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# Consumptive Affect

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*The formal repertoire of digital design is now so well established that formal novelty can no longer be used to intellectually sustain this practice. As suggested by Patrik Schumacher's "Digital Semiotics" and Greg Lynn's "Too Many Columns" studios run at Vienna's Institute of Architecture, the key figures of digital design are themselves returning to more enduring architectural issues. However, the continued reliance of key theoretical concepts, borrowed primarily from Deleuze, ensures the emphasis on process remains valid because it's supposedly non-formal basis frees design from the ideological predetermination of form. There is no intention of returning to postmodernism semiotics or the link between form and knowable experience, as promoted in phenomenological thinking. If experience exists, it does so as a condition of "affect" where, as Brian Massumi argues, it is an autonomous procedural state that is not just independent of form but is its actual sponsor.*

*Unlike Greg Lynn, theorist Brian Massumi makes this claim for "affect" based on the formation and action of the object. This paper will examine why the role of process in digital design as the "affective condition of formation" represents yet another failed attempt to separate the act of making from ideology. Of particular import is the type of radical devaluing of form one sees in the text of Massumi, which ensures there is no other purpose for the object other than as a "resource" or "material" for the processes of "affect." Drawing specifically on Georges Bataille's account of Calvinist expenditure, the trace of ideology will be revealed in how this procedural schema ensures the object, as "stuff" to be folded and reabsorbed back into production, uncannily fulfills the same role it plays in supporting the capitalist ideal of "meaningful" consumption. In this way the valorising of process is ideologically consistent the capitalist paradigm of consumption.*



## Introduction: The Anti-Representational Turn

In *Animate Form* Greg Lynn positions digital design practice as an alternative to the “linguistic constructions” and “statements” of postmodernism and deconstruction.<sup>1</sup> Lynn initiates this disciplinary shift from the humanities to the sciences by framing digital design practice within Deleuze’s anti-representational philosophy.<sup>2</sup> In this appropriation of Deleuze’s thinking, physical or abstract forms are sponsored by the cessation of procedural movement. For this reason, the form of the object is of less consequence than the forces at play behind its procedural generation. Clearly for Lynn, one of the main reasons for this shift is an acknowledgement of the limits of authorship, where an object’s meaning is always a product of the unknowable processes of cultural reception.<sup>3</sup> The point of this argument being that any duplication of prefigured form not only places a limit on the formal potential of process but also uses form to communicate specific messages. It is possible to conclude then that the intellectual driver of the procedural is the belief that it offers an escape from the formal limits of precedent and the trace of ideology.

The significance of the attempt to circumvent the ideological stain of prefigured form is that it redefines the disciplinary status of the object. This continues a longstanding disciplinary desire to achieve authenticity through apolitical forms. This worthy, but ultimately vexed aim is made more problematic if one values the need for the profession to account for the cultural reception of the architectural objects produced. This said, any critique of this disciplinary rethinking of the object demands one address, rather than refute, the Deleuzian roots of this discourse. The point being that critique must not effect a sort of philosophical colonialism of the type one sees in Mark Cousins’ essay “Aeffect.” In this essay Cousins’ reassertion of a Kantian model of experience, through the figure of the disinterested subject, simply maintains the convention where ‘effect’, as the privileged term, involves an explicit exchange between discrete subjects and objects.<sup>4</sup> Not only does this fail to entertain the possibility of instability between subjects and objects, but it also ignores a more radical rethinking of experience in the work of Brian Massumi. In this respect, the capacity to evaluate the role of the object in digital design discourse would need to engage with “affect” as the privileged term, and where the procedural aspects of formation dispense with an explicit causal relationship

1. Greg Lynn, *Animate Form* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1999), 39.

2. Lynn, *Animate Form*, 39-40.

3. Lynn, *Animate Form*, 39.

4. Mark Cousins, “The Aeffect,” in *Corporate Fields: New Office Environments by the AADRL*, ed. Brett Steele (London: Architectural Association, 2005), 149.

between known forms and known experience. Accordingly, the paper, drawing on Georges Bataille's discussion of Calvinist production, will explore how Massumi's privileging of process reinforces the role of the object as an integral component of the capitalist modes of production.

