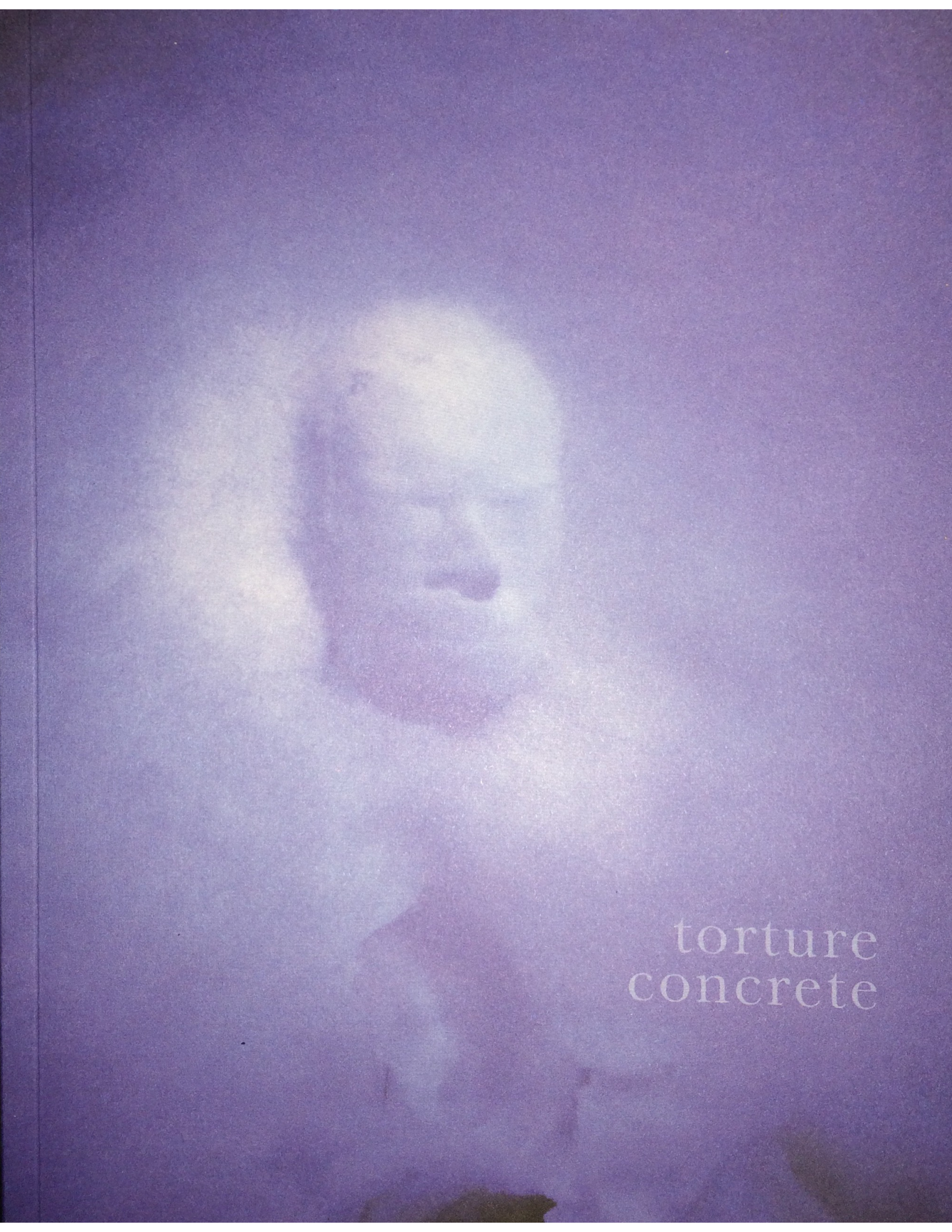

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Torture Concrete

Jean-Luc Moulène and the Protocol of Abstraction



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We might propose the following as an aphorism about abstraction and the history of contemporary art: "We've all heard of abstraction, but no one has ever seen one."

Historically the concept of abstraction as a specific operation can be traced back to the dialectic between form (mathematics) and sensible matter (physics). The complex interfusions of this particular dialectic were responsible for both conjoining and disjoining philosophy, art and science. It is in the cauldron of these fields of thought that the concept of abstraction has taken shape and acquired a singular definition and content, without which one cannot speak of it. The concept of abstraction in the history of art is indeed the extension of this singular definition. Yet under the influence of the self-reflexive history of art, it has transformed to such an extent that one can no longer, without great difficulty, trace it back to its constitutive gesture or

make sense of it in relation to what abstraction as a specific procedure signifies and entails. Lacking both a link to its conceptual genealogy outside of the domain of art and a sufficient correspondence to its specific and proper content, abstraction not only risks triviality in theory but also caprice in practice. In this sense, more experiments in abstraction do not enrich its history nor diversify its space; they only expose the impoverishment of said history and further trivialize its concept.

Against the backdrop of this contemporary self-reflexive history, and carefully distinguishing himself from it, Jean-Luc Moulène practices abstraction in a long-forgotten tradition in which the procedure of abstraction has evolved as a force of thought that rends matter and gives the inert a noetic thrust that determines the trajectory of thought and imagination. This tradition, which goes far beyond the contemporary history of abstract art, is nothing other than the history of thought developing tools and technologies required for its self-transformation, both at the level of its general structure and at the level of enabling particular modes of thought (of which art is one). Moulène's singular position derives from the fact that he undertakes the labor of abstraction outside of the contemporary history of art, despite being fully aware of this history and pursuing his work within the domain of art. Rather than conforming to the contemporary history of abstraction in art, Moulène perpetuates and reconstructs that consequential moment where abstraction is not only born out of the unity of philosophy, science and art, but also aims at the unity of all modes of thought. If abstraction in contemporary art is a part of that self-reflexive history that contributes to the isolation of art from other fields of thought and from the popular imagination, then Moulène's work should be understood as a genuine struggle against this self-inflicted sequestration. In the broadest possible sense, Moulène's project is an attempt to link art back to different modes of thought; at the same time, it is an integrative project that adamantly and systematically refuses to resort to the kinds of pre-packaged

approaches to theory and interdisciplinarity characteristic of the contemporary art world's curatorial and art-historical practices. It remains staunchly contemporary by both resisting the idea of an artistic project as a totalized body of work and refusing to shape itself according to the latest theory or idea deemed 'contemporary'.

It is by reactivating abstraction as a vector of disjunction and unity of art, philosophy and science that Moulène, from within the domain of art, gestures toward the most consequential moment—that of the unity of all modes of thought. This move toward a synthesis of disparate modes of thought, while recognizing their respective sovereignty and internal exigencies, has at once a global and a local import. From a local perspective (from the viewpoint of art as a local mode of thought), it turns Moulène's project into a meaningful resistance against the increasing professionalization of art as an 'applied honorific' that justifies the effective financialization of art and encourages an abjectly opportunistic relation to theory as a packaging template. From the perspective of the global, it entails the diversification of the space of abstraction specific to each local domain (for example, art or philosophy) by other modes of thought. Yet this is a diversification or broadening that overextends neither the capacities of art nor the conceptual and abstract resources of one field such as science into the artistic domain. The diversification of the space of abstraction, accordingly, is an emancipative operation as such insofar as it counteracts the increasing regression of domains of thought into bastions of self-chronicling histories and conceptual segregation. In acting against this regression, it thus impedes the perpetuation of local myopias in different guises.

