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"After Affect"

ABSTRACT: From the late 1980s to the late 2010s, a discourse of affect was advanced by various architectural theorists who aimed to account for the relationship between human beings and their environment and how things in the world appear to them as phenomena, in ways that were more scientifically advanced and politically progressive than similar accounts that had previously been offered by post-structuralism and phenomenology. A particular group of theorists informed by psychology and the philosophy of Gilles Deleuze—including Sylvia Lavin and Jeff Kipnis—argued that it was crucial to focus on the experience of buildings, the sensual effects of their surfaces, the moods that they created, and the seductive power of such things as color, light, and atmosphere, without addressing meaning, language, and culture and without essentializing the body and its relationship to the environment. Furthermore, following the lead of affect theorist Brian Massumi, these architectural theorists often linked these arguments to what they claimed would be a more progressive political position. This paper historicizes the discourse of affect in architecture, analyzes the claims made by affect theorists both in architecture and in general and offers a critical evaluation of its various theoretical and political claims, by drawing upon the mounting evidence about the problematic nature of the original psychological and neuroscientific studies that inspired affect theory in the first place, and upon the mounting critical literature on affect theory that has begun to emerge in recent years.

KEYWORDS: affect, phenomenology, appearances, surfaces, moods

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Affect was a powerful concept that gave new life blood to architectural theory in the late 1990s, one that fueled new design speculations and energized the neo-avant-garde domains of the discipline for over a decade. Yet little has been written on the role that affect theory played as an episode in architectural theory, and certainly little that has engaged its core theoretical claims in a critical manner. In the absence of such a history, the affect moment in architecture has simply lingered on, like the undead, neither thriving nor being fully buried. We still accept many of its intellectual formulations, and the design tropes that affect theory set in motion continue on, while few can recall the philosophical origins of how affect came into being as a discourse in architecture, nor what was originally at stake.

Since the concept of affect is the central focus of the history that follows, we should begin with the question of what we mean by affect. The term simply names a level of physiological experience that is viewed as being instinctive, autonomic, and directly connected to the nervous system, such that it is seen as bypassing the mediations of language, meaning, judgement, and conscious reasoning. To offer some examples, one might think of the way that bodies are moved, seemingly automatically, when individuals are repulsed by rotten food or by the discovery of nests of spiders or snakes. One might think also of situations when individuals yawn, smile, or blush in response to others doing the same. Or one might think of the way that one's muscles tighten in response to the screams and sobs of a crying baby, or the way one's bladder weakens at the sound and sight of running water. The key to understanding affect is that it aims to emphasize the primacy of the biological level of human experience. If psychological meaning comes into play at all, it is of the most primitive and archaic sort.

From the late 1990s to the late 2010s, various architectural theorists sensitive to larger trends in the humanities, philosophy and culture, advanced a discourse of affect within architecture that echoes these larger trends. They included Sylvia Lavin and Jeff Kipnis most especially, but also Robert Somol and Sarah Whiting, Jason Payne and Heather Roberge, Mark Foster Gage, Hernan Diaz, Florencia Pita, and their students Ellie Abrons, Andrew Holder, and Michael Loverich. Together, these protagonists of the affect moment in architecture advanced a view that the qualities of architecture were of the utmost importance because of the way they addressed this biological and primitive psychological level of experience. These architectural qualities included the optical

kind such as color, hue, tone, vibrancy, dazzle, luminosity; the tactile kind such as softness, smoothness, roughness, or hairiness; and the formal kind such as sagginess, voluptuousness, fluidity, creatureliness. Such qualities were seen to hold the power to affect people's feelings, moods and behaviors, certainly. Yet more than this simpler claim, that power was seen to be central to how politics in general should be understood, and how the politics of architecture in particular should be understood.

The spark for the affective turn could be seen to be the philosophy of Gilles Deleuze, whose quantitative manner of thinking about experience in terms of intensities and amplitudes offered fresh intellectual terrain in the late 1980s after years of structuralist and post-structuralist discourse. Brian Massumi—who, along with his close friend Sanford Kwinter, had been key to bringing Deleuze's thought to architecture in the late 1980s—was perhaps the most central intellectual source for a theory of affect drawn from Deleuze and with a sharp political edge. Yet Deleuze via Massumi and Kwinter was not the only source. Affect theorists in architecture also drew from a psychological discourse less interested in such things as the interpretation of dreams, and much more interested in a materialist, biologistic, and energistic conception of the mind's relation to the body.

In the process of developing what they claimed would be seen as a new account of the human-environment relationship, architecture's theorists of affect attempted to distinguish it from post-structuralism and phenomenology. To do so, they were often critical of both post-structuralism and phenomenology. While one might think affect theory and phenomenology are close to one another because they share a similar rejection of the intellectualist account of reality in which language and concepts determine consciousness and action, and because they share what might appear to be a similar attention to sensations and experience, affect theorists were quick to argue that phenomenology was too essentialized, universalized and timeless and as a result unable to understand the political nature of experience—a critique of phenomenology that displays affect theorist's ongoing debt to post-structuralism. And while one might also think that affect theory and post-structuralism are close to one another because of their shared anti-essentialism, affect theory was also quick to critique post-structuralism because its nominalism had led it to become detached from the real, to withdraw into a purely negative criticality and to become hostile to the possibilities of architectural design.

Affect theory's claims to superiority, then, were multifold. It claimed to be more politically progressive than phenomenology because it considered that its materialistic and physicalist conception of experience had freed it from the romantic and nostalgic yearning for an original holistic experience. It claimed to be breaking out of the ivory tower of linguistic analysis that dogged post-structuralism and to become engaged with the world as it really was. And because affect theory drew upon recent psychological and neurological experiments it also claimed to be more scientifically accurate.

But of the various claims to being a superior discourse, one stands out above the rest; affect held the key to the way that political power was formulated in the postmodern age such that it could challenge postmodern power on its own terrain. Affect theory thus assumed a conception of the disoriented and fragmented nature of public reason and it argued that feelings and moods were most important to contemporary politics, being politically urgent aspects for the left to address.

In what follows, I will historicize architecture's discourse of affect from the 1990s to the 2010s, tracing its path through the writings of this specific group of architectural affect theorists. In the process of doing so, I will critically evaluate this history, as well as the theoretical and political claims made within it, by drawing upon the substantial literature that has emerged in recent years which criticizes it. I will thus draw upon the mounting criticisms of some of the original psychological and neuroscientific experiments that affect theorists like Massumi often evoked in support for their claim that language, intentions, and rationality are secondary to biological instincts in the formation of human actions. I will also draw upon criticisms of the claims that immediacy and anti-intentionalism are inherently politically progressive, and criticisms of affect theory's complicity with an especially neoliberal phase of capitalism.

1. The Ascendency of Affect in the 1990s

Two distinct tributaries in the history of architectural theory fed the ascendency of affect as a discourse at the end of the 1990s. The first one was the gradual translation and migration of the philosophy of Gilles Deleuze into the Anglo-American academic world and subsequently into architecture. The second, yet intertwined, tributary was a renewed interest in psychoanalysis. While psychoanalysis was used by critical theorists in architecture as an instrument of what Paul Ricœur once called

the "hermeneutics of suspicion," alongside post-structuralism and deconstructivism, it contained within it the possibilities of more vitalistic and biologistic readings, especially when either referring to the early work of Freud, or the later work of second generation Freudians like Wilhelm Reich who developed electrophysiological theories of the body. I say intertwined because the biophilosophical and materialist dimensions of Deleuze's philosophy primed the more biologistic interpretations of psychoanalysis and psychology within affect theory.