### **Massumi and The Digital, The Virtual and The Autonomy of Affect.**

Frequently cited within Affect Theory literature, Brian Massumi's work has, over the last decade, progressively infiltrated design discourse. This Deleuzian reading of the conditions of production offers fertile ground by which to free design from the representational emphasis in postmodern and deconstruction thinking. Viewed through Post Critical Discourse, this permits the designer to make form without the limits of referential parody and the dictates of critique. For Massumi, this shift avoids the tendency in cultural studies to present the body as a signifier of already determined disciplinary categories.<sup>5</sup> Unlike Cousins, who maintains a direct relationship between effect and object, Massumi's privileging of the body cleaves apart these terms and redefines "affect" as an autonomous condition of production. Massumi's true significance is to uncouple experience and form so that "affect" is an account of making that recalibrates experience around knowledge of the body rather than the mind.

Massumi privileges the status of the body through the application of a fairly conventional Deleuzian reading of the virtual. As with other Deleuzian scholars like Elizabeth Grosz<sup>6</sup> and John Rajchman,<sup>7</sup> Massumi is careful to distinguish between the virtual and virtual reality because the latter is a mimetic re-presentation of real forms made possible by digital technologies. In contrast, the virtual is not inevitability located in the space of digital representation or techniques, but in the capacity these tools have to actualise the potentiality of the virtual.<sup>8</sup> Like Lynn, form for Massumi is something that emerges when movement ceases, however, this is not necessarily a procedural action within computational space but any "processual" movement caused a "thickening" in the virtual. In contrast to Lynn, who as the architect remains locked within the logic of process, performance and formal invention, Massumi is unencumbered by the issues of technique and form making. Thus, while their accounts share many theoretical alignments, Massumi's freedom from technique allows him to explore all objects as a trace

5. Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation, (Post-Contemporary Interventions)* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 1-4.

6. E. A. Grosz, *Architecture from the Outside: Essays on Virtual and Real Space* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2001).

7. John Rajchman, *Constructions* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1998).

8. Brian Massumi, "Sensing the Virtual, Building the Insensible," Essay, originally published in "Hypersurface Architecture," ed. Stephen Perrella, *Architectural Design*, 68 no. 5/6 (May-June 1998). <http://www.brianmassumi.com/english/essays.html>, 21-22.



of the a priori and posteriori conditions of “affect.”

Embracing the pragmatism of William James’s “radical empiricism,” the virtual is a unified field of real conditions of interaction.<sup>9</sup> It is, effectively, a condition of the interconnectedness of all situations, states and elements, or as Massumi writes, “a lived paradox where what are normally opposites coexist, coalesce, and connect.”<sup>10</sup> It is the real-abstract; “abstract” in the sense that it is not strictly formally figured and ‘real’ because it contains all potential conditions of interconnection of forces and things in the world.<sup>11</sup> Thus, the virtual is not formal, but the infinite potential of the “real-abstract” to compose and sponsor new, emergent forms.

9. Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual*, 16.

10. Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual*, 30.

11. Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual*, 5.

This schema’s beauty lies in how severing experience from form allows Massumi to assert “affect” as the autonomous and independent sponsor of form. This is because, as Eric Shouse reminds us, “affect” is an ‘intensity’ within the virtual that coalesces into form.<sup>12</sup> The capacity of “affect” to sponsor form doesn’t just refute the type of formal basis of effect one sees in Cousins’ essay, it also separates “affect” and “effect” as two fundamentally different conditions of legitimate form making. “Effect’s” connection to form makes form a product or re-presentation of a known experience of an engagement with that form. It involves a conscious act that works through perception and emotion, and as such makes it an artificial constraint of the virtual. In contrast, “affect” is a natural expression of the functioning of the virtual and where the traces of affective production are never re-presented in form, but only reverberate in and through it. For this reason Massumi’s “The Evolutionary Alchemy of Reason” offers the most direct description of the functioning of “affect.” In reference to the art practice of Stelarc, Massumi discusses how the application of technology, working directly on and through the body, uses immaterial flows of environmental information to sponsor “affect.”<sup>13</sup> Thus, the unknowable machinations of the Stelarc’s prostheses conjure work that is without semiotic or experiential predictability.

