

Aleksandr Bierig

**PILING ONE STONE ON
ANOTHER**

In his 1780 treatise, *The Genius of Architecture; or, the analogy of that art with our sensations*, the French architect Nicolas Le Camus de Mézières makes a case for the capacity of architectural form to affect the emotions, dispositions, and actions of its human inhabitants. In architecture, he writes, “Every nuance, every gradation, affects us. The arrangement of forms, their character, and their combination are thus an inexhaustible source of illusion.” In making this claim (and Le Camus was arguably the first to do so), he asserts the possibility of an architecture that aims to satisfy (or manipulate) its occupants by intentional design. A building created in this directed, self-aware manner is set against the rote task of “piling one stone on another” — unconsidered, unthinking acts of architecture. Such work, in a proof by contrast, must surround us.

In certain corners of the architectural field, this latter idea might be extended, in a kind of long inversion, to a recent interest in the “formless.” As theorized by Rosalind Krauss and Yve-Alain Bois (borrowing from Georges Bataille) the notion is, at its center, profoundly anti-architectural. Indeed, Bataille was consumed by a mortal displeasure with any architecture — in it, he saw only its darkness, its calcification of the follies of human order. One response was the formless, the informe, an attempt to make a willful mess that would reveal the baseness of all human construction — physical and otherwise.

So it only makes sense that architects, searching for that ever elusive (and probably long-buried) “avant garde” have looked to the formless for a new frontier of expression, a new way to “resist” the ordering demands of architectural form. In this, one hears an echo of Bois’s worry that the formless would be “transformed... into a figure”. To reiterate, architecture is the antipode of the formless — but this only explains its attraction.

This is an oblique way of raising a question: does Kai Franz make architecture? Franz was asked this repeatedly — or rather it was asked of his work, itself — when he passed through the confusing, self-obsessed halls of architecture school. Certainly, Franz’s work leans toward a kind of formlessness, beginning with his different attempts at breaking down notions of order through the delegation of responsibility to algorithms. The other essays in this volume speak to the ways in which Franz has appropriated the *Game of Life* and other manufactured patterns in order to direct his actions — for instance, in *History of One Organism (25 × 33)* (see pp. 32–39): a program that makes a long PDF, which leads to a spoon, buckets of paint, and a piece of wood. Here, I’d like to focus on the latter half of this problem. Not the program or its many complexities, but rather the paint, itself, and the internal chemical, physical structure of such works.

It is at the level of the paint (and later, sand) that the internal tensions of Franz’s approach come into view. In much the same way that the *Game of Life* orders actions according to a set of rules, so, too, does the internal coherence of its constituent materials. Franz encountered this problem directly when asked to make a second edition of *History of One Organism (25 × 33)*. The first version had been made in Germany and the second was attempted in New Jersey. He soon realized that where German paint had been viscous and self-adhering, American paint was thin, runny, and wholly unsuitable to making peaks and valleys. The PDF could be reprinted, a suitable surface could be found, and a spoon was procured. But the chemical composition of the paint was revealed as regionally specific, hostage to a host of unknown industry standards and phantom regulations. He had to thicken it manually for the piece to “work.”

In this, there is a family resemblance between the process and the product. The *Game of*

Life is not a random number generator. It has, as Franz's title suggest, a "history," very much deriving from its vitalist ambitions, which aim to simulate a chain of biological events. In a similar fashion, the thickness of the paint is fundamental to the piece — the paint's thickness is the evidence of history, no more, no less. Without the specific structure and internal chemical tectonics he needed, the American paint was useless.

This is the way in which Franz makes something nearing "architecture." Not simply the formless, nor the form-resisting form, but rather the *formed formless*. In both process and product there is a distinct — and extremely conscious — control of the parameters of the aleatory aspects of the work. Not generated randomly, but by a coherent, pattern producing program. Not paint, but German paint, which accretes attractively and has an internal robustness.

This will towards order is most recently seen in the expanding series of *Plopps*, (which, not coincidentally, were created initially for Franz's thesis project in the School of Architecture at Princeton University). Similar to the previous piece, Franz made landscapes, but here he exchanged paint for sand. Challenged with the problem of satisfying critics and jurors who would judge if he was "making architecture" or not, however, Franz hollowed out these landscapes and solidified them; after the initial piling of sand, he set them into "permanent" form through a second pour of polyurethane, which hardens the shape of hills and valleys, often forming something like a shallow arched structure. The final results were bizarre and heavy, but they vaguely looked like architecture. Yet, this "space" was incredibly narrow. Not only the actual depth of the structures, but the thinness of definition that Franz clings to. To create "architecture," in these terms, is to create something that looks like a structure, which looks like it could, maybe, in some









version (scaled up hundreds of times), hold people under it. That's it. Piling one stone on another, Franz revealed a cleft in the coherence of "architecture": architecture as simply the containment of space, by any means. These hollowed out forms were less attractive than subsequent experiments with more control — grids, lines, colors, patterns — but the initial attempts, in their crudeness, heaviness, messiness, and ugliness, revealed the baseness of architecture. Bataille might have almost approved.

Left and Previous Page:
Collection of Untitled Plopps (No. 1–52), 2012