

The (Transgressed) Body of Architecture

PREFACE

In this article I wish to examine a potential understanding of the metaphor of the body for architecture posed by the artistic oeuvre of Hans Bellmer. Perhaps the work of no other artist in the 20th C. has been further immersed in exploring the possibilities and limits of the material and psychic reality of the human body. His work forms a radical questioning (or assault) on our common understanding of what must be considered "the most difficult phenomenon."¹ Focused on exposing the ambivalence of the erotic life of man, normally hidden beneath the shell of modern existence, his work must be seen as an attempt to rediscover the fullness and depth of our experience in the world. In this sense, his 'experimental poetry' of the body explores the grounding for an intimate correspondence with the world.

It is the potential of such a primordial correspondence (or continuity) of body and world that is the essence of the metaphor of the body for architecture. The possibility of such a correspondence, as posited by Bellmer, has its source and most profound expression in the erotic life of man. Merleau-Ponty has stated that the sexual or affective life of man is one more form of original intentionality, in addition to the motor, perceptual and intellectual intentionalities. Distinct but not separate from these, man's 'affective' life forms the deepest part of an overall intentionality by which he situates himself in a communal space: in-the-world.² In Bellmer's work, the recovery of the bodily phenomenon lies in the articulation of man's situatedness, grounded in his erotic intentionality, within a description of the body itself. That is, a (body) image.



ONE

Bellmer's most famous and perhaps most enigmatic work is a series of photographs (with poetic texts) documenting the unique process of conception and construction of his 'Doll', published as *Die Puppe* and *Jeux de la poupée*. Within the articulation of this work is revealed the skeletal essence of this erotic world.

With the help of his brother, an engineer, Bellmer constructed 'her' from metal rods, nuts and bolts, a hollow wooden framework, two

jointed legs and one jointed arm made from broom handles, two feet and one hand carved from wood and flesh of flax fibre covered with plaster of paris.³

The objective account of construction however does not reveal Bellmer's intention in the work. His concern in the construction rests with the situation in-between the creator and the object, and reciprocally, in-between the 'viewer' and the object. This intention is revealed in an original 'working drawing' for the Doll. To be located (significantly) in her stomach was a rotating wheel with a series of images of 'in bad taste', representing the thoughts and dreams of a young girl.⁴ By pressing her left nipple the mechanism would be activated, revealing her unconscious (erotic) life through a viewing hole in her navel. As a metaphor for the making of the image, 'conception' and 'construction' are collapsed in an implied 'inter-course' between the creator and the object. By the touch, manifest as the manipulation of her parts, or more generally by a 'projection of desire', the hidden realities of the Doll are elicited within a corporeal schema. Within this constructive situation the 'image' is only ever complete within each of the series of photographs: complete as the situation of a unique (erotic) connection between the participants. The "jeux de la poupée" thus defines the 'image' as an all important third reality, where the autonomous realities of creator and object have been transgressed.



TWO

In this brief understanding of the 'jeux de la poupée', we see the thrust of Bellmer's entire work in which the reality of the 'image' is given priority. Yet the fundamental conception of the 'image' only poignantly takes on meaning in relation to the sheer provocation of his work: the aggressive and violent eroticism seen as endless distortion and metamorphoses of the female body.

The explicit content of his art, consistent throughout his lifetime, has often led to its being dismissed as sophisticated pornography. Clearly not images of a benign sexuality, we must ask what it is that such an art speaks of if we are to transcend this judgement. For Susan Sontag the pornographic imagination explicitly questions the common notion of

human sexuality as a dimension of existence transparent to our understanding.⁵ Opposed to the view that 'we know what it is all about', she sees in pornographic art a view of the affective life of man as an opaque phenomenon. Highly powerful and questionable, it belongs to the extremes of human consciousness.

In Bellmer's focus upon an extreme sexuality, lies a profound view of the nature of human existence, dealing ultimately with the issue of knowledge. In the tradition of writers including de Sade, Baudelaire and Lautreamont, Bellmer is exploring the ultimate ambiguity and ambivalence of human existence. As Bellmer himself has stated, such a view of existence has been best expressed in the thought and writings of Georges Bataille.

For Bataille, erotism was a distinctly human activity, distinguishing man from the animals, which transcended the simple experience of pleasure to include a knowledge of evil and of death. He emphasized, like the previous writers (and in philosophy, Nietzsche), that 'negative' human experiences were inherently part of our world.