One of the first figures to read Deleuze in architecture was Sanford Kwinter, who was applying a vitalistic, energistic and materialistic philosophy derived from Deleuze to his study of modern architecture during his PhD in comparative literature at Columbia University in New York between 1983 and 1987.[1] A native of Toronto, Kwinter was also a close friend of his fellow compatriot Brian Massumi in these years, and the two men supported each other intellectually as they worked on their respective doctorates at Columbia and Yale in the late 1980s. Massumi would go on to play a central role both by introducing Deleuze's philosophy to the Anglo American world, by translating Deleuze's books, and through his own books such as *A User's Guide to Capitalism and Schizophrenia: Deviations from Deleuze and Guattari*, which Kwinter published through Swerve, an imprint of Zone books in 1992.[2] Kwinter had become immersed in architectural culture as he began his PhD and was by 1984 already close friends with Sylvia Lavin, who was also at Columbia at that point as an undergraduate student. Kwinter had launched *Zone 1-2* with fellow doctoral students Jonathan Crary, Hal Foster, and Michel Feher in 1985, and this lavish magazine already thrust Kwinter into architecture in the way it featured architects Christopher Alexander, Kenneth Frampton, Peter Cook, Peter Eisenman, Rem Koolhaas and Raymond Abraham, alongside Kwinter's own essay on the architect Sant'Elia, and essays by Manuel De Landa, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari. *Zone 1–2* was highly influential and played a central role in introducing a new Deleuzian paradigm that linked architecture and the broader

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[1] S. Kwinter, "La Citta Nuova: Modernity and Continuity," in *Zone 1|2: The Contemporary City*, Zone Books, Cambridge, MA, 1986, pp. 88–89. Interview with Sanford Kwinter by Joseph Bedford (August 14, 2024). On Kwinter's role in bringing Deleuze's thought into architecture see S. Brott, "Deleuze and 'The Intercessors'," *Log,* 18, 2010, pp. 135–51.

[2] B. Massumi, *A User's Guide to Capitalism and Schizophrenia: Deviations from Deleuze and Guattari*, Zone Books, Cambridge, MA, 1992. Other books in the Swerve imprint also included M. DeLanda, *A Thousand Years of Nonlinear History*, Zone Books, Cambridge, MA, 1997.

topic of the urban metropolis to the history of science, chaos theory, and theories of complexity and emergence.

The key moment in which the discourse shifted, after which Deleuze was taken up in architecture at an accelerated pace came with "The Strategies of Architectural Thinking" Conference at the Chicago Institute for Architecture and Urbanism in 1988. The conference was meant to be the consolidation of a new group of critical theorists fluent in post-structuralist discourse, and particularly deconstructivism. It brought together those involved in the MoMA deconstruction show based at Princeton, with those based at Harvard working on the journal *Assemblage*. The group, which formed at an infamous scene in Jeff Kipnis's hotel bedroom during a conference in Miami earlier that year, agreed to put on the conference in Chicago to demonstrate their shared deconstructivist project in architecture.[3]

Yet no sooner had the project of Deconstruction in architecture been consolidated in Chicago than Kipnis, who had done so much to advance Deconstruction and had masterminded the Chicago conference, spontaneously "jumped ship" to a Deleuzian position.[4] Sanford Kwinter, who had been invited to the conference to serve as a respondent, and who had a passionate disdain for Derrida's philosophy by this point, mounted an attack from the audience after which a tense conflict erupted between Wigley and Kwinter. As Kipnis put it, "what Sanford said [and] the way he formulated it was amazing" and I decided "to side with Sanford." As Kipnis dramatized the scene in recalling it, "everybody looked at me and Mark [Wigley] looked at me and Sanford looked at me, and we [Mark and I] broke, it was amazing."[5] Lynn, who was also there at the Chicago conference has similarly recalled shifting abruptly from being a Derridean to being a Deleuzian at that conference.[6]

Through the early 1990s, Kwinter's and Kipnis's teaching became one of the main conduits by which a Deleuzian discourse spread in architecture. Kwinter soon became part of Eisenman's social circle, writing texts for him. It is likely as a result of the conversations with both Kipnis

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[3] Interview with Jeff Kipnis by Joseph Bedford (July 25, 2018); Interview with Beatriz Colomina by Joseph Bedford (December 16, 2018); Interview with Michael Hays by Joseph Bedford (July 12, 2018) and Interview with Catherine Ingraham by Joseph Bedford (July 17, 2018). On the Miami conference see also B. Colomina, L. Kogod, "At Home with His Parents," *Assemblage*, 30, 1996, pp. 108–12.

[4] Interview with Jeff Kipnis by Joseph Bedford (July 25, 2018).

[5] Interview with Jeff Kipnis by Joseph Bedford (July 25, 2018).

[6] Interview with Greg Lynn by Joseph Bedford (October 31, 2018).

and Kwinter in the late 1980s and early 1990s that Eisenman picked up on the concept of affect also, putting it into circulation in “The authors affect” (1991) and “‘The Affects of Singularity” (1992).[7] Though while Eisenman understood the significance of affect as a sensate response to the environment that did not involve language, he tended to equate it with Walter Benjamin’s notion of aura, worrying about its loss at the hands of technical reproduction, thus giving it a nostalgic cast that Kipnis and Lavin would avoid giving it in the years to come.

Despite having no training in architecture, Kwinter began teaching studios and seminars at Harvard in the early 1990s where he inspired other soon-to-be-influential figures such as Alejandro Zaera-Polo to develop his own Deleuzian discourse.[8] Kwinter taught in Kipnis’s new graduate program that he launched at the AA in London in the early 1990s and the two of them, along with Greg Lynn, attended a number of influential conferences at the AA on topics such as “the fold” and “complexity.”[9] Kwinter, Kipnis and Lynn were also part of an influential group of young architects teaching in New York and based at Columbia University’s School of Architecture who were thinking through the possibilities of new digital tools such as those offered by the animation software, Maya, and how the kinds of ideas about dynamic process and complex systems discussed in such books as Deleuze and Guattari’s *A Thousand Plateaus*—recently translated by Brian Massumi—might help in understanding the significance of the new digital forms.[10]

Kipnis’s writings in the early 1990s already began to lay out some of the arguments within which the discourse of affect would soon be situated. In 1991, for example, in his “Moonmark” article, Kipnis turned to “space” and “aesthetics” in architecture to shift away from what he took to be the current focus on architecture as a source of meaning and symbolism and to address in their place simply the qualities of buildings and the effects of these qualities on the subject.[11] Through the middle of

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[7] P. Eisenman, “The Authors Affect: Passion and the Moment of Architecture,” in Cynthia Davidson (ed.), *Anyone* (New York: Rizzoli, 1991), pp. 200–211, and P. Eisenman, “The Affects of Singularity,” *Architectural Design Profile*, 100, Nov–Dec 1992, pp. 42–45.

[8] Interview with Sanford Kwinter; Interview with Jeff Kipnis; and Interview with Alejandro Zaera-Polo by Joseph Bedford (January 12, 2025).

[9] The Fold conference took place at the AA on June 14, 1993, and the Architecture and Complexity conference took place on May 6, 1994.

[10] G. Deleuze, F. Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1987.

[11] J. Kipnis, “Moonmark,” *Assemblage,* 16, 1991, pp. 6–13.

the decade, Kipnis was attempting to define a "new architecture" based on the possibilities that curvilinear forms could create heterogeneous qualities of spatial experience.[12] This line of thought was best captured in a short text, "(Architecture) After Geometry," in which Kipnis wrote about a "spatial sensibility" that was liquid, boundless, fluid, and emergent and which escaped language and signification. As Kipnis put it, "no codes, no clever meanings. Looks cool."[13] But it was in 1997, with the publication of "The Cunning of Cosmetics" that Kipnis began to invest his discourse with a vocabulary rooted in affect, writing of "the cosmetic effect" of Herzog and De Meuron's work as "more visceral than intellectual."[14] As he went on, "The reductions of cosmetic minimalism, on the other hand, are anorexic, a compulsion to starve the body until it dissolves into pure (erotic) affect...."[15]

What then of the second trajectory; that which passed via psychoanalysis? Here, we can start by looking to the work done by Anthony Vidler beginning at the end of the 1980s on the theme of the uncanny, as well as on the themes of spatial phobias in the urban metropolis. His collection of essays, *The Architectural Uncanny* had been published in 1992, and he was completing his follow-up book *Warped Space* in the late 1990s.[16] While the theme of estrangement, the unhomely, shock and psychological disturbance supported the dominant critical discourses in architecture, Vidler's research on the psychology of the metropolis could also be seen to have pointed the way towards a post-critical discourse of affect. Like Rem Koolhaas before him in *Delirious New York*, Vidler was focusing attention upon the enervation of the new mass subjects and crowds of the dense 19th century metropolis and raising questions about how political and social life was being transformed by the new scale, speed and sensory stimulation of modern life. Though Vidler had not yet adopted the same kind of celebratory stance towards the metropolitan life of crowds as Koolhaas had done, the fact that the topic of the irrational

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12 J. Kipnis, "Towards a New Architecture," *Architectural design,* 63, 3–4, March–April 1993, pp. 40–49.