12. Eric Shouse, “Feeling, Motion, Affect,” *M/C Journal: A Journal of Media and Culture* 8, no. 6 (2005), <http://journal.media-culture.org.au/0512/03-shouse.php>.

13. Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual*, 89-132.

Massumi establishes the primacy of “affect” on the basis that it is the precondition of form and meaning that is at work before conscious thought. To do this Massumi draws on numerous scientific studies that indicate the body is the primary receptive vehicle that functions without the prejudices of the mind.<sup>14</sup> The mechanism by which the body circumvents the mind is proprioception, which is the capacity of the body to function without

14. Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual*, 29-31.

15. Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual*, 29.

16. Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual*, 5.

17. Mark C. Taylor, *Disfiguring: Art, Architecture, Religion, Religion and Postmodernism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 197.

18. Taylor, *Disfiguring*, 44.

19. Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual*, 30-31, 43.

and, therefore, before the mind. Massumi here quotes researcher Benjamin Libet, who argued the temporal difference between the response of body and mind indicated that free will is exerted “not by initiating intentions but by vetoing, acceding or otherwise responding to ...[an action or event] after they arise.”<sup>15</sup> Proprioception is the receptive vehicle that delineates where the body leaks into the virtual and reveals “an incorporeal dimension of the body.”<sup>16</sup> However, it is important to point out that Libet’s thoughts are speculative, so any privileging of proprioception is a conscious decision to emphasise the difference in, rather than the closeness of, response times. The decision to favour difference is conceptually vital because it allows Massumi to claim “affect” as a natural condition of being.

Mark C. Taylor’s critique that postmodern pluralism is that it bears a conceptual affinity with Hegel’s Absolute Idealism.<sup>17</sup> As Taylor writes, Hegel’s philosophy “synthesizes the opposites between which thought and action are suspended.”<sup>18</sup> Massumi’s account of the virtual and ‘affect’ runs an uncanny parallel to this thinking, as both schemas believe in the integration and synthesis of opposites and contradictions.<sup>19</sup> Like Taylor’s account of Hegel, this schema is unquestionably ameliorative. Moreover, in removing conflict and contradiction, Massumi erases the possibility of procedural disruption, thus ensuring form is always a natural expression of the action of “affect” in the virtual. Disruption and discord are present but only as a natural order of things. It is possible to argue, in fact, that the only significant difference is that Massumi sees the body, and not the mind, as the mechanism of synthesis. There is some irony in that replacing semiotic representation with embodied knowledge reinforces the split between body and mind. Yet the more significant issue is that this intellectual inversion, where the body becomes the idealised centre of pragmatic truths, is not a descriptive account of a natural state of affairs. It is, in the end, an artificial theoretical construct.

### **Affective Forms and Formal Affects.**

Massumi’s schema requires form to function as an expression of affective production. However, the establishment of the “autonomy of affect,” as the precondition of form and meaning, does more than deprive form of any generative potential. The more troubling aspect is that the desire to establish the primacy



of “affect” institutes a conceptually linear schema. One inevitably constructs a theory about origins if form is only ever a product of the virtual. Contrary to Massumi’s claim otherwise, the privileging of “affect” over meaning is not simply “a statement of ontological priority.”<sup>20</sup> The schema’s logic is fundamentally sequential. This can be traced back to the intellectual ambition to make form and meaning dependent on “affect.” This is why Massumi didactically posits “affect” to be both a pragmatic and natural condition of making. The logic of this claim for naturalness is to also make it apolitical.

20. Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual*, 8.