"...(a man) must become aware of things which repel him most violently - those things which repel us most violently are part of our nature."⁶

Implicit is a view of existence which is an opening to the totality of human experience, 'positive' and 'negative'. Bataille's inclusive position was opposed to any form of idealism which tended either to transform the 'negative' into the 'positive', or to create a synthesis. The idealist tendency, in all of its guises (which included for Bataille orthodox surrealism), always gives a privileged position to only a part of human existence. Bataille's strategy of subversion involved a rigorous investigation of the negative experiences of life; the filthy, the scatological, and the bestial. Not seeking to replace positive values with negative values or to create a different synthesis, his intent was to rediscover the breadth of human consciousness through the *transgression* of the limits between paradoxical realities. The transgressive act, in breaking limits, was an experience in which the identity and integrity of self and things dissolved. This "awareness of life even unto death"⁷ was manifested most acutely (and most violently) in the realm of eroticism. Not representing a position of ultimate nihilism, the experience of extreme transgression is still always of the world. It is the mystery of human existence in between life and death.

This world attained (and annihilated) by transgression, (now seen to be ultimately about death), is the essence of the erotic for Bataille. Not constituted by a synthesizing mind, it is a world that arises out of the depths of the agitated existence of man without God (or before the gods). It is also without a prior or comparable philosophical development and thus is an acknowledgement of the primacy of 'material' life: the body as the filter of existence.

Not a paradise, the erotic world of Bataille is one of an unleashed vital energy characterized by expenditure and excess. Echoing Nietzsche, Bataille writes:

"...freed from God,...(the creator) suddenly has at his disposal all possible human convulsions and cannot flee from this heritage of divine power which belongs to him. Nor can he know if this heritage will consume the one it consecrates."⁸

Beyond investment with 'raison d'être', the resulting world is ponderous, one might even say 'vulgar' in the sense of Vico. In this situation, the task for Bataille is the application of this intoxicating restless-

ness, a sort of vertigo, to the discovery of "verbal or figurative formulae"⁹ or images as the key to existence.

Thus the 'image' in Bellmer's work becomes poignant as the first 'understanding' of the mystery of human experience: that of eroticism itself, in between life and death. It is the key by which the 'vulgar' world is rendered visible: by which the world is constituted. Palpated from an agitated existence before language, the world of the 'image' is an immanent one, filtered through the experience of the body. Any coincidence of idea and experience, if it is to be found, is in-the-world.



THREE

Anatomie de l'image was developed and written between 1936 and 1948 and finally published in 1957. It is a complement and elucidation of Bellmer's intentions concerning the world of the 'image', the third reality in-between objective (paradoxical) realities, constructed by the force of desire.

In the series of Doll photographs and endlessly through his graphic work, the objective body has been modified to the point of dissolution, by the projection or force of desire. The body is an infinitely mutable and moving entity, which mirrors the displacements and dislocations of desire itself. Thus desire is given concrete expression as a form of the body liberated from its objectivity, forever incomplete. In this situation, after the movement of desire is physiologized, the issue of the image becomes one of meaning. That is, what configurations, combinations, projections strike one as authentic or recognizable despite appearing irrational or opaque? Adding to this notion Bellmer's observation that desire 'sees' nothing for only what it is - "a leg is not real if it is seen only as a leg"¹⁰ - one may see Bellmer as seeking 'physiological' grounding for the efficacy of metaphor, and thus, ultimately language itself.

Anticipating the formulation of the pre-reflective realm by Merleau-Ponty, Bellmer's elucidation begins with the positing of the notion of a 'physical unconscious'. That is, an underlying awareness of the body by the body itself as the basis of all expression. He explains the body as an expressive system of real and virtual centres of excitation, convulsion, and pain operating by an infinite series of transfers (and reversals) in which an amalgam of the real/objective and the imaginary/subjective occurs. The primary expressions of this system are the basic reflexes of the body, the principle of which he illustrates with the example of a toothache and a clenched fist. A clenched fist, as a reflex response to the pain of the tooth, becomes an artificial centre of agitation: a virtual tooth. The toothache thus has been figuratively doubled with the contortion of the hand becoming the visual expression of the 'logical pathos' of the tooth.¹¹ Such a direct example leads to the speculation that all bodily reflexes, the most subtle to the most violent, are similar expressions of transfer and substitution of the virtual for the real. Echoing Bataille's agitated existence:

"...we can now perceive our expressive life as a desirable continuum of liberating transfers or substitutions from the real to its image. Expressions and whatever concomitant pleasure is contained within it, is the displacement of pain and a deliverance from it."¹²

Upon this initial explanation we may thus speculate upon Bellmer's 'logic': how a girl's armpit may be perceived as her vagina simultaneously or how the eye may become almost anything.¹³ In a hidden dimension, we may further speculate on the movement/displacement of transgression, from the permissible to the forbidden.