13 J. Kipnis, "(Architecture) After Geometry: An anthology of Mysteries. Case Notes to the Mystery of the School of Fish," *Architectural Design*, 67, 5–6, May–June 1997, pp. 42–47.

14 J. Kipnis, "The Cunning of Cosmetics," *El Croquis*, 84, 1997, pp. 22–28.

15 *Ibid*.

16 A. Vidler, *The Architectural Uncanny: Essays in the Modern Unhomely*, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 1994, and A. Vidler, *Warped Space: Art, Architecture, and Anxiety in Modern Culture*, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 2000.

aspects of metropolitan experience, came to the fore in the dawning age of cyberspace, suggests the possibility of a more positive valence to come.

Vidler's close friend Mark Cousins, an architectural theorist trained in psychoanalysis, hosted a substantial conference on the theme of "Psychoanalysis and Space" at the Architectural Association (AA) in 2000 in honor of the publication of *Warped Space*.[17] The gathering afforded an opportunity for a certain realization at least on the part of one figure in the audience, Jeff Kipnis, that affect would become a major discourse in the coming years. As we have seen, Kipnis was one of the first to adopt the vocabulary of affect in his writing and had done so three years earlier, but he has recalled being guided by a renewed engagement with Freud's early writings at this moment, especially "Instincts and their Vicissitudes,"[18] and saw in that text untapped potential in Freud's account of the affects as distinct from meaning.[19]

Yet, it was likely one of the conference papers in particular, that delivered by Sylvia Lavin, that caught Kipnis's attention; a paper titled "Open the Box: Richard Neutra and the Psychology of the Domestic Environment" which she had already published in *Assemblage* in 1999.[20] By the time of the psychoanalysis conference, Lavin had already also published a short manifesto text titled "The New Mood or Affective Disorder" that called for an affective architecture as a program for contemporary design, and here at the AA her paper demonstrated to the audience—which included Kipnis—what an architecture that embodied the "new affective sensibility" looked like.[21]

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17 The Psychoanalysis and Space Conference took place at the Architectural Association in London on December 11–12, 2000.

18 S. Freud, "Instincts and their Vicissitudes," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Volume XIV (1914–1916), The Hogarth Press, London, 1957, pp. 111–140.

19 As Kipnis put it in an interview with Hans Tursack in 2014, "[Freud wrote about] two different kinds of interpretations, one is based on meaning, which the linguistic school had focused so heavily on, and the other one which is based on what Freud called affect." J. Kipnis, "Affect: Interview with Hans Tursack," Attention, 2, 2014, episode 2E, 30:00 mins, https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/attention-audio-journal-for-architecture/id1103549975?i=1000451911741, (accessed November 22, 2024).

20 S. Lavin, "Open the box: Richard Neutra and the psychology of the domestic environment," *Assemblage*, 40, 1999, pp. 6–25.

21 S. Lavin, "The New Mood or Affective Disorder," *Assemblage,* 41, 2000, p. 40. When Lavin was working on her book on Neutra, she advertised the title of the book as "Affective Environments: Richard Neutra and the Culture of Psychoanalysis," See S. Lavin, "What You Surface Is What You Get," *Log*, 1, Fall 2003, p. 106.

While Lavin's work on Neutra might at first glance be seen as part of the critical discourse that was engaged in the revision of modern architecture through the lens of post-structuralism and deconstruction—specifically the simultaneously historical and theoretical discourse developed by those around the journal *Assemblage,* such as Michael Hays, Beatriz Colomina, and Mark Wigley—it is evident that her reading of Neutra, in contrast to their critical readings of Hannes Meyer, Ludwig Hilberseimer, Mies Van Der Rohe, Adolf Loos, and Le Corbusier was from the outset already "post-critical." Lavin was one of the first to use the term "post-critical" in her "New Mood" article and it is clear from a comparison of her work with the work of the *Assemblage* generation that while they attempted to refashion these modern architects as being already post-structuralist (and post-humanist) through their various efforts to decenter the bourgeois subject of modern capitalism by implicitly critiquing the alienation and reification of modern life, Lavin, by contrast, painted a picture of the modern architect as a figure who believed in the erotic and libidinal power of the body and its direct and unmediated organic relationship to its environment.[22] That is, rather than viewing the human subject as an ideological construct and viewing the environment as an instrument that would negatively critique human actions, estranging the subject and making it feel unhomely, split, or decentered, Lavin was engaged in the project of showing how the human body as a biological organism could be enervated by its environment such that the environment could be viewed as an instrument that would positively motivate human actions, persuading and seducing, rather than unmasking and destabilizing.

In making her case for an affective account of architecture through the work of Neutra, Lavin's talk at the AA conference simultaneously criticized both phenomenology and the critical discourse of post-structuralism for being, respectively, too nostalgic and too hostile. "Modernism is under assault today," she explained to her audience, "both from a

[22] Colomina for example drew from Jacques Lacan to understand the split nature of the modern subject and in her book Privacy and Publicity she presented Le Corbusier and Loos alike as "displacing" the "humanist subject." B. Colomina, *Privacy and Publicity: Modern Architecture as Mass Media*, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 1996, p. 326. And as Hays argued, it was the achievement of avant-garde architects such as Hannes Meyer and Ludwig Hilberseimer to have "inject[ed] into bourgeois humanist normality the alienating dissonances and contradictions that characterize rapid industrialization... " K. M. Hays, "Reproduction and Negation: The Cognitive Project of the Avant-Garde," in B. Colomina, J. Ockman (ed.), *Architectureproduction*, Princeton Architectural Press, New York, 1988, p. 153.

too loving nostalgia and an overly hostile criticality. The nostalgic tend to embrace modernism in the suffocating constraints of a phenomenological regime. While the critical tend to trap modernism in the landmines set by the semiological regime."[23]

As I have suggested already, it is somewhat surprising that affect theorists in architecture, as in other fields, wished to distance themselves so much from phenomenology, given their shared criticisms of the intellectualist and rationalist Cartesian account of subjectivity and their shared emphasis on the role of pre-conceptual or tacit dimensions of human experience in human consciousness and actions. Indeed, Martin Heidegger's elaborate account of mood in *Being and Time*, or Maurice Merleau-Ponty's account of absorbed coping in his *Phenomenology of Perception* have many parallels with what affect theorists have been attempting to address. Yet, the depiction of phenomenology as a "suffocating" and "nostalgic" discourse apparently closed to the modern world and to its modern complexities, and yearning for an original completeness or universality was useful to those attempting to distinguish affect theory as something new—even if this was a somewhat crude characterization of phenomenology at the time.[24] Within architecture in particular, given the prominence of more essentializing interpretations of phenomenology by architects such as Christian Norberg-Schulz, Juhani Pallasmaa and Peter Zumthor, there were understandable local discursive reasons to overplay the differences.

Lavin's critique of phenomenology went further, however. Likely with someone like Norberg-Schulz in mind, she suggested that phenomenologists treated "space" as something entirely relative to human subjectivity and possessing no objective reality of its own. In this way, while post-structuralism could be cast as presenting architecture merely as an effect of the externalized structures of language, phenomenology could be cast, in a somewhat overly neat symmetry, as presenting architecture as merely subordinate to an essentialized and interiorized subject, leaving affect theory as the only discourse truly addressing the living connection between the body and its environment. As Lavin put it:

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[23] S. Lavin, "Open the Box, Richard Neutra and the psychology of domestic environment," presented at the Psychoanalysis and Space Conference at the Architectural Association, London (December 11–12, 2000).

