

## ***ParaSites: New Propositions***

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This research explores the potential of using behaviours and strategies of parasites as a model for sculptural propositions in the built environment and investigates how these interventions might resonate with architectural, urban, historical and socio-cultural issues. This paper presents a preliminary artistic intervention at a dilapidated edifice in Paris which has initiated this ongoing research. This is followed by a discussion of the theoretical framework that has evolved from our, originally rather intuitive, practical investigation. We then introduce two new artistic propositions which have been developed within the context of this research and debate to what extent they correspond with and/or elicit our theoretical ideas.

Keywords: site-specific, sculpture, parasite, sound, movement, architecture

### **Background**

This project has been sparked off by an artistic intervention in 2009 at a dilapidated edifice in Paris, the *Fondation Avicenne*, designed by architect Claude Parent in 1968. The building's "body" was constructed from top to bottom, suspended within an exterior "skeleton" of six colossal iron pillars - a particularity that retained our attention. Confronted with the monumental "dead" mass of the building, we thought about the behaviour of parasites infesting and profiting from a vulnerable body. We devised simple electromechanical "parasites" that we attached magnetically to the upper part of the iron pillars. With their "proboscis" the parasites prodded their "host", making the monumental architecture resonate in a subdued manner. The impacts also caused brief detachments of the parasites from the surface allowing them to slowly move downward along the pillars. The parasites were triggered according to an intuitively devised algorithm via a central computer. Our premise for the algorithm was to create an overall sonic and kinetic impression of organic life rather than reproducing any kind of authentic biological behaviour. Furthermore, the parasites followed the same top-to-bottom trajectory that had been conceived by the architect for the suspension of the building's body and, in this way, reunited the conceptual strength and the structural decay of the edifice in a descending movement. This, originally rather intuitive and specific project has given rise to numerous questions and new interests in our research.

We treat the term parasitism both literally and metaphorically, and are particularly inspired by Michel Serres' philosophical writing *The Parasite* (2007). Considering its different significations in French language (biological, social, static/noise), Serres uses the parasite to extrapolate ideas about human relations, society, history and communication while emphasising its destabilising and transformative powers. With this in mind, we are keen to explore the potential of using the polysemic notion of the parasite as an integrated conceptual framework and methodological tool to feed new sculptural interventions, and to investigate their impact on our relationship with the built environment (sonic, visual, structural, historical, ecological, symbolic and socio-cultural).

## **Methodology**

Our intervention at the *Fondation Avicenne* provides a useful illustration of how parasitic qualities can shape a sculptural proposition. It is conceivable that the tools and materials used in Paris might be reemployed in future interventions where new levels of “parasite/host integration” might be explored, e.g. information from an existing electronic network within a building might be relayed to the activity of the parasites. This formal “evolution” would correspond metaphorically with the biological evolution of parasitic species from “surface grazing” to “burial in the host body” (Combes, 2005, p. 26). However, the overall idea of this research is not to develop the specific manifestation in Paris into a generic form, adaptable to all kinds of locations, but instead to consider an appropriate parasitic approach for each new location. With regards to both sculptural form and our comportment as artists we will take resource in the richness of parasitic qualities - such as inconspicuousness, integration, expansion, interference, mobility, opportunism - in order to “profit” from the vast realm of potential architectural hosts (their physical properties, histories, current functions and urban contexts) as well as adapt to different socio-cultural and economic situations for the interventions, e.g. exhibition budget, relationship with both organisers and public, etc. Importantly, to remain within the realm of the parasite, different qualities will have to be considered in combination. For instance, the faculty of expansion is generally coupled with a relative smallness of the parasite.