Having explained the principle of displacement, Bellmer proceeds to explain the mechanism or principle by which these amalgams of the real and the virtual might be explained in themselves, as the image. He illustrates with the example of a photograph of a figure with a mirror placed at an angle to it, moving. We involuntarily perceive the amalgam (figure and reflection) as a whole due to its mobility. Real and virtual disappear into the third reality. The mirror divides and reproduces along the line of their intersection, creating an antagonism which the movement resolves. The principle of reality represented by the fold between the mirror and the photograph is implicit in the images of the first Doll and becomes an explicit part of the second Doll's construction as the 'ball' joint (jointure a boule). This is crucial for the "...role (of the provocative object) will be conditioned by its adaptability, its mobility, essentially by its 'jointed' articulation".¹⁴ Most significantly the formulation of 'jointure' allows all projections from within our unconscious, to attain a physiological expression, and hence exist in the world.

Having traced out the principles and mechanisms of the imagination, Bellmer extends the process of transfer and reversibility to the inter-subjective realm: the plane of reflection (in both senses of the word) between a man and a woman. 'Anatomie de l'amour' is the transcendence of the self-moving energy of desire, essentially narcissistic in its constant search for its own image within everything in its horizon, through a mutual reflection of love. It is a 'reflection' by which a man sees himself as reflected in a woman. Conversely, it is a woman seeing herself as reflected in a man. It is such that:

"My eyes see the eyes I love and take themselves to be those eyes. I don't see the mouth I thirst after without modelling it within myself as my mouth"¹⁵

And further, to fulfillment it appears ultimately that:

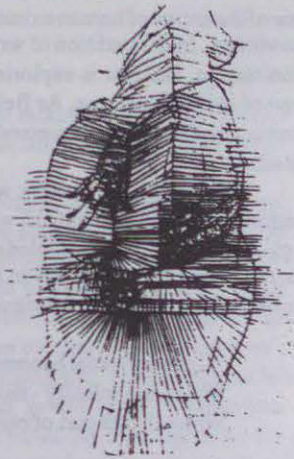
"It seems that this vibrant woman's form was in my body before my own form..."¹⁶

Implicit, is the notion that the woman's body must already have been experienced within the man's before 'she' may be recognized in the world. Such is the basis by which the body extends beyond itself into the world, is opened up, existing throughout the world, haunting it in a turbulent and ultimately impossible task of possessing the world, which paradoxically must be experienced within in order to be recognised.

Thus, one may now speak of the 'body' that is man's erotic situatedness:

"For the first time, the body does not clasp the world but another body...fascinated by the unique occupa-

tion of floating in Being with another life, of making itself the outside of its inside and the inside of its outside, and hence forth movement, touch, vision, applying themselves to the other and to themselves, return toward their source and in the patient and silent labour of desire, begin the paradox of expression."¹⁷



FOUR

I have already noted how Bellmer intuitively follows Merleau-Ponty with his positing of the physical unconscious. Now Bellmer at the end of his book, gives a suggestion of a further extension of his ideas to the scale of world. Perhaps most provocative of his hints is a discussion of desire's preference or concentration on the detail or part of the body rather than the whole. Implicit is an underlying notion of 'world' which holds and sustains the efficacy of the detail, that dimension by which the part may be seen as a part of the whole. This notion of 'world' implicit in Bellmer's endeavour, I believe has been explicitly thought by Merleau-Ponty and named by him the 'flesh'.

In the *Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty speaks of the visible as the adhesion of the viewer to the visible considered not as two substances, but as this whole thought in itself. Ideas, in this world do not lie beneath the visible as absolutely invisible but are of the visible: 'invisible'. It is an interior armature which the visible reveals and conceals.

"The invisible of this world, which inhabits this world, sustains it, and renders it visible, is its own interior possibility, the Being of this being."¹⁸

The cohesion between the visible and the invisible is Merleau-Ponty's notion of an ideality that is an experience of the flesh. It is a cohesion that is not conceptual. It is thinkable in itself, like the cohesion of the parts of my body, or the cohesion of the body with the world. This ideality of the flesh he terms a *carnal ideality*.¹⁹

Of carnal idealities Merleau-Ponty cites the phenomena of both light and sound as exemplary. Unlike ideas which we possess in order to understand, carnal idealities possess us, 'haunting our being with the link to Being'.²⁰ The phenomena of light and sound traditionally were the evidence of the harmony of the world and were referred to throughout history in architectural treatises. Another carnal ideality Merleau-Ponty cites is what he terms 'physical voluptuousness'.²¹ With this notion, the phenomenon traditionally referred to by the metaphor of the body for architectural in history is revealed: the most primary phenomenon that nevertheless is the most elusive.