The relationship between form and “affect” is far less clear when confronted with a world already full of affected objects and their encultured meanings. The presence of already formed objects is fundamentally problematic to any theory based on origins and fixed procedural sequences. Remembering the intellectual veracity of Massumi’s schema is based on the rejection of form, the only way to maintain the purity of the system is to reincorporate form back into the virtual. This is achieved by treating objects like recycled material, where meaning is stripped away as they are readied for the next instance of affective production.<sup>21</sup> Consequently, the privileging of “affect” posits form as simply the inevitable waste product of a purer mode of expenditure.

21. Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual*, 9-10, 42-43.

The essays “The Future Birth of the Affective Fact: The Political Ontology of Threat” and “Sensing the Virtual, Building the Insensible” are important because they attempt to address how the object, once formed, returns to affective production. The formal conditions examined in these essays explore language and architectural form respectively, but irrespective of these formal differences the conditions of “affect” function in the same way. In both cases, form seeds new affects without bearing the trace of the conditions of “affect” that brought them into being or their assigned meanings.

In “The Future Birth of the Affective Fact,” Massumi explores how contextual events reframe the functioning of abstract nouns so as they can exceed their semantic reading.<sup>22</sup> The central example, George W. Bush’s use of “threat” during the 2004 presidential campaign, activates the anxiety of September 11 to make such events an always-possible future event. In opening a ‘surplus’ of reality at every utterance, the abstract noun functions performatively rather than representationally; creating an ambient presence of a potential real lived condition that modulates feeling.<sup>23</sup> This converts the “theory of signs [into] a

22. Brian Massumi, “The Future Birth of the Affective Fact: The Political Ontology of Threat,” in *The Affect Theory Reader*, ed. Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 52-70.

23. Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual*, 64.

24. Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual*, 63.

metaphysics of feeling.”<sup>24</sup> However, the redefinition of language from symbolic form into affective vehicle inevitably exposes further problems with the claim that it is apolitical. Clearly, Bush’s use of language is conceived to achieve politic ends. Furthermore, the affective capacity of “threat” requires the identification of individuals to socially marginalised stereotypes. Ironically, in making this argument Massumi must accept the presence of the very social forms he rejected in the introduction of *Parables for the Virtual*.<sup>25</sup> This political exploitation of socially formed perceptions and emotions also questions the basis on which Massumi rejects of phenomenology as a formed body of knowledge on experience.<sup>26</sup> While there are contradictions in other texts, Massumi does suggest that perception and emotion are formed experiences; ones which “can only be thought.”<sup>27</sup> The political exploitation of perceptions in this example intrinsically links ‘affect’ to known forms. More significantly, is Massumi’s passivity to the fact that the real world expressions of “affect” he draws on come predominantly from the political right.

25. Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual*, 1-2.

26. Massumi, “Sensing the Virtual,” 11.

27. Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual*, 91.

Massumi’s essay “Sensing the Virtual,” remains to this day one of his most extended discussions on the architecture of computational design practice. These issues are approached through the geometric entity of the topological surface as a ‘onto-topological’ condition.<sup>28</sup> Interestingly, it is this formal type that provides the capacity for form to fold or feed back into the virtual. Accordingly, “The asignifying or processual sign-form of the onto-topological turn catalyzes experiential potential rather than meaning.”<sup>29</sup> Essentially, performance replaces meaning because form “catalyzes uniform conditions of actual emergence.”<sup>30</sup> The autonomous movement of “affect” exceeds the formal limitations of the object because “the virtuality or changeability of a form [always] exceeds its actuality.”<sup>31</sup> This recursive quality of the movement of “affect” through form, labelled as “ontogenetic,” is inherently performative because it allows form to participate but not author new conditions of “affect.”