[24] See L. L. A. Zerilli, "The Turn to Affect and the Problem of Judgement," in *A Democratic Theory of Judgment*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2016, p. 241.

> Despite its many contributions, particularly with respect to perception, phenomenology never permitted space to escape its position as a Kantian *apriori*, while the swirling valences and atmospheric allusiveness of space itself has always seemed to evade the structuralness of semiology. … I would like to think that psychoanalysis can help us produce a concept of space that is neither essential nor outside of the chain of signification but rather that is ecological and material.[25]

Given that, in her work on Neutra Lavin was immersed in Wilhelm Reich's materialistic and biologistic theories of the organism-environment relationship, it is somewhat strange for Lavin to have accused phenomenology of not being open only to have then turned to what many phenomenologists such as Merleau-Ponty had long viewed as the reductive naturalistic and biologistic accounts of the relationship between the human body and its environment. If one takes, for example, Merleau-Ponty's early work in the 1940s, such as *The Structures of Behavior* and *Phenomenology of Perception*, one can see Merleau-Ponty engaged in a sustained critique of the then widespread behavioristic account of the human being that held sway in many areas of the social sciences and psychology. He saw behaviorism as understanding the human organism in mechanistic terms, over emphasizing the degree to which the environment determined actions and behaviors.[26]

Yet it is understandable how the dynamism suggested by Deleuzian philosophy could represent biology as a site of emancipation. As critics of affect theory such as Ruth Leys have pointed out, affect theorists often attempted to cast the biological level of human experience as a site of spontaneity, indeterminacy, and unpredictability, giving new connotations of possibility, potentiality and newness to what had formerly been viewed as deterministic and controlling.[27] This representation of nature in general as a dynamic and chaotic system rather than as a mechanical universe was part and parcel not only of Deleuzian discourse, but more

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[25] S. Lavin, "Open the Box, Richard Neutra and the psychology of domestic environment," presented at the Psychoanalysis and Space Conference at the Architectural Association, London (December 11–12, 2000).

[26] M. Merleau-Ponty, *The Structures of Behaviour*, Beacon Press, New York, 1967, and M. Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, Routledge, London, 2013.

[27] R. Lays, "The Turn to Affect: A Critique," in *The Ascent of Affect: Genealogy and Critique*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2017, p. 312. First published as R. Leys, "The Turn to Affect: A Critique," *Critical Inquiry*, 37, 3, Spring 2011, pp. 434–472.

generally of the science of complexity and chaos theory, and the work of those connected to the Santa Fe Institute. It is crucial, then, to grasp this history, to understand how affect theory could displace phenomenology because of its more progressive political connotations.

Corresponding to Lavin's adoption of a theory of dynamic enervation, she presented Neutra's houses as functioning, as Lavin claimed, as a kind of "architectural Viagra," apparently making prospective buyers of them "tingle" as they walked around them.[28] For Lavin, the "spatial excitement of the glazed corners in Neutra's bedrooms recalls the erotic translucency of new products for the bed and bath and voyeuristic pleasures of picture windows as represented through photography and advertising."[29] Through Neutra, the single-family home in America was becoming "an environment that was to produce pleasure itself."[30] Lavin even likened Neutra's architecture to the curious orgon-energy-accusatory (the organ-box) invented by Wilhelm Reich, to try to intensify orgon-energy in the subject, to raise one's sexual energy and intensity of orgasms.[31] As she later put it, "Neutra houses ... generate excitement through zones of affective intensity."[32] The smooth and featureless surfaces of his houses constituted "the durable quality of the house, its normal state, its unconscious affect."[33]

2. The Science and Politics of Affect Theory

At this juncture in our tracing of the discourse of affect, we must pause our history in the social milieu linking Kwinter, Kipnis, Lynn, and Lavin around the mid-1990s, to take a closer look at the one text that above all others most shaped the understanding of what was meant by affect. That text was Brian Massumi's "The Autonomy of Affect" published in *Cultural Critique* in the autumn of 1995. It combined in a single source a Deleuzian vocabulary of intensity, virtuality, and immanence, with a biologistic psychological discourse coming out of a number of influential

[28] S. Lavin, "Open the Box, Richard Neutra and the psychology of domestic environment," presented at the Psychoanalysis and Space Conference.
[29] S. Lavin, "Open the box: Richard Neutra and the psychology of the domestic environment," *Assemblage*, 40, 1999, p. 11.
[30] *Ibid*., p. 12.
[31] *Ibid*.
[32] S. Lavin, *Form Follows Libido: Architecture and Richard Neutra in a Psychoanalytic Culture*, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 2004, p. 99.
[33] *Ibid*., p. 100.

neuroscientific experiments, which Massumi drew upon to support his ideas about the primacy of affect and the political significance of understanding affect by way of scientific studies that proved to him that emotions and feelings are more important than ideas, reason and meaning in human judgements and actions.[34] While the more precise work of mapping the influence of Massumi's writings in architecture awaits being undertaken, it is safe to assume, as many have done, that Massumi was the first and most influential channel by which Deleuze's work was read in the Anglo-American world and by which a Deleuzian inspired affect theory was developed.[35]

Massumi's text followed the lead of a range of new psychological experiments that had been developed in the twentieth century, and of one experiment in particular by Benjamin Libet, developed in 1983. Libet's experiment claimed to have found proof that human actions were not free and rooted in the autonomy of moral choices, but were determined by the body's unconscious relationship to its sensory environment. Because of the influence of Massumi's text, it is worth focusing upon Libet's experiment and how Massumi interpreted it because of the degree to which the conclusions that Libet drew from his studies have been widely questioned in subsequent years.

Benjamin Libet's experiment involved monitoring his patients brain activity with an electroencephalograph (EEG) and their skin with an electromyograph (EMG). The first measured their brain activity and the second recorded the electrical activity in their muscles. He then asked his patients to quickly and spontaneously flex the finger or wrist of their right arm and to record the time on a clock when they first became aware of their decision to move. The finding that seemed to change the world of psychology and which transformed popular ideas about human consciousness, free will, and individual action and responsibility, was that the EMG documented an electrical brain signal that preceded the patient's conscious awareness of their own decision by 0.3 seconds—a time frame that Massumi liked to exaggerate by referring to the "mysterious half second." From this, Libet drew the conclusion that the "initiation

[34] B. Massumi, "The Autonomy of Affect," *Cultural Critique*, 31, Autumn 1995, pp. 83–109. See also B. Massumi, *Parables of the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation*, Duke University Press, Durham, NC, 2002.
[35] M. Jobst, H. Frichot, *Architectural Affects after Deleuze and Guattari*, Routledge, London, 2020, pp. 4, 10.

even of a spontaneously voluntary act ... can and usually does begin unconsciously."[36]

Massumi interpreted Libet's experiment as indicating that bodily, unconscious, autonomic processes precede human action and human intentions. As Massumi put it:

> In other words, the half-second is missed not because it is empty, but because it is overfull, in excess of the actually performed action and of its ascribed meaning. Will and consciousness are subtractive. They are limitative, derived functions which reduce a complexity too rich to be functionally expressed. It should be noted in particular that during the mysterious half-second, what we think of as 'higher' functions, such as volition, are apparently being performed by autonomic, bodily reactions occurring in the brain but outside consciousness, and between brain and finger, but prior to action and expression.[37]

More generally, Massumi drew from this a much larger interest in how responses to stimulation could take place in ways that human beings were not aware of. Such responses could be observed by, for example, measuring such things as heart rate, the depth of breathing, and galvanic skin responses or skin resistance, while individuals could have no conscious awareness of these responses or their significance. Massumi concluded from his account of these automatic reactions that the effect of a sensation enters quickly through the body and its physiology, before and without being processed in terms of socio-linguistic meaning. In a memorable phrase, Massumi summarized this by writing that "The skin is faster than the word."[38]

Yet Massumi's articulation of affect offered architects like Lavin, Kipnis, Somol and Whiting more than a reminder of ongoing scientific research on human physiological responses to environmental stimuli; it offered a political account of the importance of engaging affect as a potential avant-garde cultural project that might challenge reigning forms of power. The larger context for Massumi was, of course, a sense of the decline of the Left after the years of Reaganism. He was concerned that the media

