

Martin Beck

**DIAGRAM,
GESTURE, RIDDLE,
BONE — THE PLOPPER
AS A PHILOSOPHICAL
MACHINE**

In line with computer animation or second life, 3D printing has provided another cause for idealist aesthetics, in the guise of ideology, to rise from the dead. Roughly speaking, idealism was the idea that knowledge, self-consciousness, and freedom are found less by blundering about in the shreds and fragments of the given: sensations, perceptions, and our immediate states of mind; but rather, are found when the objects of our theoretical interest and practical will are products of our own spontaneity. The metaphysical promise of 3D printing is a culmination of this concept, where god's position as creator is surpassed and superseded by humankind's unlimited technical capabilities. Other promises — maybe desirable, maybe equally dubious — are the emancipation from mass produced commodities, along with the ultimate victory against any government censorship regarding commodities, such as guns. As interesting as the latter are, I won't be able to discuss them here, and will continue on the question of idealism.

What was idealism about again? Idealist aesthetics was born in the 18th century. On closer inspection, the first topic of idealist aesthetics is not the problem of taste and fashion — realms where a de-stratifying bourgeois society is looking for social and political binding forces. Rather, it was the revolutionary idea that human thinking has the power of spontaneous synthesis. Previously, a century-old logic and metaphysics of substances and their accidents had confined human thinking to a mere comparison and classification of the concepts and things that somehow were already there. It would begin either with a chaos of sensations or an already rational order of intellectual beings, the latter unsurprisingly fitting much better into the conceptual grid, thus leaving dogmatic rationalism (unlike empiricism) less afflicted by the specter of skepticism

The first instance of this synthetic power was the mathematical diagram: a virtual thing that contains a thousand possible relations and perspectives. While the geometric diagram had been around

since antiquity, now in retrospect it became clear that if the human mind was indeed only concerned with comparing and classifying it would never have found out about this inner abundance in the first place. Like its relatives: numbers, algebraic signs, and algorithms, the diagram has no prototype whatsoever in the realm of the given, nature and experience. Rather, it is man's own accomplishment, through an act of genius creative liberty. We have a pure imaginative power of the construction of forms that contain infinity within them, but at the same time these forms never leave the sphere of human imagination and its ability to control its own creations: to create structures *ex nihilo* and erase them without a trace; to repeat any operation infinitely, manipulate the time axes, not having to fear the interference of invisible forces and accidents or all the other renitencies of nature.

This insight into the power of the diagram came with the recognition of its limitations: its confinement to the realm of forms and their *compositio*: to have on command only possibilities, the virtual and structures, but never realities, events, substances. To never pass the dividing line into the realm of matter or the *nexus*: a realm of invisible forces, of resistant matter and finite quantity of substance that can be neither augmented nor reduced; the irreversible temporality of causal processes and worst, the correlation of everything with everything, where in every new context forces can appear out of thin air that steer everything into another direction and out of control. The problem of matter subsequently also derailed the first idealistic philosophy, the formal idealism of Kant, and its goal to found a rational order of nature in man's capability of spontaneous synthesis — even the late established idea of an obscure *Aether* didn't help much.

The *Plopper* is something like the bad conscience of this formal idealism: as a 3D printer it translates the smart, trim and generally wonderful numbers, points, lines, and algorithms into the thick,





viscous, cumbersome, and opaque realm of the *nexus*, of matter and reality. By doing so it shows no ambition of deceit or ideology: sand and resin, gravity, surface tension, and chance produce objects that are both utterly useless and fragile. No useful commodity, no product we can be proud of, no structure we (or even our small pets) can inhabit arises. Their actuality is not one of human constructive ingenuity and creativity, but of passiveness, metabolism and digestion: compared to the ingenious grids and algorithms they owe their existence to, they appear like poorly risen, disfigured biscuits or fossilized excrements.