"...my body is made of the same flesh of the world, and moreover that this flesh of my body is shared by the world, the world reflects it, encroaches upon the world, they are in a relation of transgression..."²²



FIVE

If Bellmer's entire attempt to construct a world of desire is now recalled, one may say that it is one by which all dimensions of human experience may be traced into an immanent world of the flesh. Here the classical image of man, an ordered 'cosmos' of parts epitomised by the Vitruvian man, is violently yet provocatively destroyed. The flesh becomes a material of construction. From this corporeal material Bellmer has created instead a promiscuous organism of 'jointed' fragments. Capable of any and all transformations or metamorphoses that desire may ask for, the body remains forever incomplete. Yet, without the 'whole' one may still speak of 'world' if one understands the image as an anamorphic projection, seen in a transformed sense. Although the image is always a distortion or displacement, there is nonetheless a coincidence of idea and experience, truth and beauty, and form and content, as the locus of projection is eternally accessible to us. It is 'within' us.

This relation of accessibility to the world (and it to us) is the relation of *perception*. One may say that Bellmer's project has been to (re-)describe our most primary perceptions, elicited from our bodies. Merleau-Ponty, now from within a description of perception itself, (implicitly) restates the world of Bellmer. Common to both descriptions of the world is the notion of transgression, or encroachment: that by which the world is given to us as parts and fragments, which are nevertheless the essence of 'world' before language, in between idea and experience.

"Perception opens the world to me as a surgeon opens a body catching sight through the window he has contrived the organs in their full functioning, taken in their activity, seen sideways's. It is thus that the sensible initiates me into the world,... by encroachment, *Ueberschreiten*. Perception is not first a perception of things but a perception of elements (water, air,...), of rays of the world, of things which are dimensions which are worlds."²³

The universal structure 'world' ...,²⁴ encroachment of everything upon everything...,²⁵ a relation of transgression...,²⁶ a being by promiscuity.²⁷ The intentional encroachment: the chiasm.²⁸

END - NOTE

Faced with the task of an architectural (re-)interpretation of the body, we are presented in Hans Bellmer's oeuvre with a powerful understanding of world 'construction': a world in which both body and architecture participate.

I will end at the beginning of Bellmer's endeavor into this world; the situation in-between the efficacy and magic of his dreams and memories of childhood, and the reality of his world (which is also our world) so far from that earlier reality. The 'games of the doll' arose presence of this gap "...as a remedy, a compensation, for a certain impossibility of living."²⁹ In Merleau-Ponty, there is a complimentary invitation.

"Solution: recapture the child...the unreflected...which is perception...(by definition) intentional transgression"³⁰

1. D.M. Levin, *The Body's Recollection of Being*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985, Introduction.
2. M. Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1962, Chp. 2 'The Body in its Sexual Being'.
3. See P. Webb, *Hans Bellmer*. Quartet Books, 1985, Chp. 2 'The Doll'.
4. Hans Bellmer quoted in P. Webb, *Hans Bellmer*, Chp. 2.
5. Susan Sontag, 'The Pornographic Imagination' in *The Story of the Eye*, Penguin, 1979.
6. Georges Bataille quoted in P. Webb, *Hans Bellmer*, Chp. 8.
7. Ibid.
8. Georges Bataille, *Visions of Excess*, University of Minnesota, 1970, 'The Sacred'.
9. Ibid.
10. *Hans Bellmer*, Chp. 7 'The Anatomy of the Image'.
11. *Hans Bellmer*, Chp. 7.
12. Ibid.
13. See Georges Bataille, *The Story of the Eye*, Penguin, 1979.
14. *Hans Bellmer*, Chp. 7 'The Anatomy of the Image'.
15. Joe Bosquet quoted in *Hans Bellmer*, Chp. 7 'The Anatomy of the Image'.
16. Ibid.
17. M. Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, Northwestern, 1968, 'The Intertwining - The Chiasm'.
18. Ibid.
19. Ibid.
20. Ibid, 'Working Notes'.
21. Ibid.
22. Ibid.
23. Ibid.
24. Ibid.
25. Ibid.
26. Ibid.
27. Ibid.
28. Ibid.
29. Hans Bellmer quoted in P. Webb...
30. M. Merleau-Ponty, 'Working Notes'.

Helmut Klassen....Montreal 1989.