[36] B. Libet, *et al.*, "Time of conscious intention to act in relation to onset of cerebral-activity (readiness-potential): the unconscious initiation of a freely voluntary act," *Brain*, 106, 3, 1983, p. 640.
[37] B. Massumi, "The Autonomy of Affect," *Cultural Critique*, 31, Autumn 1995, p. 90.
[38] *Ibid.*, p. 98.

technical conditions of the age had favored this new kind of politics not by reasoned decision-making but by warm reassuring feelings. Affect, then, became for Massumi a name for the kind of persuasion that is regularly deployed in the media in our postmodern world. It results from the kind of sense stimulation and nervous enervation experienced by individuals exposed to a flood of media messages that arouse their feelings in various ways. As Massumi put it in concluding his text, affect is key to our:

> late-capitalist, image- and information-based economies. Think of the image/expression-events in which we bathe. Think interruption. Think of the fast cuts of the video clip or the too-cool TV commercial. Think of the cuts from TV programming to commercials. Think of the cuts across programming and commercials achievable through zapping. Think distractedness of television viewing, the constant cuts screen to its immediate surroundings, to the viewing context where other actions are performed in fits and starts as attention flits. Think of the joyously incongruent juxtapositions of surfing the Internet. Think of our bombardment by commercial images off the screen, at every step in our daily rounds. Think imagistic operation of the consumer object, as turnover time increases as fast as styles can be recycled. Everywhere, the cut, suspense—incipience. Virtuality, perhaps?[39]

And as he went on, citing Deleuze's observations in his essay, "Postscript on the Societies of Control," an essay in which Deleuze wrote of the new logic of control society as being a logic in which individuals are free but in which their collective behaviors are modulated and controlled as crowds:

> *Affect holds a key to rethinking postmodern power.* For although ideology is still very much with us, often in the most virulent of forms, it is no longer encompassing. It no longer defines the global mode of functioning of power. It is now one mode of power in a larger field that is not defined, overall, by ideology. This makes it all the more pressing to connect its real conditions of emergence. *For these are now manifest, mimed by men of power*.[40]

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[39] *Ibid.*, pp. 103–104.

[40] *Ibid.*, p. 104. See also G. Deleuze, "Postscript on the Society of Control," *October*, 59, Winter 1992, pp. 3–7. Emphasis added.

The argument that the analysis of affect would serve in the fight against postmodern forms of power on its own terms was taken up by many on the Left including Nigel Thrift who argued in 2001 that "[t]he envelope of what we call the political must increasingly expand to take note of the 'way that political attitudes and statements are partly conditioned by intense autonomic bodily reactions that do not simply reproduce the trace of a political intention and cannot be wholly recuperated within an ideological regime of truth'."[41] Massumi's and Thrift's diagnoses might seem dark, foreboding, and the opposite of an avant-garde program, yet it nonetheless appeared to contain the positive proposition that the progressive Left can still reshape the world for the better by engaging the very forces that coerce and distract the subjects of late capitalism, redirecting them to alternate ends. Sylvia Lavin, in particular, can be seen to have directly recapitulated this Massumian argument, when in the conclusion to an essay encouraging architects to address themselves to the sensual effects of color in architecture she wrote that "effects have taken over as techniques in the production of political and cultural change once accorded to technology. *Effects are the new instruments of power.*"[42]

3. Affect in the 2000s: From Theory to Practice

Let us return to our history of the discourse of affect in architecture by following Lavin as she played a central role as an administrator in a school of architecture by advancing affect as one of the contemporary "conversations" that she sought to foster within architecture. Lavin was Greg Lynn's partner by the mid-1990s and it was also through Lynn—who was closer to Massumi personally at this point—that Lavin became ever more socially connected to the discourse on Deleuze that was being further cultivated by Lynn, Kwinter, Kipnis, and others at Columbia in the mid 1990s.[43] After becoming the chair of the architecture program at UCLA in 1996 (a position she held until 2006), she further supported the cultivation of an affect discourse there, helping to bring Robert Somol in 1997, Greg Lynn in 1998, and Jason Payne and Heather Roberge in 2002—both former students of Lynn.

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[41] N. Thrift, "Thinking the Post-Human: Literature, Affect and the Politics of Style," *Textual Practice*, 15, 1, 2001, p. 24, cited in R. Leys, "The Turn to Affect: A Critique," *Critical Inquiry*, 37, 3, Spring 2011, pp. 434–472.
[42] See S. Lavin, "What Color Is It Now?," *Perspecta*, 35, 2004, pp. 111. Emphasis added.
[43] S. Lavin, Pers. Comm.

By the late 1990s, Robert Somol, an especially influential advocate of Deleuze's philosophy in architecture, was also writing on themes of repetition and diagrams in his texts. But by 1999, he came to make very similar claims to those of Lavin in her text on Neutra of that year. As Somol postulated in 1999, architecture could leave behind the critical project, invested as it was in representation and language and pursue instead an "ambient architecture [that] mixes the intoxicants of the contemporary, setting the scene for diverse behaviors, desires, and demands." And referring to Julius Schumlan's infamous photograph of a bachelor putting on a record in a Pierre Koenig case study house in LA, Somol wrote "This is architecture .... as seduction scene: not architecture for paying attention to (not about its meaning), but an environment for acting in, for instigating new events and traits."[44]

In Lavin's "New Mood" polemic in the following year, she too positioned the affective against the critical in much the way that Somol had done using the analogy of psychoanalysis to make her case more vivid. The critic, she wrote, had become an analyst and had placed architecture under analysis such that everything including "the structure of the profession, the mechanisms of its discourses and modes of representation, as well as the very concepts that make architecture architectural" had been analyzed to reveal latent and sublimated desires "for power."[45] Yet, as she went on:

> Ironically, emotion itself came to be repressed in the analytic discourses of criticality and an affective disorder began to emerge in which the pathological symptoms of the unconscious were identified with great abandon but the passionate drives theoretically generating these symptoms were nowhere to be found. The house had become a neurotic bundle of tics and compulsions but affect itself no longer had a home.

As a deeper context for Lavin's remarks, it is worth noting that only a few years earlier she had been engaged as a guest professor running a master class with Liz Diller at the Berlage Institute in Rotterdam, in which their students had been tasked with exploring the house through the analysis of the themes of paranoid hygiene, claustrophobia, agrophobia,

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[44] R. E. Somol, "Intracenter: The Seduction of the Similar," *Assemblage*, 40, 1999, p. 75.

[45] S. Lavin, "The New Mood or Affective Disorder," p. 40.

boredom, eating disorders, obsessive compulsive disorder and optical paranoia, such that Lavin may have had as a result the critical attitude of Elizabeth Diller in the late 1990s in her mind as she wrote her critical lines about the house being seen as a neurotic bundle of compulsions.[46]

As she went on, offering an alternative strategy to that of the analyst of architecture's disorders:

> Reconfiguring this psychodynamic has emerged as a major potential of the postcritical era. The work of Gilles Deleuze has permitted the affective terrain of buildings to organize itself anew and the discipline seems to be entering an almost hyperemotional state. Increasingly uninhibited by repressive regimes of regular geometry and Taylorist modes of production, architecture is instead nurtured by the ardent expressions of consumer desires and the secret pleasures of new, soft materials. Buildings can now be animated, ecstatic, and rapturous. [And] criticism must now understand *sensibility as a form of intelligence* rather than as opposed to intellect.[47]

One of the ways in which a specifically Massumian interpretation of affect can be traced in architectural discourse, then, was in the sharp distinction that he drew between experience and meaning, or between a level of unconscious behavior that responded automatically to the environment and a level of conscious intellectual reflection that involved meanings, symbolism language, and culture. As we have seen repeatedly, it was said by Kipnis that affect involved a mode of interpretation that did not involve meaning and by Somol that it was "not about its meaning." And as Lavin went on to claim in the 2000s, affect was "without signification,"[48] it was "the internalization of perception and *not personal feelings shaped by symbolism, language, and other forms of cultural predeterminations*."[49] Massumi's interpretation of Libet's experiment and his focus on the "half second" between the EGS signal and the movement of the finger reinforced this same argument that conscious reasoning comes only *after* decisions have already been made by the

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[46] S. Lavin, E. Diller, "Domesticating Space: Elizabeth Diller and Sylvia Lavin," *Berlage Cahiers*, 7, 1998, pp. 62–65.