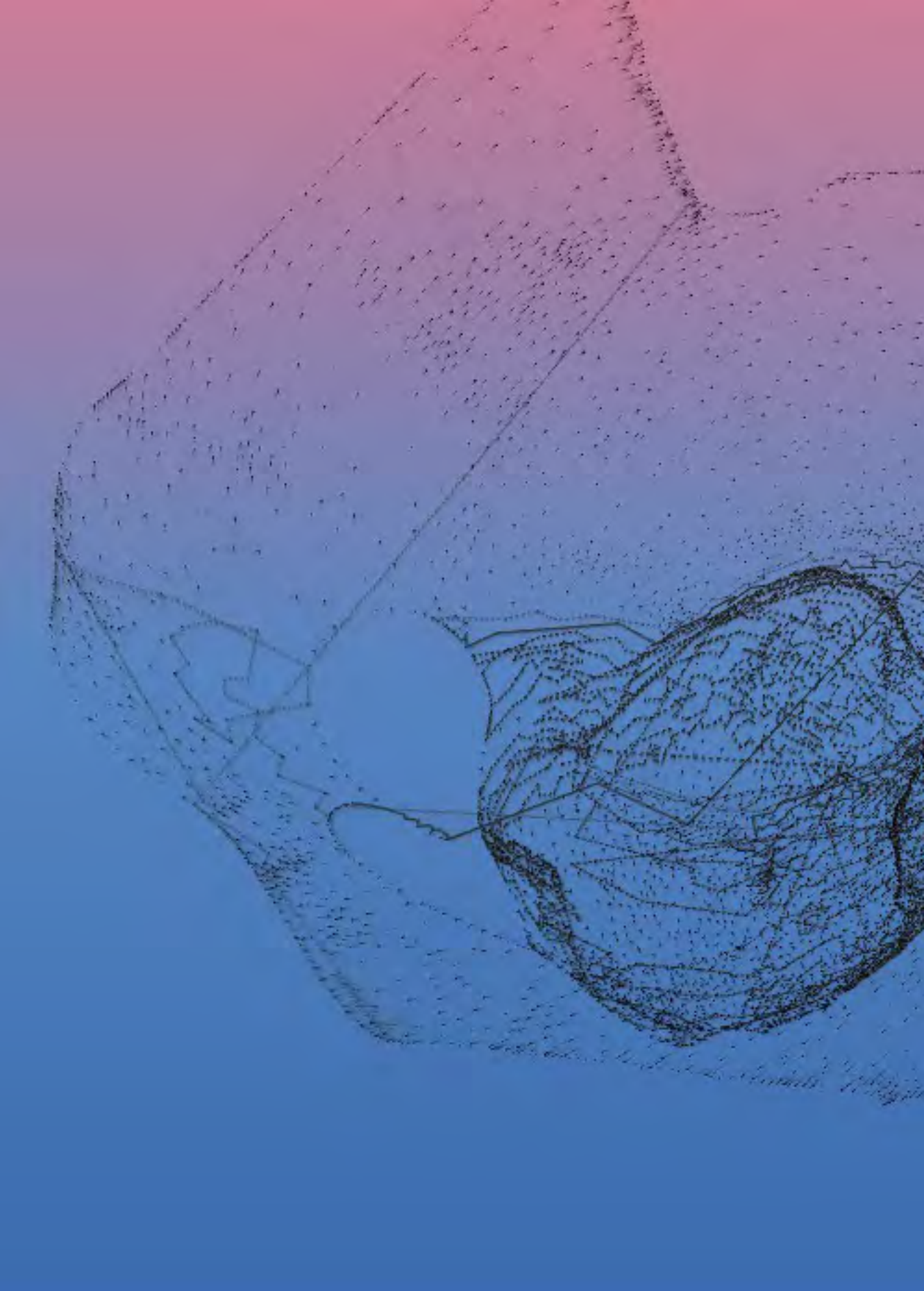
But the *Plopps* not only grind against human excitement about our grand technical ability to construct and fabricate, but also against our belief in our faculty for deep and intense sentiment. From their appearance the *Plopps* seemingly try to look like art, maybe like paintings or objects of abstract expressionism. These had been part of the great antithesis to the wonderful story of *techné*, construction, mathematics, and control: the story of the deep human power of sentiment and its artistic forms of expression and *poiesis*. If we want to deceive ourselves in that direction, we could see the *Plopps* as almost human-like, soulful inspired beings, whose handless bodies try to form gestures to tell us everything about the profundities of human life and sentiment. Yet this desire for identification is nullified by their spiritless and utterly superficial origin. Their kinship to the landmarks of human expression is itself only a very superficial one: they are the contingent product of stupid numbers, a spiritless machine (which is a pleonasm), and the physical contingencies of their surroundings. Maybe it has never been any other way: we want to see our likeness in something, hear our own echo, even when we only hear the flat, hollow, and soulless laughter of a tin can.

The *Plopps* have a strange temporality, are subject to a time lag of some kind. It seems we could either think of them as immemorially old or very futuristic. On closer examination however, their futurism is also set in future perfect tense: even

in a science-fiction scenario they would already be old, left-over traces of some dead civilization. Their temporality is actually no specific time, but a certain space: the desert, as a timeless space that produces nothing, grows nothing, only kills, and reminds everything of its finitude. The desert can thus be likened to time itself, of which Heraklit says it's a playing child that builds and crushes heaps of sand constantly and indifferently. It is also no coincidence that the sphinx and the pyramids are located in the desert, being the epitome of the riddle, of incomprehensible and opaque stuff that protrudes from the sand and may indifferently come from the past or the future — the latter by proxy of some futuristic alien visitor from outer space. But is this everything? Are the *Plopps* only able to tell us: we are utterly useless excrements, hollow-sounding death-masks of nothingness; you are going to die soon?

I would rather end with a speculative argument from the philosophy of nature. For Hegel, maybe the greatest of the idealists, the rationality of nature begins not only since the emergence of life, whose functions of organic self-recreation prefigure the rational dialectic of the concept. Rational processes occur already in the mineral stages of matter — as crystallization. Quartz, mica, and feldspar crystallize and form the reflective unity of granite. Granite and poto-limestone form a mineral antithesis, combine with other elements, form land, and mountains. Maybe — in accordance with the recent speculative interest in nature — we could say the *Plopps* participate in a very timid and tender manner on such a rationality of the mineral. We could then be reminded of the fact that in the spiritual process of the becoming of all beings, nothing is ever completely lost, but only *sublated* (as Hegel's notorious term *aufheben* is translated). The fact that the *Plopps* often remind us of bones and skeletons then appears as anything but a coincidence: according to Hegel our bones are the sublated reappearance of dead mineral matter in the context of the living organism. The *Plopps* then could remind us of two things. Firstly: why







do we have bones? Because, at some stage in the cosmic processes of becoming, we indeed have been minerals. Secondly: there may be a gentle and tender mineral intelligence, a “small” and “grey” inorganic intelligence of crystallization, that we — as part of nature and having once been minerals — may or may not participate in.

Right:

#Black Skull, 2014

Previous Page:

#Black Skull, **#Cinder Blocks** and **#Clouds from Above**, 2014, Still from Animation

Following Page:

#Black Skull, **#Cinder Blocks** and **#Clouds from Above**, 2014 (details)