Just as abstraction, according to Charles Sanders Peirce, signifies the precondition for the differentiation of the universal sign to its local contexts and the subsequent complex (i.e. non-additive) universal integration of all local contexts, the unity of all modes of thought denotes the productive passage from thought as such to its different

modal instantiations.[1] Abstraction constitutes the backbone of this passage: it strives neither for the fragmentation of thought nor for the totalization of different modes of thought. It is that liberating yet fully procedural exercise through which thought bootstraps itself from the realm of primitive intuitions and fixed spaces toward increasingly complex forms and transitives for the mobilization of itself. Here the term 'exercise' should be understood in the double—although strongly correlated—sense of an internal tendency of thought and also a method whose augmentation coincided with the anticipation and eventual rise of modernity. By regarding abstraction as that which constitutes the passage between local and global moments of thought, rather than as a process at the service of a particular instantiation of thought or the product of a narrow history, Moulène moves toward a conception of art that is possible only within, and in the service of, the synthetic schema of the unity of all modes of thought. Indeed, by seeing the consequentiality of art—its resources and tools for abstraction—within a much broader differential-integral horizon of thought, and by perpetually resisting the capture of art's significance by a particular history or by the self-reflexive norms of the contemporary art world, Moulène occupies a special position in the history of contemporary art. The implications of this position for emancipation and resistance establish Moulène as an artist for whom art as a mode of thought is consequential precisely because art is not an applied honorific; that is to say, it is consequential because it is not *intrinsically* or *spontaneously* consequential. Instead, its consequentiality is the fruit of its being in a specific transit between local and global moments of thought, one that liberates new spaces for the self-transformation of thought by concurrently diversifying and calibrating its particular activities and functional roles in the form of canonical systems for the exercise and control of abstraction.

I. Protocols of Cruelty

Abstraction is the order of the formal cruelty of thought. In its most trivial and unsophisticated form it involves pure mutilation: amputating form from the sensible matter. In its most complex—that is, most veritable—instances, it is the concurrent organization of matter by the force of thought, and the reorientation of thought by material forces. It is the mutual penetration and destabilization of thought and matter according to their respective regulative and controlling mechanisms. Anyone who does not recognize and embrace the formal cruelty of thought is not fit for the labor of abstraction. Anyone who is not suited to the labor of abstraction cannot liberate thought from its idleness and from its oppressive determination by its own present image i.e. what it is or what it is supposed to be.

Despite their diversity, Moulène's works are unified by an undergirding principle: the formal cruelty inherent to the procedure of abstraction, or what in Moulène's own lexicon are called *protocols*. Abstraction in this sense is not simply a theme, a technique or a style, but an evolving protocol that enables thought to see the image of itself from the perspective of a matter that implacably stalks it. It is a protocol for the diversification or ramification of one single term (an observable or a concept) into its contexts or local instantiations through the qualitative compression of information and the composition of new forms of organization of space. To this end, the aim of abstraction becomes twofold: both an optimal approach to a unitary phenomenon or a concept by way of its compressed instantiations, and the integrating compression of multiple observables or constituent data into a single abstract entity that preserves their invariant traits (i.e. isomorphisms, internal symmetries, etc.). Both diversification into compressed instantiations (groups or categories) and compression into unitary abstract data are employed as methods for the organization of information, the simplification of processing, ordering, the diversification of thought processes, increasing the possibilities of

synthesis (since abstraction retains generalities which can glue diversities back together) and furnishing the different contexts of a unitary or single term with different purposes. The latter operation allows one to discover or invent new roles, purposes or tasks for a unitary phenomenon or concept whose functional roles—its possible range of activities or contextual pragmae—are otherwise hidden, unknown or undeveloped.

What undergirds and drives the system of abstraction is the ambition of thought to liberate itself from the tyranny of the here and now, which is represented as thought's attachment to a particular material substrate, a specific intuition or a limit posed by imagination. But in order for thought to liberate itself from material entrapment, it must utilize and manipulate the material that holds sway over it. The same thing goes for the imagination and for intuitions of time and space. Rather than dispensing with the resources that they provide for thought, thought must break away from their restrictions by finding a renewed relation to them—a destabilized and non-equilibrial relation. Through this instability, thought raises itself to a superior plane of stability or dynamic formation before once more inciting new disturbances in its relation to its environment. However, thought cannot destabilize its relation to whatever hinders it without first destabilizing its relation to itself—that is to say, unbalancing its unitary formation, its uncompressed homogeneity. In other words, thought cannot effectively employ the cruelty of abstraction until and unless it exercises cruelty against itself. This is where thought adopts as its own the protocols of cruelty that lie at the basis of abstraction.

By perturbing its homogeneity and provoking disequilibrium in its unitary field, thought branches out into its own compressed instantiations (philosophy, art, science...). By branching out into its specific local domains, thought gains a noetic propulsion otherwise impossible from the perspective of an equilibrial homogeneity, since from now on, each local instantiation of thought furnishes thought with

a new functional role or range of designated activities. Each trajectory of thought is indeed a tendency in the system of thought that simultaneously sheds and develops new intellectual habits. Whereas stable homogenous thought is held captive to its own indivision and remains too general for the scope of any specific task whatsoever, local instantiations of thought—the products of thought's division of itself by upsetting its formation—count as designations of thought for evolving tasks whose objectives are as yet largely unknown precisely because they are free of any manifest telos. Only by equipping itself with spectra of various tasks and functional roles is thought able to approach a reality bereft of any telos, but also to cumulatively escape the order of natural causes. As thought devises new protocols of self-disturbance, it further canalizes and diversifies its internal dynamic tendencies as new local fields of thought. In doing so, it expands its multi-modal friction upon reality.[2] Accordingly, the transformation of thought can be delineated in terms of its configurational structure, or of the geometrical-dynamic relations between its tendencies and local fields.

The greatest merit of Moulène's work is that he is perhaps the only living artist whose entire project is systematically devoted to changing the transformative dimension of thought by manipulating and disturbing the general configuration of its structure—that is, the relation between its tendencies and local instantiations. For him, the task of art is rediscovered not in its ostensible autonomy but in its singular power to rearrange and destabilize the configurational relations between parameters of thought, parameters of imagination and material constraints that structure and parameterize the cognitive edifice. It is this configurational instability that allows for the transition of thought to a new stage by widening its scope of synthesis (i.e. the differentiation and integration of thought). However, the evolving task of art can never be entirely approached from within art itself as a particular mode of thought, but only in the context of the general structure of thought that makes such a task possible and renders it

consequential in terms of the role it plays for the transformation of thought. This is where, by approaching the task of art in terms of the self-transformative capacities and opportunities of thought—its propensity to systematically be cruel to itself, to violently rise above what determines it—Moulène makes two consequential moves: Firstly, he attempts to redefine the consequentiality of art in terms of what makes the task of art possible and legitimizes such a task within a much broader context. Secondly, by approaching the designated task of art by way of the general configuration that enables such a task (i.e. the positive destabilizing-stabilizing loop through which thought finds new answers to perennial questions of 'what to think' and 'what to do'), Moulène seeks to outline new objectives for art and to revise its task.