## **Context**

“For me, the site should be an integral part of the oeuvre and the oeuvre dependent of the site. This theory is fundamentally opposed to the idea that art has to be autonomous” (Daniel Buren cited by Chanson, 2007, p. 23). The intention expressed by Buren and other contemporary artists, e.g. Levèque, Nishi, Rousse, Serra, Whiteread, to sculpturally enter into dialog with the specificities of a site and to establish an integral relationship between artwork and location, provides an important contextual setting for our approach. With *ParaSites* we attempt to accentuate this integral relationship by explicitly adopting behaviours and strategies of the parasite – a true specialist of integration - and to invest architectural “hosts” on several levels (formally, conceptually, technically...). In the natural world, the parasite adapts to the host in order to profit from it while remaining entirely dependent on it. There is no parasite without host and there is no site-specific sculpture without site. While a parasite is commonly considered to be harmful to its host, biological research shows that “as soon as associations arise between individuals of different species” a clear distinction between parasitism and mutualism (a perfectly equitable relationship) becomes almost impossible because in most cases the host also profits, to some extent, from its parasite (Combes, 2005, p. 18). In more general terms, Serres points out that “the parasite produces small oscillations of the system, small differences” and can force a “system” to new levels of complexities (Serres, 2007, pp. 190-193). Accordingly, by adapting to architectural particularities and intercepting given relations, our parasitic interventions will remain subtle “interferences” to the existing architectural “system” and might engender new perceptions and experiences of the “host”. In this respect our project also resonates with Poinot’s affirmation that “[...] the work in-situ takes from the real environment elements as divers as the architectural or natural setting or the traces and marks of events or activities. One of the ways in which the work in-situ operates on the real becomes apparent through the particular

effect in which the work or performance feeds back to this real from which it has taken an element” (Poinsot, 2008, translation by the authors).

## **Future Interventions**

Following the formalisation of a theoretical framework for this research, we were faced with an initial dilemma of concretising new parasitic forms. On the one hand, this was due to our continuing “attachment” to the intervention in Paris which corresponded exceptionally well with both our theoretical and practical ideas of a parasitic sculpture. On the other hand, we realised that without a specific site of intervention it actually seemed counter-intuitive to imagine new parasitic forms “in advance”. However, this situation has changed with a recent commission to conceive of a site-specific work for an immense WWII bunker in the port of Boulogne (France). The bunker is situated on an industrial wharf, separated from the city area by a large seawater basin, and is primarily visible from a busy coastal promenade at a distance of about 200 meters. To be more precise, the view from the promenade reveals nothing but the bunker’s rectangular façade (ca. 30m wide and 8m high), which has been screened off by metal sheeting some time after WWII. The metal sheeting is covered in a quasi *trompe-l’œil* painting of an industrial landscape, which crudely imitates the industrial surroundings of the port and suggests previous city planners’ intention to eradicate (the histories and memories associated with) the bunker by rendering it more or less invisible. It stands to reason whether this attempt can be deemed successful or whether the original concrete façade would not have been much less noticeable. Either way, the notions of inconspicuousness and ridding of an unwanted “guest” suggest a consideration of the bunker as a parasite within the host environment of the port. This view obviously fits well with our research project and provides a suitable opportunity of (conceptual) attachment. (Or, to put it inversely, our very preoccupation with *ParaSites* conditioned our approach towards the bunker and brought this very view to light.)

Whereas a parasitic understanding of the bunker seems interesting with regards to the theoretical considerations of our project, it appears, at first sight, contradictory in the context of a parasitic intervention that would treat the bunker as a host body. However, this is not at all the case because a “parasited parasite” (or the parasite as host) is frequently observed in biology and also coincides with Serres’ notion of “the parasitic chain” in which the “last [parasite] to come tries to supplant its predecessor” (2007, p. 4). Interestingly, the bunker has already been “parasited” by an enormous advertising board in the run up to the Football World Cup 2010. Here, the board was mounted on a huge support structure which had been attached to the bunker, using it like a plinth. The board and the support structure have since been removed but have left some (perforation) marks in the metal façade of the bunker. Taking resource in parasitic strategies, we consider these existing traces as indicators of the potentially weakest point in the “host’s defence system” and as guidance for our own intervention. In a first step we intend to highlight the existing perforation marks by putting yellow monochromatic lighting in the gap between the metal sheeting and the concrete wall of the bunker. This particular lighting is adapted to the host environment as it imitates the surrounding street lighting: “The parasite plays a game of mimicry. It does not play at being another; it plays at being the same” (Serres, 2007, p. 202). In a second step, we aim at further extending the existing perforation by means of “thermite”, a chemical compound capable of burning through the metal sheeting. The specific location of the bunker

(isolated and surrounded by water) and its physical structure (metal sheeting on concrete wall) provide a rare urban niche to realise this relatively dangerous type of intervention and the obvious allusion to a parasitic termite makes the chosen substance all the more appropriate. During a performative event at night the t(h)ermite, attached to predefined sections of the bunker's façade, will be ignited and burn (brightly) through the metal sheeting. These new traces of invasion will be illuminated by the aforementioned yellow lighting, rendering the spontaneous transformation permanently visible. To be more precise, the intended shape of the new perforation is based on a pictogram which depicts two persons lifting a box and indicates a heavy object. From a practical point of view, the pictogram is both relatively easy to create and "readable" from far away. For us – a French-German artist duo working on a German WWII bunker in France – the pictogram does not only evoke the physical weight of the bunker but, more importantly, its politico-historical heaviness and the need for a collective approach for dealing with this "heritage" in a sensitive way. With regards to our overall project, the violent attack by means of termite and the, arguably, positive or encouraging outcome that is produced echoes our dual understanding of the parasite, being both disruptive and transformative.