[47] S. Lavin, "The New Mood or Affective Disorder," p. 40. Emphasis added.

[48] S. Lavin, "Plasticity at Work," in *Mood River*, Wexner Center, Columbus, OH, 2002, p. 81.

[49] S. Lavin, "Kissing Architecture: Super Disciplinarity and Confounding Mediums," *Log*, 17, Fall 2009, pp. 9–16.

body. As Massumi put it in the *Parables of the Virtual* in 2002, affect is an "intensity" that is "not semantically or semiotically ordered."[50]

Indeed, Kipnis also argued for the primacy of feeling over reason in his catalogue essay accompanying his 2002 "Mood River" exhibition at the Wexner Center in Columbus. That exhibition presented a range of contemporary artifacts of design, from chairs to toothbrushes that used smooth surfaces, color, and other qualities in ways that were seductive. In his essay, one of Kipnis's main arguments for why the realm of feelings and emotions solicited by affect were important was that new feelings precede and lead to new ideas. As he wrote:

> New feelings erupt into the world ... [D]esign and the arts give diverse and specific material moment to these new feelings, help make them choate and concrete, and spread them about like the wind spreads pollen, like mosquitoes spread disease. After these new feelings have materialized, taken shape, taken various shapes, and disseminated, they eventually evolve into their most auspicious incarnation as new ideas.[51]

Kipnis went so far in the essay as to suggest that Leibniz could only have invented calculus because of a feeling that had been put into widespread circulation by experiences that had been engendered by the invention of the microscope. Calculus, Kipnis said, was like putting a curve under a microscope.[52] The claim that Kipnis was ultimately making about architecture was that it would be like the microscope in his analogy; architecture too could engender new experiences that would spread new feelings and lead to ideas that could change the world in the way that calculus had done.

The attraction of the argument that ideas, meanings, and words were secondary in importance had everything to do with the local context of disciplinary debates in architecture in which this particular group of thinkers sought to distinguish their project from those who had, in the years prior, invested so heavily in linguistic analyses, semiological theories of the sign, Derridean word-play, and the critique of ideology. It had everything to do with the larger political shift they attempted to initiate from the negative project of critical theory—which they saw as tending

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50 B. Massumi, *Parables of the Virtual,* pp. 24–25.

51 J. Kipnis, "On those who Step into the Same River...," *Mood River,* Wexner Center for the Arts, Ohio State University, Columbus, OH, 2002, pp. 34–44.

52 *Ibid.*

to undermine the power of design—to an affirmative and positive project that celebrated the power of design.

The best documentation of the discourse that Lavin cultivated at UCLA in particular is the publication *Crib Sheets*, which documented the more informal conversations and ideas that circulated through the school after a conference in 2003 called "The Good, The Bad and the Beautiful." In what is in effect a collection of quotations from articles, books, but also transcribed speech from conferences, we find several entries on topics related to the discourse of affect such as "surface," "atmosphere," and "environment" that suggest the intellectual milieu in the school at the time. Lavin's own transcribed remarks on the topic of surface read, for example, "The surface [becomes] manifestly effective rather than tectonic when architecture seeks mood instead of meaning."[53] Her remarks on atmosphere read:

> Of paramount importance in the reorientation of architecture toward a field of effects de-emphasize volume, the logic of the plan, and the ethics of rationalism, in favor of atmospheres produced through the *curation* of the surface. Through accumulation, lamination, decoration, colorization, agitation, plastification, and environmentalization, these surfaces curate effective moods and when these effects are special, they catalyse the contemporary.[54]

Her remarks were echoed by younger members of faculty such as Jason Payne, who is similarly recorded as having said:

> People respond viscerally to atmospheres. Increasingly they respond to institutions with ennui. We are becoming ever more a species that thrives on immediate, palpable stimulation, on material fact. It's not *what* it is so much as *how* it feels. One of the things we feel most potently in buildings is their atmosphere. Maintaining and even extending the public role of buildings demands they produce a saturated experience that almost clings to the skin of the people moving through them.[55]

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[53] S. Lavin, "Surface," in S. Lavin, H. Furján (eds.), with Penelope Dean, *Crib Sheets: Notes on the Contemporary Architectural Conversation*, Monacelli Press, New York, 2005, p. 63.
[54] S. Lavin, "Atmosphere," in S. Lavin, H. Furján (eds.), with Penelope Dean, *Crib Sheets: Notes on the Contemporary Architectural Conversation*, Monacelli Press, New York, 2005, p. 70.
[55] J. Payne, "Atmosphere," in S. Lavin, H. Furján (eds.), with Penelope Dean, *Crib Sheets: Notes on the Contemporary Architectural Conversation*, Monacelli Press, New York, 2005, 70.

While the discourse of affect in architecture was pioneered by theorists such as Lavin, Somol, and Kipnis in the years around 1999-2002, it was inherited and developed by a generation that had been their students but who were now teaching alongside them. This generation, seeing itself as a generation committed to practice as much as to theory was trying to build and to exemplify the persuasive power of design when thought of in affective terms. In their NGTV Reception Bar of 2006, for example, Jason Payne and Heather Roberge worked with translucent materials and methods of forming surfaces with vacuum molding to create a bar that glowed hot-red. And by 2009 when Diller and Scofidio, now in a phase of prolific building, adopted a similar approach in their renovation for the Alice Tully Hall at the Lincoln Center in New York (Figures 1 and 2), the walls not only glowed red but pulsed as the lights behind came up and went down.

By 2008-2009, Payne, Roberge, Gage, Pita and others were grouping themselves behind the related concept of "sensation." They did so in a group show called "Matters of Sensation" at Artist Space in New York in 2008, and in conjunction, Gage and Pita guest edited a special issue of Log—number 17—that included the publication of a transcript of a conversation about the show and individual essays by Gage and Pita, Payne, and Lavin. Payne's essay brought together and summarized much of what had gone before in the previous decades. It continued to argue that the discourse of affect was to be distinguished from phenomenology, though without going into much detail about the matter other than to write that phenomenology was a "darker, disciplinary codified doctrine."[56] It also continued to argue that meaning was irrelevant to the power of aesthetics in our postmodern age. Nobody is interested in the question, Payne claimed, of what a specific color, tone, shade, or curve means to any one particular group of people in any one context. Taste and symbolism had been replaced by intensity, he wrote, and interpretation had been replaced by reaction. He argued that there was no need to worry about the precision of the concepts involved in his essay, because the feelings that words evoke were the real way they mean anything, such that one could use "mood, atmosphere, sensibility, sensation, [and] feel" as synonyms for affect without much consequence.[57]

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[56] J. Payne, "Hair and Makeup," *Log*, 17, 2009, pp. 41–48.

[57] *Ibid.*

Figure 1. Jason Payne and Heather Roberge, NGTV Reception Bar and Film Set, Beverly Hills, California, 2006. Photograph by Deborah Bird.

Figure 2. Diller Scofidio + Renfro, Alice Tully Hall Renovation, Lincoln Center, New York, 2009. Photograph by Iwan Baan.

In addition to the work of this younger generation of practitioners, the teaching of a younger generation still, especially at UCLA, led to further design explorations, both in the studio context and in gallery exhibitions, of the way that forms and their variously shiny or hairy surfaces could evoke feelings of attraction to the cute or repulsion to the horrifying. Ellie Abrons and Andrew Holder were creating forms that looked ambiguously adorable or disgusting as little embryonic creatures, insect-like or animal figures, posed to fall from cliff edges or appearing to be soon crushed by a great weight (Figures 3 and 4). And Michael Loverich created haunting abject sculptures that ambiguously combine the cuteness of babies with the animal-like hairy forms (Figure 5).