The entire task of thought is to redefine its functional roles and cumulatively liberate itself from the grip of any external cause that determines it and any telos that limits its functional ascension. A local field of thought—be it art or philosophy—that does not reinvent its task in order to adapt to this general goal has no justification whatsoever for its existence. Just as biological evolution has no tolerance for the lack of functional adaptation, the functional evolution of thought has no patience for a mode of thought that refuses to rise to the status of the noetic structure that supports it. A specific mode of thought that does not raise itself to the general status of thought is obsolete and will be weeded out by the very thought that once enabled it.

By appropriating the general schema of abstraction as an operation through which thought can destabilize its relation with its present image, and through which the designated task of art as a local mode of thought can also be synchronized with the general status of thought, Moulène turns abstraction into a universal protocol. It is this protocol that unites the seemingly disjointed variations of Moulène's work. By reanimating the formal cruelty of thought—its propensity to disturb and mobilize itself by simultaneously intruding upon

matter and inviting the intrusion of the material upon itself—within each instance of his artistic production, the protocol becomes the very evolving theme of Moulène's work, which refuses to settle down as a finished subject matter.

What Moulène calls "protocol" when describing his *modus operandi* in making art is a performative system or germ of procedurality. It is a thought-manual furnished with materially influenced behaviors and evolving logics of operation. It is called protocol insofar as it governs the artist's conduct according to the entanglements between (normative) laws of thought, (representational) laws of imagination and (dynamic-natural) material laws. To follow protocol is to be prepared to change one's approach in accordance with how interactions of matter and thought develop and how the space of abstraction is reorganized and diversified. In other words, the protocol offers new choices of disequilibrium for the entanglements between thought, imagination and the material.

Since the protocol represents the ramifying transits between thought and matter, following the protocol signifies a search for integrity in variation and for opportunities to partake in variations on the basis of their underlying invariances. In this context, Moulène's approach to artmaking as 'following protocols'—acting according to the entanglements between laws of thought, laws of imagination and laws of matter—turns into an exercise in 'integration through extreme variations'. While the first register of this variability appears in the thematic diversity of Moulène's work (a multitude of objects), its true expression lies in the capture of the formal cruelty of thought by different configurations of the protocol—that is to say, by various entanglements between thought and matter.

The knot, the body, the head, the hole, the noose and the sealed surface are different instantiations of the same generative principle of formal cruelty through which thought does something to the material in order for the material to forcefully imprint its dynamic

influences upon thought. The protocol, accordingly, displays both the variable and invariable aspects of this generative cruelty through which thought and matter develop new opportunities for disturbing one another. Each instance of this cruelty contains a manipulation of matter by thought and a twisting of thought by matter. The mutual perturbation opens a new of field of action or practice before the artist. This is a field that obeys the logic of dynamic systems discovered by Henri Poincaré and expounded on by the likes of René Thom and Gilles Châtelet: Proceeding becomes a matter of following a new choice of disequilibrium that opens up a new path or transit, and with that new constraints which bring into view new affordances of action. The freedom of the artist, in this sense, is the compulsion to follow the chain of evolving protocols, to arrive at new choices of disequilibrium (freedom of alternatives), to tackle their exclusive sets of constraints (freedom through rules) and ultimately, to single out and adopt affordances for new allowable actions out of these constraints (positive freedom as the freedom to do something).

Protocols are not deliberately composed sets of instructions, they are not simply arbitrary rules enforced by the artist to develop a personal formalism or to boost and/or direct creativity. Instead, they are autonomous rules of conduct that govern and shape the artist's interaction with materials both theoretically and technically. In a sense, what Moulène calls protocols are generic names for embodied procedures that demand changes of approach, perspective and even techniques of manipulation depending on how the interactions between thought and matter evolve and ramify. Protocols, in this sense, oppose the naive intentionality whereby the artist deliberately imposes a set of constraints and rules of action on his practice. They are rather, directives and cues for how to proceed according to the evolving rules of engagement between thought and matter.

One furnishes the black box of matter with the force of thought disguised as virtual observer or a truncated imitation of the thinking

subject. Thus endowed, the black box constrains the mobility of thought by the intrinsic constraints of matter over which the subject has no hold. The resulting product is a space of tension between thought and material constraints, logical implications and real implications, habits of thinking and dehabituating tendencies of matter. The task of abstraction in this scenario is to liberate the virtual subject—the designated force of thought—from the trap of the material. But this liberation is conducted precisely by utilizing the resources of the material, with the aid of its tendencies, properties and parameters, that determine and govern the behavior of the material system and, correspondingly, constrain the dynamic of thought, forcing it to revise its formation and to triangulate new affordances for conception and action.

By suspending the role of ideas and self-imposed rules of the artist and replacing them with protocols, Moulène turns artistic activity into a process of partaking in the cruelty of thought. The catastrophic rearrangement of the stable correlations between understanding, imagination and embodiment, their respective laws and constraints, opens up an amplified field of ambiguity. This, a space where the general configuration of thought and its particular modes, noetic disturbances and material disturbances, geometry and physics, logical implications and real implications, thought experiment and material manipulation, disembodied nous and embodied nature, internal and external exist *side by side* (*ambi-*). But this lateral coexistence does not signify a state of indeterminate correspondence between the sides or an relativist equivocation. The activation of the field of ambiguity requires a prioritization of one side over the other, a controlled unbalancing of sides that incites revolutions in the order of understanding and demands new decisions with regard to the choice of orientation and new strategies for the stabilization of thought, moving to a higher order of equilibrium.

The field of ambiguity that the protocol organizes is a torture upon the structure of thought, and specifically that of understanding, in that it is a coercion to articulate the unarticulated by breaking with the basic intuitions of understanding and the entrenched images of thought. The bilateral influence of thought and matter upon one another in the guise of what thought does to matter and what matter does to thought is in fact the violation of stationary abstractions through which the origin and destination of thought are imagined. The generative ambiguity that the protocol engenders irredeemably confounds the spatial clichés of understanding: Does thought come from outside of the subject or from inside? Where is nature in relation to thought, at its center or at its periphery? Where is the density of thought greater, in the subject that thinks it or the object that can transform thought into a thing? What the protocol inaugurates is an all-encompassing field of disturbance—the generative ambiguity, the enveloping tension of being side by side, x beside y—that violates all intuitions of inside and outside, left and right, center and periphery. A thought that has been freed of such intuitions is a thought ready to burst open in hitherto unimaginable directions.

There is something peculiarly cruel and uneasy about the ambiguity that the procedural framework of abstraction—the protocol—establishes between thought and matter, understanding and nature, the subject and the object, the artist and his production. Not only does it deprive thought of the naive intuitions through which it parochially sees and transforms itself; it also makes thought enter into unsettling entanglements with precisely that which it seeks to escape. Moulène has a name, or more accurately, a configuration for this perplexing ambiguity, the figure of cruelty disincarnate: the knot.