28. Massumi, “Sensing the Virtual,” 2-3 & 17.

29. Massumi, “Sensing the Virtual,” 19.

30. Massumi, “Sensing the Virtual,” 24.

31. Massumi, “Sensing the Virtual,” 17.

One final issue raised in “Sensing the Virtual, Building the Insensible” revolves around the problem that the virtual, as an inclusive condition of everything, can only be represented within the design process. The digital can only design and construct procedural analogies of the virtual’s incipient conditions. Massumi owns this inconsistency, writing that in a programmed environment “There is no such thing as pure indeterminacy.”<sup>32</sup> In fact, when “constraints are set to interact [they] will be an

32. Massumi, “Sensing the Virtual,” 5.

33. Massumi, “Sensing the Virtual,” 5.





arbitrary decision of the architect.”<sup>33</sup> This position is reinforced four years later in *Parables for the Virtual*, in Massumi’s brief discussion of the work of Lynn and Lars Spuybroek.<sup>34</sup> This position indicates that procedural capacity is more important than the representational veracity of any analogue of the virtual. This contradiction can only be explained because the attractiveness of process lies in its ability to induce objects that come into the world without the ideological weight of meaning. Like Stelarc’s prostheses, these processes and mechanisms evidence “affect” and provide a formal conduit that must be able to fold back into the virtual to help participate in new conditions of “affect.” In this system, form and meaning are the surplus, and must undergo a mode of conceptual recycling before being able to reenter the productive region of the virtual. This semiotic purification has no need of the cultural production of meaning. In this way, Massumi ensures form is never a locus of “affect.”

34. Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual*, 183, 92.

### **Bataille’s Notion of Capitalist Expenditure and Productive Objects**

In *The Accursed Share*, philosopher Georges Bataille writes, “What differentiates the medieval economy from the capitalist economy is that the former, static economy made nonproductive consumption of the excess of wealth while the latter accumulates and determines a dynamic growth of the production apparatus.”<sup>35</sup> The capitalist economy “gives precedence in the use of the available resources to the expansion of enterprises and the increase of capital equipment; in other words, it prefers an increase of wealth to its immediate use.”<sup>36</sup> The reabsorption of the profit from production may be virtuous, but it also opens a problem with the role of the object. Bataille, after Webber, traces the problem of form back to the Calvinist doctrine that split religious and secular modes of expenditure. “Things” are redeemed as a “good” mode of expenditure only when they are seen to drive further production

35. Georges Bataille, “The Accursed Share: An Essay on General Economy,” volume 1: *Consumption*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Zone Books, 1995), 116.

36. Bataille, “The Accursed Share,” 119

Massumi’s “economy” seems to address this problem by removing the importance of form. However, Bataille, in reference to Tawney, points out that the Calvinist objective “is not “personal salvation, but the glorification of God, to be sought, not by prayer only, but by action ... [it] is intensely practical.”<sup>37</sup> The difference between Calvinist production and Massumi’s schema lies in how the dilemma of form is resolved. Calvinism’s

37. Bataille, “The Accursed Share,” 123.

38. Bataille, "The Accursed Share," 126.

gift to capitalism is that "things" are imbued with the valuable capacity to fuel production and thus resist "an immense unproductive consumption and the idleness of all those who had a free choice in life."<sup>38</sup> For Massumi, the problem is form itself because it threatens the capacity of the virtual to be a mode of pure production. Its ethos cannot tolerate the possibility of disruptive waste in the system whose resolution requires a two-pronged attack on form. The first presents form as a byproduct of a useful expenditure of "affect." Denied of generative capacity, things may be seen as wasteful outcomes of a type of procedural consumption. Objects, while a negative in the system, are valued because they testify to a natural mode of expenditure. The second attack involves the cleansing of representation where it must be recycled as before being reabsorbed back into virtual. The superficial rejection of capitalist expenditure through the removal of form's importance belies the reality that both offer a "clean" mode of expenditure. This is done by converting the negative of waste in the system as a temporary abeyance of "affect." These two strategies resolve the problem of form by converting it back into the positive cycle of production. Bataille's account of the secular economy haunts Massumi because his schema is driven by an attempt to remove the inevitable waste associated with unproductive consumption. The shared commitment to action and production also shares the same dilemma of form, because it remains the awkward and unaccountable surplus in the system.