3. The Critique of Affect in the 2010s

The changes taking place in architecture as it shifted from the cordial rivalry between phenomenology and post-structuralism to the new reigning discourse of affect were not happening in isolation. The discourse of affect was part of similar post-critical developments happening elsewhere in the arts and humanities wherever they had been touched by the spread of post-structuralist discourses. Affect was above all part of a response to the perceived exhaustion of the critical claims made by post-structuralism. In English, Rita Felski and others were already emphasizing pleasure as a dimension of the experience of the reader.[58] And by 2010 students of Brian Massumi, Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth, were able to document in *The Affect Theory Reader* a whole host of discourses and texts indebted to the affective turn.[59]

But a quarter century on from these developments, surely it is time to step back and assess the validity of their scientific and political claims which underpinned their neo-avant-garde stance. The discourse of affect certainly seems behind us now in many ways. Few architects speak of, or let alone read, Deleuze anymore. There have been strong critiques of the association between the discourse of affect and neoliberalism by the resurgent Marxism that swelled after the financial crash of 2008, and that was

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[58] R. Felski, *Uses of Literature*, Wiley Blackwell, London, 2008, and *The Limits of Critique*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2015.

[59] M. Gregg, G. J. Seigworth, *The Affect Theory Reader*, Duke University Press, Durham, NC, 2010.

Figure 3. Ellie Abrons, *Inside Things*, 2016.
Photograph by Joshua White.

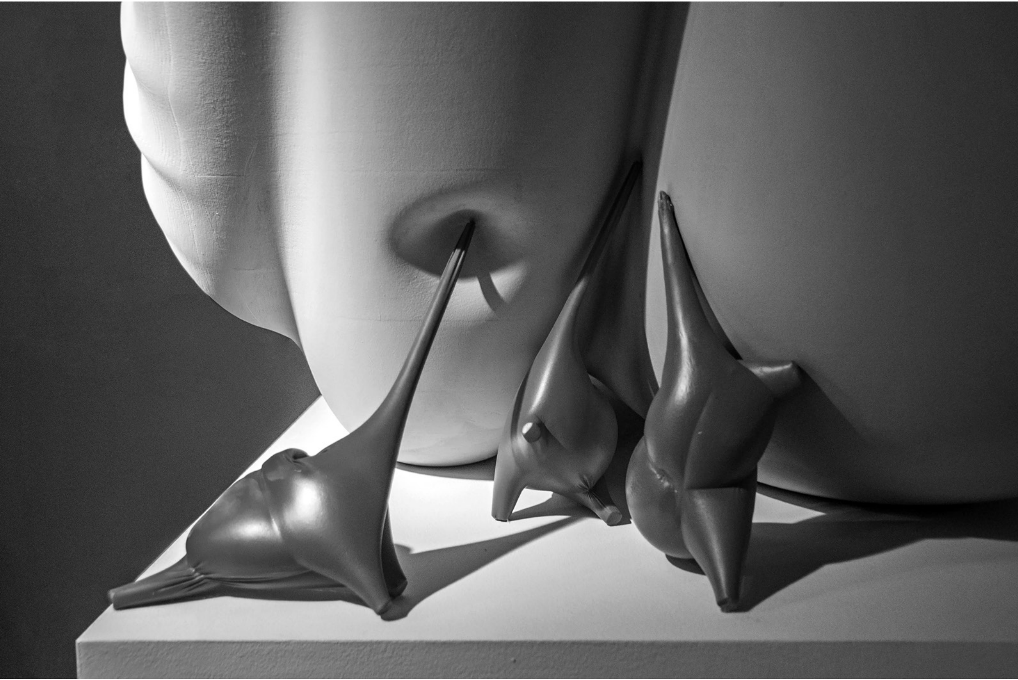

Figure 4. Andrew Holder, *48 Characters*, 2016.
Courtesy of Andrew Holder.

Figure 5. The Bittertang Farm, *Quilt Babies*, 2009.
Courtesy of Michael Loverich.

best represented by figures such as Douglas Spencer.[60] And even many of the second generation around Jason Payne—including also David Ruy, Mark Foster Gage, and Florencia Pita—began to speak of the project of affect in the past tense as the origin out of which they came, but are now more likely to associate themselves with the newer discourse of Speculative Realism and Object Oriented Ontology, and primarily with the philosophy of Graham Harman.

But certainly, today, the turn to affect and the post-critical turn are behind us and are thus ripe for evaluation, not least because of the substitution of Harman for Deleuze by its own protagonists or by the younger inheritors who were to carry the torch, but also because the entire discourse—not only in the academy but in much of the elite spaces of the media, government and professional middle class culture—has experienced a swing back in many ways to something like the identity-based critical discourse that once dominated the project of the generation of *Assemblage* in the late 1980s, only this time without the same thoroughgoing commitment to the linguistic constructivism of reality.

For Lavin, Kipnis, and Somol, affect was part and parcel of the claim that interrogating the architectural object, negatively undermining it, pulling it apart and deconstructing it, while aggrandizing to the critic, had left architects without much of an understanding of the power of architecture to shape the world. They had tried to recover those powers on the grounds that it was preferable to use them to fight fire with fire in an attempt to make the world better rather than it was to endlessly wring hands about all the things for which architecture is guilty and for which it can be criticized. In the past decade, roughly from around 2015 to 2025, there has been a recouperation of this deep sense of critique of architecture that Lavin and her colleagues had been attempting to shift away from, albeit now through a much more explicit foregrounding of the deconstruction of racialized and gendered norms of the urban environment and the architectural profession.

The general post-humanism that post-structuralism helped to bring about within the academy has not gone away, however, in part because it has been such a useful way to avoid the traps of talking about human

[60] See D. Spencer, "Architecture and the Affective Turn," in *The Architecture of Neoliberalism: How Contemporary Architecture Became an Instrument of Control and Compliance*, Bloomsbury, London, 2016, pp. 141–150, and D. Spencer, "Affect, Architecture, and the Aapparatus of Capture," in M. Jobst, H. Frichot (eds.), *Architectural Affects after Deleuze and Guattari*, Routledge, London, 2020, pp. 26–39.

history, culture, symbols, and meaning in a multicultural society, and to attempt to avoid an explicit confrontation with the culture wars. Nonetheless, the immediate claims of the 1990s affect turn which bracketed out meaning altogether have also faded. In effect, the resurgent critical turn of the identitarian politics that swept through the academy in the mid-2010s has placed meaning and cultural context back on the agenda but without much of a framework or vocabulary for talking about meaning and certainly not one as sophisticated as that which had been developed in the years shortly following the linguistic turn and the discovery of semiotics. And many architects wishing to explore the traumatic histories of various marginalized groups have found themselves asking about narratives, memory, and cultural traditions, yet with intellectual tools somewhat blunted by years of neglect.

Affect theory has also recently been the subject of much critique.[61] William Mazzarella has argued that affect theory reverses the long-standing critical literature on crowd psychology and comes to uncritically favor affect over reason.[62] As Mazzarella puts it, "the crowd's formerly unacceptable unreason now reappears as the productive, emergent puissance of the multitude."[63] For Mazzarella, affect theory also greatly underplays the role of dialectical mediation and the relationship between mediation and social institutions that are crucial to politics. Arguing against Massumi specifically, Mazzarella claims that mediation should be understood as the "most fundamental and productive principle of all social life,"[64] and suggests that Massumi's very idea of a premediated experience is in the end a fiction that mediation itself produces.[65]

Similarly, in *Immediacy, or The Style of Too Late Capitalism,* Anna Kornbluh links affect discourse to the current logic of the financialized, just-in-time, gig economy that depicts everyone as fulfilled by their own direct ability to buy and sell goods—and to buy and sell themselves—without being able to grasp the abstractions and mediations of the platforms and algorithms that modulate their direct experiences. She argues that affect theorists fail to recognize that the discourse of affect ultimately

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[61] See the critique offered by J. A. J. Storm, *Metamodernism: The Future of Theory*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2021, and W. Mazzarella, "Affect: What is it Good for?," in *Enchantments of Modernity*, Routledge, London, 2009, pp. 291–309.