II. A Point in the Flesh

In its most rudimentary or perhaps least consequential form, abstraction is the cutting of form from matter. It is quantitative compression through the taking away (*apheresis*) of determinations. It is a primitive cruelty that mutilates or deprives the sensible. By imposing arbitrary rules, one can both take away and add determinations, rendering something abstract or sensible. A mathematical form purged of sensible residues can be reintegrated within the physical order through the addition (*prosthesis*) of determinations. Therefore, the reversibility of the process attests to its arbitrary and unconstrained nature. No matter how sophisticated the rules of the geometer, no matter how meticulous the formalist rigor of the artist, abstraction in this sense is a product of capricious deliberations and the poverty of thought. It is possible to abstract in such a manner because the rules of removal and addition of determinations are fundamentally arbitrary and are not governed by intrinsic or real constraints. But more importantly, abstraction as the pure removal of determinations is possible because it is the fruit of a naive intuition: the assumption that, in removing determinations from the sensible matter by the force of thought, both thought and matter remain neutral, unscathed. In other words, the assumption that when thought acts upon sensible matter, sensible matter does not influence or act upon thought. The inertness of matter together with the idealized freedom of thought from all material or external influences then justify the removal or addition—abstraction or prosthesis—of determinations according to the rules, deliberations and decisions of the artist, the philosopher or the geometer.

The prevalent power and complexity of this type of abstraction, whether in art or philosophy, is the marker of its paramount ineffectuality. Just as it takes no effort to steal from a corpse, there is no art in robbing dead matter of its determinations. It is against this model of abstraction as the common poverty of thought that Moulène reactivates abstraction in the form of an embodied thought experiment

guided by the combined laws of thought, imagination and physical matter. This is abstraction as the site of lateral influences, of thought and matter positioned side by side as counterweight-compensation devices that unbalance the total equilibrium of the system in order to carve out new possibilities of orientation and organization. In cutting out a pound of flesh from the sensible, matter penetrates thought. Abstraction then becomes the art of rendering intelligible the mutual perturbations of thought and matter by organizing the space through which their respective forces are expressed. As we shall argue, Moulène's knot is a generative schema—a protocol—inherent to and at the core of the following embodied thought experiment.

Suppose a mass of completely opaque fluid, a liquid black box whose internal behavior is entirely unknown to us. The thought experiment begins by disturbing the totality of the system of the fluid. We excise and remove a part or volume V of the system S using the force of thought. This is the equivalent of rudimentary abstraction as the removal of determinations. Once part of the fluid is removed by thought, a virtual site opens up, an amplified space pregnant with all sorts of influences and disturbances because it shares its boundary with the remaining part of S. The virtual site can be symbolized as v, its boundary or interface with S as ∂v. The virtual site v is the destabilized or amplified counterpart of V. Yet there is no correspondence of form between v and V. Hence abstraction begins by circumventing the cliché of a deep isomorphism between the original and the abstracted that has always fascinated artists and classical geometers.

As part of the fluid is displaced and the virtual site inhabited by the force of thought is opened up within the system, the rest of the fluid of the system S attempts to flow into the empty site to fill in the vacuum. The system's struggle to regain stability is registered as pressures of fluid or lines of forces that penetrate the virtual site of thought along different points of connection between v and S: $S \rightarrow \partial v$. The displacement of the fluid by thought, the creation of a virtual site

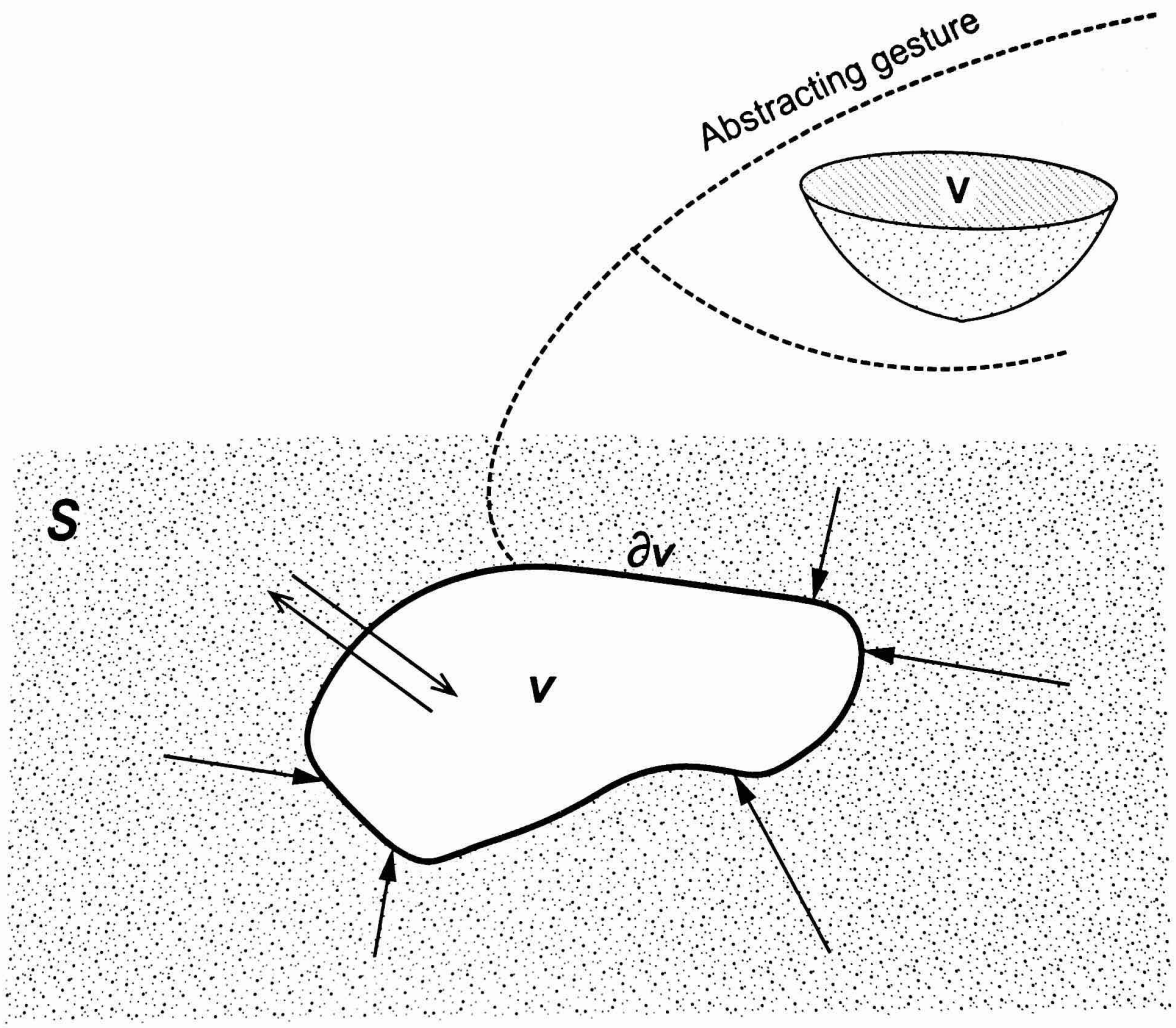


Figure 1. Abstraction as a thought experiment with reciprocal influences between the intelligible and the sensible, rules of thought and material behaviors.

by excision or local disturbance, is a germ of abstraction. But whereas in abstraction as a process of pure removal, thought and sensible matter remain untouched by each other precisely because they are treated in isolation from one another, in abstraction as a virtual removal of determinations, thought and matter can no longer be treated in isolation. Every removal or excision exercised by thought opens a site that exhibits the lines of intrusion of the material. Abstraction can no longer be subordinated to arbitrary and self-imposed rules of the geometer or the artist because the abstracted can only be addressed and generated on the basis of the entanglements between laws of

thought (virtual excision) and laws of matter (intrinsic material constraints) deployed side by side and in the state of a fragile equilibrium. Abstraction strives to overturn this equilibrium by alternating between the forces of thought and the forces of matter, the intelligible and the sensible, and then capturing the new formation or variation in a higher state of stability before resuming the process by inventing new strategies of destabilization. This is how abstraction takes shape, as a program of transcendental torture par excellence through which thought expands its frontiers. For Moulène, each art object (be it a geometrical figure or a human body, a noose or a nude) captures a variation or a phase of this transcendental torture, hypostatizing the unnerving tipping point between the disincarnating faculties of thought and the incarnating powers of matter.