In the global presentation of *ParaSites* we have mentioned our intention to employ different strategies of parasitic implantation. One of the possibilities is to invest a space without invitation and/or permission. Often those spaces might be public, implying a certain degree of freedom of appropriation for citizens. Public space is easily accessible but that doesn't mean that it is authorised to intervene as one likes. Everybody knows that there are some limits and if the intervention exceeds a certain scope it becomes difficult to impose oneself without authorisation. All monumental artworks installed in public space are commissioned and consequently belong to an owner and benefit of legal protection. In the case of self-initiated artistic interventions the artwork imposing itself on the public domain remains the sole responsibility of the artist and doesn't benefit of any legal protection: a quasi outlaw situation. We are interested in this possibility of "hanging" our parasites "wildly" in the urban environment and have been looking for niches where our sculptures could find a material support to attach themselves and express their visual and sonic dimension by exploiting the context significantly. By prospecting our city of residence, Roubaix (France), we had the idea to attack secured residences, which have been provoking us for some time.

"An enclosure – gate, wall or fence – around the residence composed of tiny apartment blocks coquettishly arranged on impeccable lawn, surveillance cameras linked to monitors in each apartment and guardians present day and night: the package of 'secured' habitat is now flourishing on the property market in Toulouse" (Besset & Kremer, 1999, translation by the authors). This description is valid for most French cities which are growing through developing residential areas. Investors have to respond concretely to ambient problems of insecurity. It seems that "living together" is a completely spherical concept legitimising closed groups protected from exterior fluxes. We are faced with impassable fences and gates which can only be traversed by automobile bubbles equipped with a code. Access is restricted in order to separate, as much as possible, the "same" from the "different". This phenomenon implicates a shift in the notions of the private and the public. If we were to define private space as a place where what happens is nobody's business, then we now have a situation where what happens in public space is nobody's business. Actually, behind the door of "my home" is now "our home" and behind the

door of our home there is no public space, properly speaking, there are no communal roles to fulfil, there is only a transit area linking various enclosed sites, a no-man's-land, at best a dog's promenade. In a sense, the notion of the private is stretched to the society within the limit of the fences. However, we should rather refer to it as "communal individualism" because those people do not seek membership of a community but aspire to live behind fences which don't enclose their proper private space but which delimit, to their advantage, the "exterior public space".

This is a good starting point for our project. We consider the protective enclosures around residences as the new membranes of the architectural organs whose (traffic) arteries guarantee their autarky. A membrane's function is to filter, in one way or another, toxic substances and, indeed, the boundaries around residences are often filled with waste; plastics tangled up in fences and paper sent flying from rubbish bins left at the entrance gates. What an opportunity for *ParaSites* looking for a niche from which they are not too rapidly expelled.

With the image of membranal fences in mind, it seems pertinent to us to make them resonate. We imagine a tentacular sculpture of which each tentacle will attach itself to a bar of a fence. At their extremities, a modified mini-fan (the kind of gadget sold for cars, providing ventilation without having to open a window) is fixed in such a way that it strikes the metal bar and produces a sound. We have identified exterior public space as a mere passageway for car drivers and, as it happens, cars are containers of energy. All that is needed is to fit at the other end of our sculpture a cigarette lighter plug and the car drivers who might be tempted to activate the sculpture will be able to connect it to their car and "play" the protective fence.

In the 1980's, the "art of tuning" arrived in France. It was about personalising, or "preparing", one's car - a symbol for showing-off but also for the fight against serial monotony. Today, when we are proposing our parasitic sculpture *Tuning*, it is also a form of fight. Not anymore against serial monotony (which since has been fully integrated) but against public space being deprived of the public by neutralising the street like an enemy under the pretext of security. Finally, in contrast to the two aforementioned interventions, this project is not specific to a particular site but specific to a type of site, a particular situation which repeats itself almost identically at different places. Thus, our initial approach of parasitic sculptures adapting to the specificities of different sites has been transformed, here, into a proposition that responds to and profits from an increasing standardisation of urban space.

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