[62] W. Mazzarella, "Affect: What is it Good for?" *Enchantments of Modernity*, Routledge, London, 2009, p. 297.

[63] *Ibid.*, p. 297.

[64] *Ibid.*, p. 302.

[65] *Ibid.*, p. 303.

assumes and reinforces the same logics of the software used by today's major corporations such as Google.[66] She criticizes the discourse of affect, therefore, for its tendency to limit human subjects to only the self-commanded resources of their own identities and to indulge in a cult of authenticity that destroys the ground of communication upon which social relations and political solidarities are built.[67] In the process, she argues, affect discourse mires us in the perpetual present and is unable to offer a much-needed vision and hope about the future.[68]

Finally, Ruth Leys has been perhaps the staunchest of critics of affect theory in recent years, directing her attention towards Massumi's work and his reading of neuroscientific experiments. She has also pointed out in her critical reading of Brian Massumi's "Autonomy of Affect" text that affect theorists tend to misconstrue two key claims in ways that are questionable. Firstly, affect theorists, for Lay, tend to claim that up until now we have overemphasized rationality in political decision-making and have not realized the degree to which political decisions are made on non-rational bases. She points out that affect theorists tend to be committed to arguing that there is "a gap between the subject's affects and its cognition or appraisal of the affective situation or object, such that thinking comes 'too late' for reasons, beliefs, intentions, and meanings to play the role in action and behavior usually accorded to them."[69] This gap however is often rooted in their interpretation of psychological studies that have subsequently been questioned by many in the field of psychology.[70]

The enormous literature on the Libet experiment in particular has produced a series of extensive and thorough meta-analyses, particularly

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66 A. Kornbluh, *Immediacy: Or, The Style of Too Late Capitalism,* Verso, New York, 2024, p. 123.

67 Kornbluh, *Immediacy*, pp. 45, 47, 83.

68 Kornbluh, *Immediacy*, p. 15.

69 R. Leys, "The Turn to Affect: A Critique."

70 For critical studies of the Libet experiment within psychology and neuroscience see M. N. Braun, J. Wessler, M. Friese "A meta-analysis of Libet-style experiments," *Neuroscience & Biobehavioral Reviews*, 128, September 2021, pp. 182–198; C.D. Frith, P. Haggard, "Volition and the Brain: Revisiting a Classic Experimental Study," *Trends Neuroscience*, 41, 7, July 2018, pp. 405–407; Within phenomenology Paul B. Armstrong argued that Massumi misinterprets Libet's experiment and that it does not indicate that thinking precedes reason. See P. B. Armstrong, *Stories and the Brain: The Neuroscience of Narrative*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 2020, pp. 62–64. And within philosophy more generally Nursena Çetìngül shows the range of philosophers, including Marcel Brass, Alfred Mele, and Peter Ulric Tse, who have rejected the claims made about human beings not having free will based in Libet's experiments. See N. Çetìngül, "Benjamin Libet's 'Free Will Experiment,' Scientific Criticisms and Kalāmic Perspective," *Kader,* 21, 1, 2023, pp. 320–349.

that done by Marcel Brassa, Ariel Furstenberg, and Alfred R. Mele in 2019, that have argued that while neural activity can be detected in advance of a decision, there is no evidence that it represents a decision being made unconsciously. They argue that many of the more convincing critical studies place the moment of decision as well as the ability to veto a decision very close to the time when patients think they are deciding, which as they put it, reinforces the "common idea or feeling that we decide at the moment of conscious intention."[71] They ultimately argue that the pulse observed in the brain at 0.3 seconds before the decision to move is specifically related to what Aaron Schurger has called "stochastic neural fluctuations,"[72] which appear to be related to the process of accumulating evidence prior to a decision, but not to a decision itself. They point out that these neural fluctuations are correlated to the arbitrariness of the decision-making scenario in the experiment and suggest that it is *precisely because* there is no natural context by which perception guides the making of a decision that decisions are made in a way that required more of this internal neural noise. As Brassa *et al.* put it:

> In typical cases, when people make a decision about whether to accept or reject a job offer, whether or not to make a bid on a certain house, and so on, their leading options differ from one another in ways that are important to them. In such cases, people often have a wealth of information to mull over. There is no need to depend primarily on subthreshold neuronal noise.[73]

The literature is also critical not only of the conclusions drawn by Libet from his experiments but of the methods and assumptions in his study. They point out the critiques within the literature of the artificial nature of Libet's experiment and the way that the instructions of the experiment influenced the experiment by leading the patient to adopt a "metacognitive strategy" where they attend to their own attention in ways that are unnatural in everyday experience. This in turn, Brassa *et al.* claim, leads to the fundamental problem that whatever the experiment

[71] M. Brassa, A. Furstenbergb, A. R. Mele, "Why Neuroscience Does Not Disprove Free Will," in *Neuroscience and Biobehavioral Reviews*, 102, 2019, p. 263.

[72] A. Schurger, J.D. Sitt, S. Dehaene, "An Accumulator Model for Spontaneous Neural Activity Prior to Self-Initiated Movement," in *The Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of Americas,* 109, 2012, pp. 2904–2913.

[73] M. Brassa, A. Furstenbergb, A. R. Mele, "Why Neuroscience Does Not Disprove Free Will," p. 263.

finds in the laboratory context cannot be generalized as an explanation for human experience per se.[74] They point out the significant differences between making decisions in an arbitrary manner such as lifting a finger randomly when prompted by an instruction to do so and making decisions in a situational context of meaning and significance, such as hitting the brake when you see a pedestrian crossing the road.[75]

Conclusion

In retrospect, the claims made by affect theorists like Massumi, Lavin, Kipnis, and others, that the level of affect is prior to and distinct from the realm of significance and meaning, seem evermore difficult to sustain given that the scientific studies that were once supposed to underpin these claims are no longer widely supported. It is not entirely clear anymore that it is accurate or desirable to demote the role of such things as reason, meaning, the imagination, culture, and history in human decision making and actions. As these qualities of human nature are being daily undermined by the media-technical systems of "too late capitalism," it no longer seems a progressive gesture to embrace a logic of immediacy that is in fact a symptom of these systems.

Throughout this article I have charted, through a number of protagonists and their writings, an intellectual history of affect theory in architecture. In the course of doing so, I have pointed out how affect has historically displaced or supplanted the discourse of phenomenology, largely on the strength that its claims were more politically progressive and on the aspersion that phenomenology was a "dark," closed, or "essentializing" philosophy. Yet as affect theory's own politics looks far from progressive, it is unclear why phenomenology would remain so understudied as an alternative means of understanding experience.

There was not space in this paper to analyze the ways in which phenomenology offers a means to think about how the qualities of buildings are experienced, and this analysis will have to wait for another occasion. Yet, we can say that within the historical triangle between post-structuralism, affect theory and phenomenology, phenomenology occupies a

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74 The same critique is offered by Przemysław Strzyżyński. See P. Strzyżyński, "Benjamin Libet's Experiment and Its Critique Between 2000–2012," *Filozofia Chrze Cijańska*, 10, July 2013, pp. 83–102.

75 M. Brassa, A. Furstenbergb, A. R. Mele, "Why Neuroscience Does Not Disprove Free Will," p. 252.

position that evades the nominalism by which everything is viewed as a discourse without resorting to immediacy. Phenomenology's account of experience, far from essentializing or adopting an *a priori* conception of space, could be demonstrated to understand experience in terms of the historical, cultural, and social significance of situations that are deeply wired into all human experience from the moment a child is born and during the process of child development, such that there is no such thing as experience prior to cultural mediation, because cultural mediation is what enables human beings to orient themselves in the world, to perceive their environment, and to act intentionally in the world.

If in the last decade we have witnessed a swing back to the critical project through increasing demands to understand the meaning of human experiences because of a desire to understand the history and politics of those experiences, then phenomenology might prove a useful vehicle by which to sharpen our tools for understanding the meaning of experience, without falling back upon the nominalism and linguistic primacy once championed by post-structuralism.

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