The entanglement between laws of thought and material behaviors expresses the mutual perturbation of thought and matter. The virtual excision v, or the site of abstraction, is a place for rendering intelligible this entanglement, but also for extracting new degrees of intelligibility through the generative ambiguity that such entanglement conditions. The effectuation of the site of abstraction v is only possible at the cost of activating, or more accurately accentuating, forces of the material system S that envelope v so as to permeate its interior. By highlighting forces that are otherwise inactive in the state of equilibrium, abstraction accordingly uses the resources of a material in order to render it intelligible. These are the forces qua intelligible components of the system which attempt to flow back into the vacuum—or the virtual excision, the site of abstraction—and fill it, thereby bringing the system to the state prior to the disturbance caused by the force of thought. In this respect, the intrusive forces of the material system are articulated as the very components of its intelligibility. In this scenario, the mutual perturbation of thought and matter—v and S—is then expressed in the guise of forces articulated at the points of connection between the site of abstraction v and the material system S ($S \rightarrow \partial v$). The process of abstraction becomes

the very process of articulating these forces by organizing the space through which they are effected and exert their influence upon the site excised by thought.[3] The controlled organization of space as a precondition for the articulation of the unarticulated and the extraction of intelligibility marks the advent of geometry. Since the sense of space is not a-priori given, geometry begins as a system for organizing space as a prerequisite for the articulation of intelligibility. Moulène's rediscovery and employment of the geometrical approach is by no means an accident or an arbitrary—even a creative—choice. It stems from the very the logic of abstraction, the very protocol that he committedly follows no matter where it takes him.

For Moulène, abstraction can only be grasped as the mutual perturbation of thought and matter. Correspondingly, the site of this mutual perturbation can be understood by way of the articulation of forces activated by thought and occasioned by the material domain. The diversification and expansion of the space of abstraction is only possible by the organization and reorganization of the space through which these forces can be articulated. Each spatial configuration of forces delineates a new grasp of space through which the material domain can be rendered intelligible and the horizon of thought can be expanded and reshaped. If the process of abstraction amplifies the mutual perturbation of thought and matter, new spatial configurations of force highlight different alternatives for arriving at new modes of disturbance. But how can forces expressed at each point of connection between S and v be articulated by different spatial configurations (of $S \rightarrow \partial v$)? To answer this question, Moulène conducts a new embodied thought experiment. The result of this thought experiment is the birth of the knot as that weightless device of disturbance or torture through which the cruelty of thought spreads like a contagion, first against itself and then against whatever else it comes into contact with.

Imagine a truncated man, a subtle agent α endowed with a minimal subjectivity that simulates human behavior. This agent is stationed in the virtual site that was previously cut out by the force of thought. The agent's task is to study the behavior of the system by grasping different spatial configurations through which forces—that is, components of the behavior of the material system—are articulated. The agent is therefore a simulated being that has embodied the site of abstraction *v*. It is assigned the task of rendering intelligible the components of the system—its forces—by way of grasping the forms of space through which these forces are assembled and effectuated. The subtle agent is the geometrical equivalent of the ghost in the machine or the spirit in the system. Now, rather than remaining the passive site of the material intrusion—as was previously the case with the virtual excision of abstraction *v*—the geometrical agent α begins to organize itself in such a manner that it can *behave as if it were a force of the material system S*.

Whereas the positioning of the site of abstraction or the virtual excision within the material domain was somewhat arbitrary and its location fixed and immobile, the agent that behaves as if it were a component of the material system (a force) sheds all residues of arbitrariness and immobility. For the agent α, the dimension of the site of abstraction is no longer important, precisely because the dimension of the excision is an arbitrary decision. In order to discard residues of any arbitrary decision in abstraction and also gain mobility, α contracts to zero-dimensionality; it contracts to a point so as to remove any other arbitrary point *of* and *inside v* (i.e. the arbitrary dimension of the excision). The agent or the ghost shrinks itself into a point in order to minimize the arbitrariness of abstraction and maximize the scope of the articulation of forces or the components of the material system through new forms of organization of space (i.e. geometrization).[4] Yet this is not an immobile point or an Archimedean vantage point through which the entirety of the material system can effortlessly be observed and rendered intelligible. Instead it is a generative

unit of thought attuned to forces and perturbations of the material system. Its entire objective is to put itself in place of the material force or the system component by generating further points and schemas of instability, thereby abstracting new configurations of space and orientation.

The generative point is the subtlest of thought's torture devices. It combines the simplest intuition of space with maximum operativity. The elementary is teamed up with a frightening mobility that blurs the line between productivity and destabilization, individuation of new forms of space and their destruction. The generative point can penetrate any material system with surprising efficacy. Once it bores through the flesh of sensible matter, the generative point can stir up revolutions of intuition, alienation, decision-making, and the uncovering of the possibility of this or that thought. Simple intuition combined with a tendency toward instability turns the point into an agent of disturbance whose one move in one orientation always also points to another orientation in thought, forcing the entanglements between thought, imagination and matter to reform and reorient themselves. The point, in this sense, is the unit of the cruelty of thought. It *behaves as if* it were a material component, it allows the force to animate and embody it, but in doing so it also brings about the possibility of a geometrization of the material kernel, the flesh of things. And although the generative point is initially engendered by thought as a virtual agent inhabiting the space of abstraction, it soon emerges as an entity with obscure alliances.

An act of thought is consequential only if its every move has cascading repercussions for the general configuration of thought. The point pretends to be a material component in order to render that material component intelligible, but this cunning game of impersonation implicates thought in a vast web of material complicities that fundamentally change the nature of thought in relation to itself and to the material domain. As the act of thought occupies a point of a material

system and pretends to be a component of it, the forces of the material system commandeer the act of thought as if they had been forces of thought all along. This is the underlying principle of the artist, philosopher or scientist's most unnerving moment—the experimentation in the embodiment of matter or nature and its impregnation with virtual thought parcels. The dislocating and disorienting experience

