parasites from the surface allowing them to slowly move downward along the pillars (Fig. 2). The

Fig. 1. The *Fondation Avicenne* building in Paris (© Cécile Colle}{Ralf Nuhn.)



Fig. 2. Central pillar of the *Fondation Avicenne* building. Some "parasites" have already descended, while others are still located further up. (© Cécile Colle}{Ralf Nuhn.)

descending parasites were connected to visible red cables - converging at the centre of the façade - which formed an enormous "spider" moving downward over time. The parasites were triggered according to an intuitively devised algorithm via a central computer. Our premise for the algorithm was to create an overall sonic and kinetic impression of organic life rather than reproducing any kind of authentic biological behavior. Furthermore, the parasites followed the same top-to-bottom trajectory that had been conceived by the architect for the suspension of the building's body and, in this way, reunited the conceptual strength and the structural decay of the edifice in a descending movement. This, originally rather intuitive and specific project has given rise to numerous questions and new interests in our research.

We treat the term parasitism both literally and metaphorically, and are particularly inspired by Michel Serres' philosophical writing *The Parasite* [1]. Considering its different significations in French language (biological, social, static/noise), Serres uses the parasite to extrapolate ideas about human relations, society, history and communication while emphasizing its destabilizing and transformative powers. With this in mind, we are keen to explore the potential of using the polysemic notion of the parasite as an integrated conceptual framework and methodological tool to feed new sculptural interventions, and to

investigate their impact on our relationship with the built environment (sonic, visual, structural, historical, symbolic and socio-cultural).

Our intervention at the *Fondation Avicenne* provides a useful illustration of how parasitic qualities can shape a sculptural proposition. It is conceivable that the tools and materials used in Paris might be reemployed in future interventions where new levels of "parasite/host integration" might be explored, e.g. information from an existing electronic network within a building might be relayed to the activity of the parasites. This formal "evolution" would correspond metaphorically with the biological evolution of parasitic species from "surface grazing" to "burial in the host body" [2]. However, the overall idea of this project is not to develop the specific manifestation in Paris into a generic form, adaptable to all kinds of locations, but instead to consider an appropriate parasitic approach for each new location. With regards to both sculptural form and our comportment as artists we will take resource in the richness of parasitic qualities - such as inconspicuousness, integration, expansion, interference, mobility, opportunism - in order to "profit" from the vast realm of potential architectural hosts (their physical properties, histories, current functions and urban contexts) as well as adapt to different socio-cultural and economic situations for the interventions, e.g. exhibition

budget, relationship with both organizers and public, etc. Importantly, to remain within the realm of the parasite, different qualities will have to be considered in combination. For instance, the faculty of expansion is generally coupled with a relative smallness of the parasite.

Research context

“To my mind, the space has to play an integral part of the artwork, and the artwork has to belong to the space. This theory is in fundamental opposition to the idea of a so-called autonomous art.” Daniel Buren [3]

The intention expressed by Buren and other contemporary artists (Acconci, Leveque, Nishi, Serra, Whiteread, etc.) to sculpturally enter into dialog with the specificities of a site and to establish an integral relationship between artwork and location, provides an important contextual setting for our approach. With *ParaSites* we attempt to accentuate this integral relationship by explicitly adopting behaviors and strategies of the parasite – a true specialist of integration – and to invest architectural hosts on several levels (formally, conceptually, technically, etc.). In the natural world, the parasite adapts to the host in order to profit from it while remaining entirely dependent on it. There is no parasite without host and there is no site-specific sculpture without site. While a parasite is commonly considered to be harmful to its host, biological research shows that “as soon as associations arise between individuals of different species” a clear distinction between parasitism and mutualism (a perfectly equitable relationship) becomes almost impossible because in most cases the host also profits, to some extent, from its parasite [4]. In more general terms, Serres points out that “the parasite produces small oscillations of the system, small differences” and can force a “system” to new levels of complexity [5]. Accordingly, by adapting to architectural particularities and intercepting given relations, our parasitic interventions will remain subtle “interferences” to the existing architectural “system”, and might engender new perceptions and experiences of the “host”. In this latter respect our project, i.e. its kinetic and sonic elements, strongly resonates with Michel de Certeau’s suggestion that “spatial operations” challenge the stability and “univocity” of a geometrically defined place, giving rise to many different,

“conflictual” actualizations and readings [6].

A parasitic attack on the built environment implies an apprehension of the building as body. The historical and continued link between evolving understandings of the body and architectural practices has been thoroughly examined [7] [8] [9], and offers a stimulating framework for rethinking architecture in relation to our technologically enhanced bodies [10]. We are interested in investigating how our sculptural interventions might be situated within current practice and thought concerned with the relation of architecture to our new, technologically-mediated way of being-in-the-world. Furthermore, what might be the relationship between current ideas regarding the implantation of new technologies within the human body and our parasitic invasion of the architectural body?

In recent years, the notion of the parasite has been an inspiration, explicitly or implicitly, for several architects and artists concerned with the built environment (Attila Foundation, Carbonell, Eberstadt, Ex. Studio, Korteknie & Stuhlmacher, N55, Rakowitz). Those approaches comprise experimental structures attached to existing buildings and flexible, temporary homes deployable in urban “niches” and are, for us, particularly interesting for their emphasis on the adaptability and mobility of the parasite. At the same time, their underlying motivation to imagine new spaces for living differs intrinsically from our own intention. Diller and Scofidio’s installation *Para-site* (1989) coincides more significantly with our project due to their multi-layered interpretation of the parasite (biologic, social and interferential) and explicit reference to Serres’ writings. The central part of their project consists of a complex set-up within a confined gallery space but also “intercepts the museum’s circulation system” through surveillance cameras and mirrors, exploiting the captured information to create “ficto-real episodes” on monitors in the gallery space [11]. While their conceptual starting point (broadly speaking, the relationship between the modern museum and its visitor) and the “scenographic” approach taken in the main gallery space do not entirely fit with our ideas, the “parasitic scope” of the intervention might nonetheless be viewed as a close precursor of our own research.

The invasive, disruptive, but simultaneously inconspicuous, nature of the parasite has been associated with interventions by artists who reclaim public space and exploit urban niches as a place for the production and exhibition of artworks (Bansky, Bronco, Downey, El Bocho, Fairey, Fino, The Wa). To varying degrees, those artists undermine power structures within the cultural domain as well as highlight wider social and political problematics. The research and practice of Tadej Pogačar is explicitly informed by the notion of the parasite and operates on different levels. His actions include conferences with minority groups, such as sex workers, as well as guerrilla-type interventions at high-profile cultural events, recently at the Venice Biennale. Most interestingly, he has set-up the *P.A.R.A.S.I.T.E. Museum of Contemporary Art*, a para-institutional organization that appropriates the form of a “real” museum and thus permits him to enter into the system of institutional spaces of art. While the formal aspects of these interventions are not necessarily inspired by biological forms of parasitism – and in this way are much different from our idea of parasitic sculptures – their concern with investigating and destabilizing relations within the art system through parasitic strategies provides a rich context for our own objective for this research: to provide new perspectives on the nexus of artist, artwork, art organizations and institutions, and the diffusion of art in public spaces.

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