### **Consumptive Ideology and the Political Neutrality of the Object**

The claim that the "real-abstract is not ideological," is premised on blending James' epistemology of radical pragmatism with the ontology of Hegel's idealism. This is intended as a clean expenditure of form that in the process divests the system of meaning. Here, the conceptual amalgamation of James and Hegel privileges the procedural production and recycling of form to ensure the apolitical pragmatics of production are sustained.<sup>39</sup> This is accompanied by a representational cleansing of form where the object is subservient to the primacy of movement. This conceptual framework, geared to guarantee the neutrality of "affect" parallels capitalist rhetoric by sublimating and incorporating objects within the ideal of useful expenditure. Like Capitalism, this is discriminatory framework because there are virtuous objects that contribute to production and wasteful surpluses that

39. Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual*, 9-10, 42-43.



cannot be usefully absorbed back into the system. The virtual is an idealised account of the world because it removes the possibility of discontinuity and jettisons any responsibility for the political functioning of the object. Taken to its logical end this schema discourages the idea of the subversive action or the disjunctive form.

Massumi's privileging of the body has further pacifying tendencies. Like phenomenology, any knowledge of experience is an epistemological contradiction. The radical formlessness of the virtual and "autonomy of affect" is so open and vague that it is everything and nothing in particular. Embodied knowledge may be a valid formal conduit, but it can't be consciously constructed. In Cultural Studies, it is acceptable to respond to conditions of "affect," but in the specific case of digital design practice, the reality is that processes are always authored and are simply analogous simulations of the virtual and "affect." Moreover, as Pierre Francastel argues technology becomes active only when a value for it is identified, technologies and their associated representational techniques can never shake the problem of ideology. This is because one is "dealing not with a purely technological or speculative progress but with a joint evolution of the social and technological activities."<sup>40</sup> This process, which Francastel calls "figuring," suggests that the technologies of production are never neutral because they only become active when a social or political value is identified.

40. Pierre Francastel, *Art and Technology in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (New York: Zone Books, 2000), 33.

It would be wrong to suggest that others working in the field of Affect Theory are not prepared to broach the issue of politics. In fact, Ben Anderson's essay in the *Affect Reader*, "Modulating the Excess of Affect: Morale in a State of 'Total War,'" focuses on the production of "affect" through the various mechanisms of wartime propaganda.<sup>41</sup> Anderson retains the "autonomy of affect" because it is not found in any one object, however, it is also something that can be attained through the strategic use of the techniques and tools of delivery. This suggests an affective capacity can be constructed and used for specific political objectives. Another essay in the *Affect Reader*, Patricia Clough's "The Affective Turn: Political Economy, Biomedicine, and Bodies," also draws attention to the political consequences of "affect." At the conclusion of the essay she acknowledges the depoliticizing of "affect" also risks excusing the unfettered capitalist exploitation associated with new prosthetic technologies.<sup>42</sup> Even when holding onto the conceit that culturally determined

41. Ben Anderson, "Modulating the Excess of Affect: Morale in a State of 'Total War,'" in *The Affect Theory Reader*, eds. Gregg and Seigworth, 161-85.

42. Patricia T. Clough, "The Affective Turn: Political Economy, Biomedicine, and Bodies," in *The Affect Theory Reader*, eds. Gregg and Seigworth, 206-25.

meaning is semantic and permanent, these essays indicate that processes are authored and intent can be deferred to the operation of “process.” In respect to architecture, both Anderson’s and Clough’s accounts question the capacity of “affect” to place disciplinary knowledge beyond the object’s meaning or experiential qualities and, by extension, the capacity to avoid the stain of ideology.