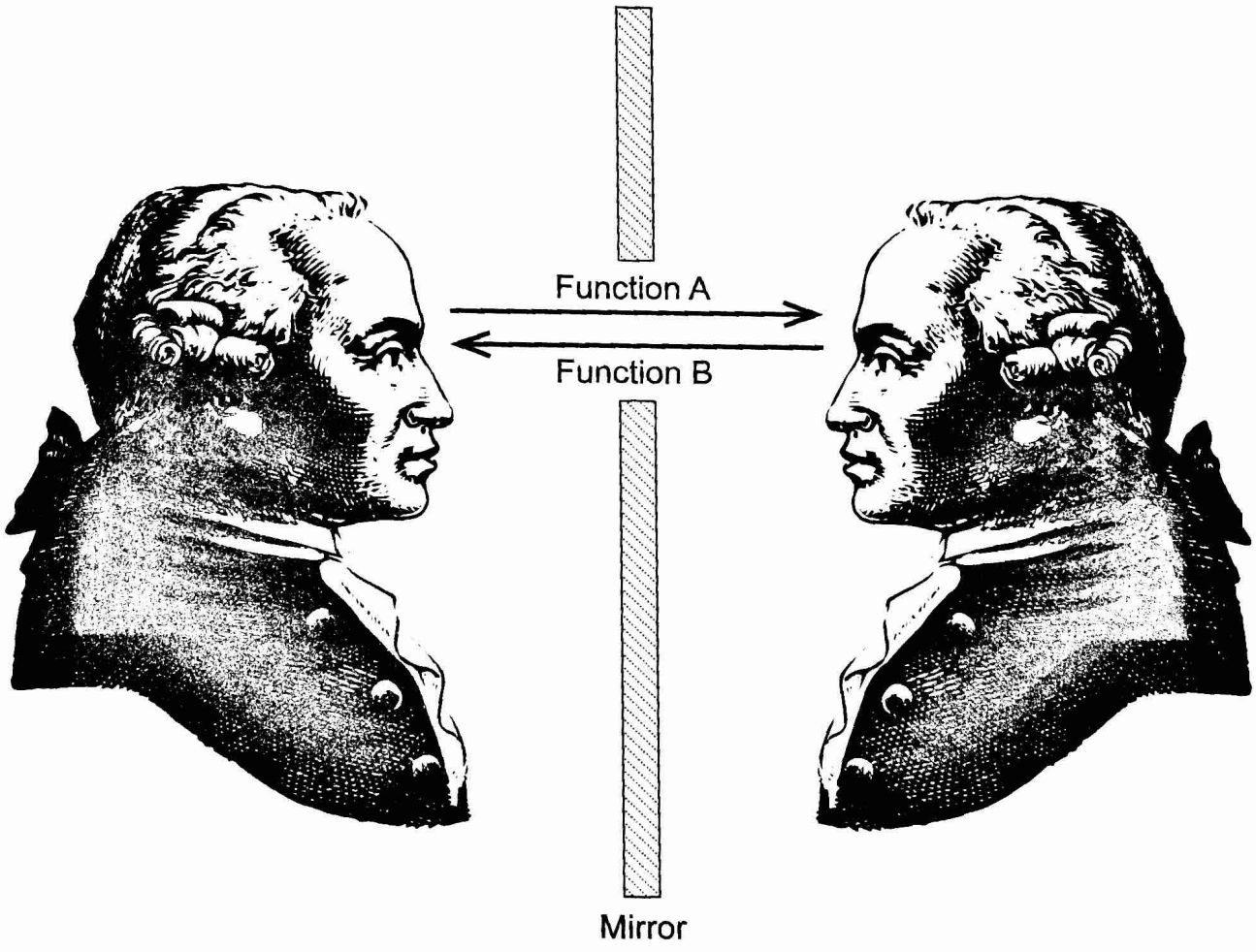


Figure 2. 'Adjoint Kant' thought experiment: By looking at the mirror, Kant incites the thing in the mirror to look back at him as Kant. The mirror operates as an adjunction of two reciprocating functions (⇄) that generate a symmetry between two exceedingly asymmetrical terms (Kant and the thing in the mirror, culture and nature, the abstracting gesture and material behavior). The symmetrizing adjunction brings two different terms under a single schema without equivocating between them. In so doing, it creates a fragile equilibrium that disorients thought, forcing it to dismantle, plank by plank, the worlds of appearances and accumulated intuitions.

it brings into existence is reminiscent of the effect produced as a result of playing with a mirror: In looking at the object or the thing in the mirror, it is the object or the thing in the mirror that looks at me *as me*. This adjoint formula (⇄) of mutually disturbing transitions can be expanded even further and recapitulated in terms of the process of crafting: In making x, it is x that makes me under the guise of me. This is the unbalancing moment that the point, as an agent of abstraction, instigates and the knot fully unravels. Rather than suppressing this terrifying moment, Moulène's entire effort is put towards the extraction of this moment into a protocol that must be perpetually underlined, its experience broadened and effects sharpened. The fundamentally and persistently disquieting dimension of his work is the rediscovery of abstraction as a force of thought which, by cutting into sensible matter, awakens a whole family of perturbing and unapprehended material forces and behaviors which are mirrored back to us as vaguely familiar objects or abstract geometrical constructs.

As a unit of instability and spatial productivity, the point can engender an entirely new array of spatial configurations of force qua components of material behaviors. The mobility of the point constructs a line, as a line is nothing but a point put into generative and orientational production. The surface is a line that has adopted the generative logic of the point. In the same manner, the solid is dynamically produced by a surface whose unit of operation is again a generative point. The generativity of the point is indeed the condition for its synthetic expansion or dilation. Without this generativity, it remains a part of dead space or inert matter, thus relapsing back into banal platitudes of free or subjectivist abstraction. But the goal is to overcome the inconsequential caprice of a thought deluded by naive intuitions of itself by liaising its noetic implications with the implications of the real, virtual designations of thought with mobilities of substance.

The agent of thought α that was previously contracted to a point can again be dilated to its initial position and then expanded even

further, but this time no longer under the arbitrary rules of abstraction but through the collusion and involvement of laws of thought and intrinsic constraints imposed by the material system. The extension of the point along an orientation (length, the field of a ruler), the equal dilation of the point in every direction (width, the field of a compass), the splitting of the point into oppositions of + and - (laterality, the field of a tuning fork), the dilation and replication of the point along an axis (axiality, the field of latitudes), the merger of the lateral and the axial (the field of a corkscrew)—these are various dilations of the generative point. Each schema is capable of articulating a specific family of force through forms of organization of space. Each is a device to disturb the peace of thought in respectively different ways. It takes, however, the synthesis of all variations of the generative point's dilation to produce the ultimate protocol of cruelty, the knot. The figure of the knot involves the whole of space: It is at