## Conclusion

In “Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation,” Deleuze argues that the action of sensation and “affect” in Bacon’s work involves formal tactics that undo the conventions of the genre. In particular, is Deleuze’s exploration of Bacon’s disruption of the conventions of figurative painting.<sup>43</sup> This is a significant departure from Massumi’s account because “form” is the strategic and disruptive instigator of “affect.”<sup>44</sup> This interest with the object’s agency is, of course, familiar territory for Rosalind Krauss and Yve Alain Bois, particularly *Formless: A Users Guide*. For Krauss and Bois the object’s agency results from a defiance of convention and the operation of representation and form against itself.<sup>45</sup> One might suggest that Greg Lynn’s *Too Many Columns* and Patrik Schumacher’s *Digital Semiology* studios run recently at Vienna’s Institute of Architecture (IoA) that this approach is guiding digital design practice back to a critical interrogation of and through past disciplinary “constructions.” Importantly, the rethinking of the object and ‘affectiveness’ within a capacity for representational and contextual disruption indicates how disruptive forms can actively refuse the conceit of binaries like body and mind and form and content.<sup>46</sup>

Massumi’s “The Future Birth of the Affective Fact: The Political Ontology of Threat” locates the affective functioning of language in the performative potential of the abstract noun. This is a risky argument given it could be equally understood as a subtle semiotic play on words. As Umberto Eco’s *The Open Work* indicates, the interrelation between explicit, implicit and even semantically open signifiers and the context of reception are never certain.<sup>47</sup> The important distinction lies with Eco’s identification of the difference between information and meaning, where the more precise and predictable the information in the message the more redundant the information conveyed is.<sup>48</sup> This is a Structuralist account of the world, but the radical aspect

43. Gilles Deleuze and Francis Bacon, *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 14-18.

44. Deleuze and Bacon, *Francis Bacon*, 6

45. Yve Alain Bois and Rosalind E. Krauss, *Formless: A User's Guide* (New York: Zone Books in association with Centre Georges, Pompidou, 1997).

46. Yve-Alain Bois, “To Introduce a User’s Guide,” *October* 102 (1996), 25.

47. Umberto Eco, *The Open Work*, trans. Anna Cancogni (London: Hutchinson Radius, 1989).

48. Eco, *The Open Work*, 52-53.



Eco bring to the discussion is that meaning is additive and contextually situated, so any increase in profundity is linked to a disruption of the formal code.<sup>49</sup> The possibility of disruptive intent in the functioning of the form indicates it has the potential to confound meaning. Unlike Lynn and Massumi, who only ever see form leading to semantic readings, representation for Eco is not semantic, and meaning and experience are not mutually exclusive. If, as argued, the “emotive aura depends on both the intentional ambiguity of the given sign and its precise referential value,” Eco could explain the political “effectiveness” of Bush’s use of “threat” because it treats “the linguistic sign as a ‘field of stimuli.’”<sup>50</sup> Clearly, words are not exactly semantically or referentially explicit.

49. Eco, *The Open Work*, 45.

50. Eco, *The Open Work*, 36.

Massumi’s advocacy of “affect,” both conceptually and structurally, only conceives of good form. This requires one to ignore the politics behind what purpose the process is put to and the affective potentiality of form itself. The danger of striving for a neutral mechanism of production is that it ignores any consideration of the political work asked of signifying terms. Eco’s implicit acceptance of affective capacity of language not only questions Massumi’s insistence on form always being semantic, but also questions the separation between experience, centred in the body, and meaning, centred in the mind. If Massumi’s split between form and “affect” comes as a consequence to a commitment to the body at the expense of the mind, Deleuze’s account of Bacon’s work suggests his account of “affect” is not as straightforward as he would have it. Deleuze’s account offers the idea “affect” can be a condition of disruption or abeyance in the formation of meaning, rather than being conditional on the cessation of movement alone. Like Krauss and Bois, this insists on a concern with the performance of objects in the real world, one that doesn’t retreat into the idealised potentiality of the virtual. Ironically, it is by acknowledging the object’s disruptive agency that the ideal of production is politicised, and the consumption of form is readied for scrutiny. For those working in digital oeuvre, this signals the need to return to an interest in the politics both in the design process and the reception of the object.