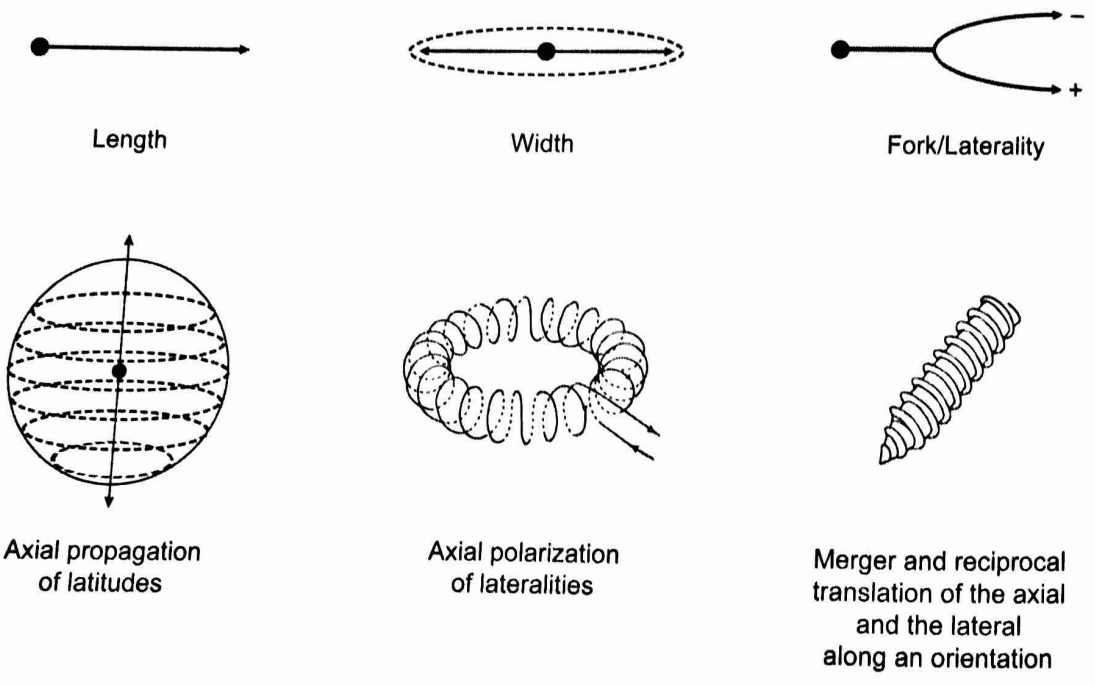


Figure 3. Various schemata for the dilation of the generative point and the progressive unlocking of new orientations, transitives and densities of space (from the low density of length to the high density of a screw).

ease with dilation and contraction from the sides (laterally) and along the axis (latitudinally), turning the dialectical power of polarities into enveloping movements around the sides (gyration) and subsequently abolishing the distance by propagating the ambiguous and mutually perturbing fields of sides or polarities along an orientation (axial translation of different latitudes). It is not simply an abstract element, a transit or a trajectory, it is a unified environment where all basic intuitions of space and relations between sides are undermined. The only relation that the knot endorses is the relation to itself, an act of linking to itself which passes through a perplexing coalition of different organizations of space and ambiguous interplays between sides (thought and nature, the intelligible and the sensible, the geometric and the substantial, etc.).

By encompassing the whole of space, by dissolving naive intuitions of space, location and place, and by combining the power of penetration and translation, orientation and allusion, the knot carries out a transcendental desanctification of space. Without this transcendental desanctification, thought's relation to itself and to nature remains the eternal prisoner of clichés of space, which impede and dampen the procedure of abstraction, the production of forms and the expression of intelligibility required for understanding. But above all, short of a transcendental desanctification of space, what is ultimately impeded is thought's ability for self-transformation. Since such an ability is maintained either by the amplification of understanding or the reformation of the general geometry of thought, namely, the configurational relations between the specific modes of thought (how they can influence and synthesize with one another, enhance and revise their roles with regard to their particular domains and the general structure that supports them). Both the understanding and the configurational structure are linked with forms of organization of space that play dominant roles in abstraction, qualitative organization of information, extraction of intelligibility and even the conduct of heuristics.

> By linking itself with itself, the knot refuses to be undone. It registers itself as a new intuition for a thought determined to transform itself by exposing itself to expressions of the intelligibility of the material domain, and by following new protocols of thinking wherein rules of thought and laws of nature collide as the latter imprint themselves on the former. What does it mean to behave like a knot? This is a question that compels Moulène to reinvent the birth of the knot as a protocol of maximum abstraction, that is, as the maximum cruelty of thought. It begins with a thought experiment conducted in the material realm whose basic gestures happen to be the driving principles of various, powerful physico-mathematical tools such as continuum mechanics and Cauchy's residue theorem.[5] As the thought experiment is fully immersed within the material system, it permits the abstracting force to assume material behaviors and a new generative schema otherwise unavailable to an isolated account of thought trapped in naive intuitions of itself. The thought experiment then continues by devising a point of instability that soon propagates in all manners of loops, spatial densities and mobilities. The dilation of the point now signifies the liberation of its productive space as well as the liberation of abstraction qua the charged entanglement between thought and matter, the intelligible and the sensible, the disembodied form and substantial space. But the dilation of the point—understood as the synthesis of its products, mobilities, densities and loops—marks the birth of the knot as contraction of space or as the blowing up of all transits conceived by the generative point.

As far as the protocol of the knot is concerned, one can contract space with an imaginary rope or blow up a mobile point, and in every case still produce a knot. For Moulène, what distinguishes a bronze knot from a glass knot is simply a matter of following the protocol along different densities of space: the imploded and the exploded, the contracted and the dilated. Whether generated by pulling a rope tight around a body to contract it laterally or blowing into a small mass to give it different breaths (latitudes), the knot, as Moulène realizes it,

is not produced by different methods of abstraction. It is the protocol of abstraction as such—the very kernel of it—at different levels of condensation and dispersion. From a bronze knot that faintly resembles a flower or a tall, slender metallic palm (*chamaedorea metallica*), to glass knots which vaguely display progressive primate cephalization, to heads cast by pouring cement into sewn and sealed masks like material experiments in personification, there is an invariant link that refuses to disappear but also refuses to make itself fully manifest. This invariant link is the knot as the protocol of abstraction embodied across different densities of space and fields of mobility.

The bronze knot takes form through the mobilization of transits and loops (realized by the contraction of a rope). Lengths give body to widths by lifting them, and lateralities twist lengths by polarizing widths. In this manner densities are produced and distributed, but also thickness and length are canceled by entwinements which bring different abstractions of space or heterogeneities under one single orientation or form of organization of space (for example, width and length, the lateral and the polar, and so on). The density thus produced functions as a token of productivity in transit that links the mass to volumetric variations ($\rho = dM/dV$).

Here the bronze object can no longer be seen through the trite concept of the positive or filler space, for it is the very expression of those knotted forces that organize and encompass the whole of space, banishing naive intuitions of the inside and the outside, and with them the shoddy equilibrium between negative space and positive space that grounds the space of classical composition in art. Just as a flower is embodied by the process of unfurling, the bulk of bronze receives its body from the dilations of a generative point (its density-making movements) as they open out the material quantity into morphodynamic variations. At the other extreme lies a reverse form of this process: The head is fabricated by pouring cement into masks. The cavity into which the cement is introduced operates as a site for this

inverse abstraction. The process of abstraction compresses different narratives of the mask (political, popular imagination) into a single abstract edifice which also happens to be its own concrete embodiment. The head is a maximally condensed knot where the surface of the mask—essentially the simplest form of a loop—demarcates the boundary of the knot. The condensation of the knot into its simplest form, a vacuum-loop interlace, enables a transposition or a sharp turn between the abstract and the concrete: The concrete becomes the bare abstract as the abstract becomes the corporeal. The loop of abstraction passes through both the abstract and concrete poles as it translates one into another.

Seen from the perspective of the knot as an invariant link and a device for the translation of asymmetrical terms, the concrete is only abstraction with a different degree of density and distribution of transitives than the abstract. Accordingly, the knot as a protocol establishes an inversion between the concrete and the abstract. What is most disturbing about this reversal is that, for Moulène, it brings about the possibility of libidinizing abstraction. The supposedly abstract is furnished with the carnal resonances of the concrete and the figurative, while the concrete or the corporeal is tinged with the disturbing insinuations of the abstract. Thanks to the dilating-contracting qualities of the knot that make this reversal and twist possible, Moulène can fully alternate between his craft and modes of operation: between *art corporel* and mathematics, between Viennese actionism and industrial design, between art's allusive potencies and design's practical possibilities. But the logic of the knot does not allow one to directly approach one pole rather than the other. The terms of each pole are always dictated by the other side: *art corporel* by geometry, industrial design by Viennese actionism, abstract allusions through design possibilities. Through the logic of the knot, it is finally possible to put the formal cruelty of thought back into the domain of the carnal, either endowing the transcendental torture of abstraction with a flesh and a fully-fledged libidinal system, or letting the corporeal exude the

abstract unease of a geometrical body art. The knot is an abstract torture made flesh. But flesh—the head, the concretized mask, the Amsterdam nude—is a knot fattened with different densities of abstraction.

It is always possible to make art a site of conflict. But tension risks the banality of dialectical sufficiency and myths of emergence, the constant conflation of logical contradiction and real opposition, and equally, the articulation of real oppositions without any grasp of the rules of the concept that map such oppositions. The proliferation of tensions in the name of novelty or dialectical materialism's "road to truth" (Lukács) is as dubious as maintaining a stifling inertia in the name of equilibrium, or perhaps even more so as it engenders illusions of transformation without understanding, novelty without intelligibility.[6] As a former collaborator of *art corporel* and Viennese actionism, Moulène is aware of the pitfalls of disequilibrating perturbations and libidinally fatuous tensions. What is consequential, but also most demanding, is to turn the system of conflict and tension into a set of technologies for diversifying and linking understanding and action. Perturbation is only an opportunity when it forces a judgement in relation to a new orientation in understanding and action. The knot is the figure of such a tension, whose every passage, crossing or twist encompasses a new entanglement between understanding, material constraints and modes of producing intelligibility.

The consequentiality of any tension—whether cognitive, libidinal or political—rests on its potential for abstraction, that is to say, on the excitation and stabilization of new forms of collusion between understanding, effective articulation of intelligibility (forms of organization of space, quantification and modes of qualitative compression of information) and material behaviors. But abstraction itself is a space of maximum tension. This is, however, a tension that precedes any libidinal, social or political narrative, but can nevertheless be implemented and set in motion in different contexts according

to their specific rules and requirements. It is precisely the tension of abstraction that Moulène seeks to highlight and reactivate within any framework or narrative, be it political, libidinal or mathematical.

Walking through a display of Moulène's objects is akin to an abstract reenactment of Octave Mirbeau's political allegory, *The Torture Garden* (1899): The garden is replaced by the ramificatory landscape of integration in variation, bodies turn out as knots at different stages of unfurling, the communicative and rhetorical dimensions of allegory are discarded in favor of strategies of abstraction, and finally political and libidinal tensions are overshadowed by tensions inherent to protocols of abstraction through which thought develops its compulsion to abstract. Yet, at its basis, the compulsion to abstract is a conduit for thought's compulsion for self-transformation, the cruelty necessary to elevate thought's general status and liberate new noetic tasks by any means possible. Thought's integration of transcendental cruelty as its internal principle emblematizes its determination for self-transformation, for thought's abstract cruelty is a disturbance of the taciturnity of nature and a gesture toward making a difference in a world marked by permanent indifference. But in order for thought to make a difference in the world, it must first make a difference in itself—and this is where abstraction finds its true vocation.

Notes

1. For more details regarding the definition of abstraction in terms of the sign see, Charles Sanders Peirce, *Logic Notebook*, Houghton Library, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass., http://pds.lib.harvard.edu/pds/view/15255301.

2. See René Thom, *Mathematical Models of Morphogenesis* (Chichester: Ellis Horwood, 1983); Wolfgang Wildgen, *The Evolution of Human Language: Scenarios, Principles, and Cultural Dynamics* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing, 2004); and Lorenzo Magnani, *Abductive Cognition: The Epistemological and Eco-Cognitive Dimensions of Hypothetical Reasoning* (Berlin: Springer, 2009).

3. The total force acting on v is the combination of gravitational forces and traction forces applied along the surface of ∂v. The latter can be articulated by the integration of all action points where forces of S are applied along the surface or the curve ∂v, namely, the boundary that connects v to the inside of S. Traction forces cannot be adequately articulated without a method for evaluating integrals along this path. Augustin-Louis Cauchy's integral theorem allows for the development of sophisticated tools for the evaluation of the integrals along this path, or in a sense, the specific organization of space required for the articulation of traction forces.

4. The introduction of a subtle agent (the so-called daemon) or an infinitesimal entity into a system in order to enable the evaluation of the behavior of the system or a specific aspect of its spatial organization has been frequently practiced in both processes of discovery and proof. An ancient example of the use of a 'daemon of abstraction' to understand the behavior of the system is Archimedes' principle of buoyancy. In order to examine the purity of gold used in a votive crown, Archimedes imagines the crown being submerged in water. He then only 'virtually' removes the crown from water in order to avoid disturbing the actual state of water. Next, he virtually refills the imaginary hollow volume (the virtual site of abstraction) with a volume of water in the shape of the crown. Since the imaginary water-crown does not move, its weight is offset by the force of the surrounding water. The abstract principle extracted from this thought experiment is then applied to the real crown (previously removed by thought) which is now immersed back in water in its original position. From this, Archimedes concludes that the forces of surrounding water exerted on the actual crown equals the weight of

the displaced volume of water. This experiment would have been impossible had Archimedes not immersed his own body in a bathtub and put himself in the place of a volume of water, in effect turning himself into a 'daemon of abstraction' who follows a protocol composed of the rules of thought and behaviors of a material system. An example of delegating a virtual entity with the task of proof would be the proof of Cauchy's integral formula, where a virtual infinitesimal circle is introduced to a closed curve and then removed to enable the evaluation of the path integral along the closed curve.

5. The principle underlying continuum mechanics and Cauchy's residue theorem is the analysis of behaviors or the evaluation of path integrals for a specific region (representing a continuous material mass) in the Euclidean space by way of studying the space around points or material particles within these regions. Deformations, movements and transitions are studied through the abstraction of space around these points or referential coordinates. In a sense, the organization of space becomes a general way for the articulation of intelligibility of certain behaviors. To articulate, then, is to organize spatial configurations or forms of space through which intelligibility can be expressed. In the first stage, points are introduced into the system. Points express the function associated with the act of pointing, namely, a gesture aimed at perturbing the informational homogeneity of an equilibrial or epistemically opaque system. Precisely in the same manner of a hand marking a difference in space by pointing toward something, a point creates an opportunity to organize space by means of generating a rupture (a reference point, a difference, a designated location or an individuated state) in the system or the environment. Subsequently, the analysis of forms, configurations and opportunities of abstraction made possible by this designated rupture or perturbation serves to determine and study the behavior of the system. From this perspective, points allow for the functional decomposition of the system. Once forces or components of the system's intelligibility are highlighted or functionally distinguished, it is then possible to reintegrate these components by algebraic or geometrical methods. The spatial organization works as a basis for the functional reintegration of the system's components, and accordingly, the intelligibility of the system's behavior.

6. György Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1971), 1.

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