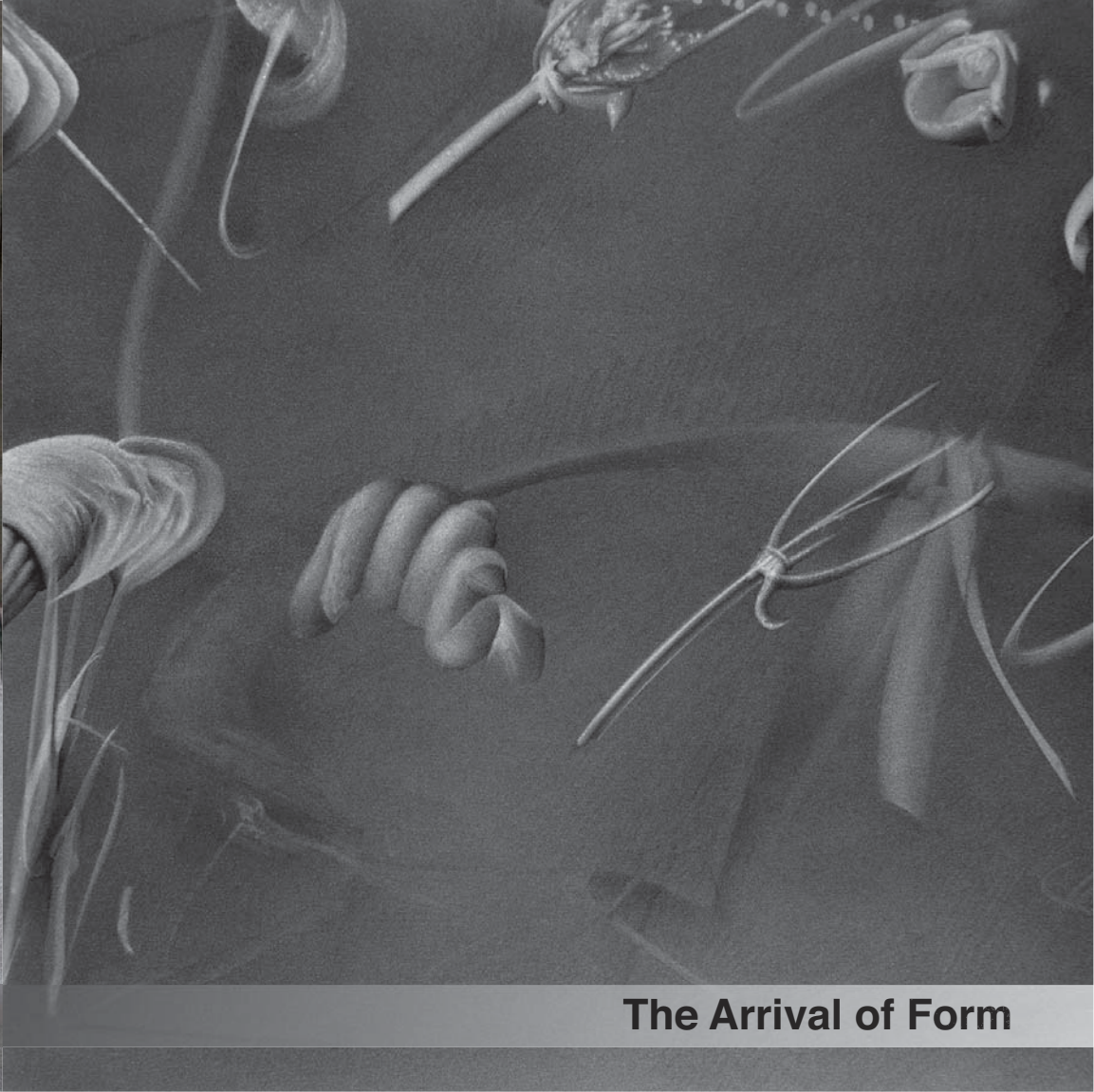
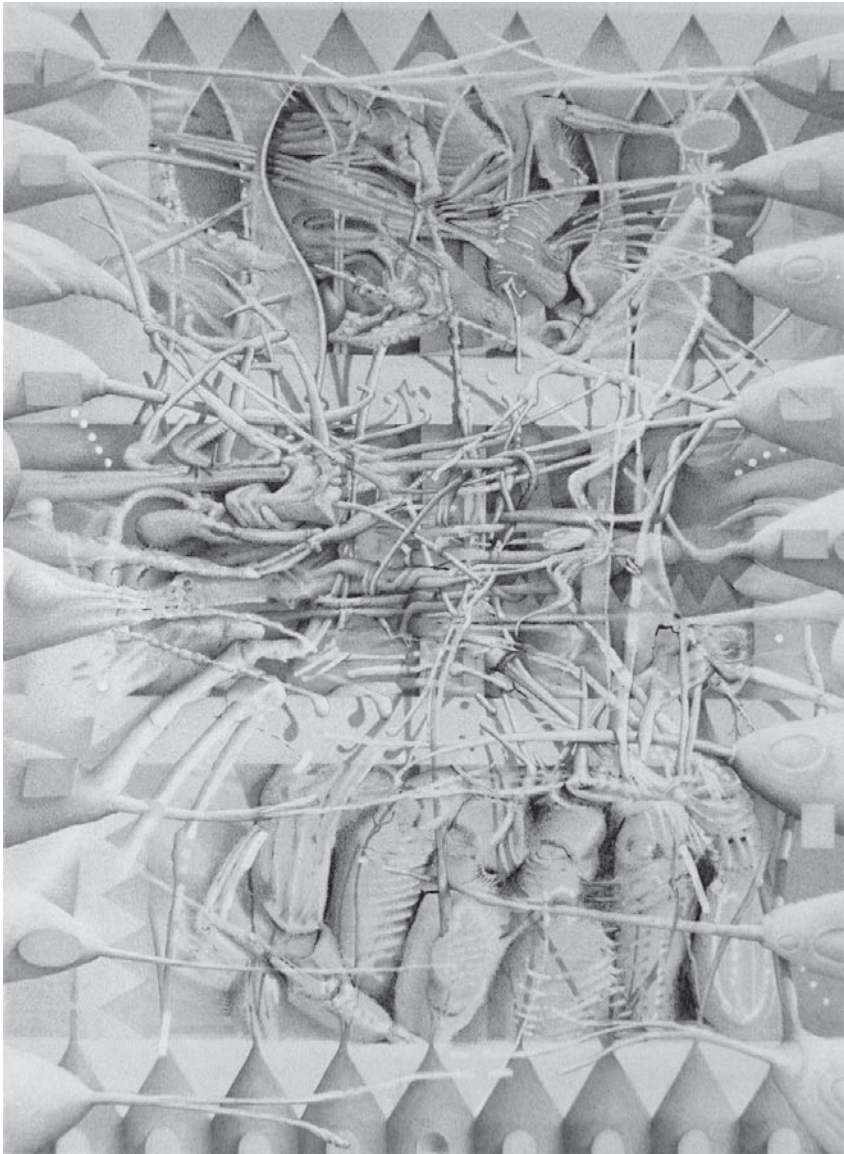




MARK WEST



The Arrival of Form



THE ARRIVAL OF FORM
Mark West

1.

On Form-Eruption Drawings:

Graphite is the crystalline form of Carbon and is used industrially as a dry lubricant. But the lubricating qualities of graphite were dormant in the pencils I had been taught to use. It's wet and slippery nature was revealed only when the rigid and willful specificity of architectural drawing slipped and fell.

Cursory research reveals a few underlying qualities of Graphite that are attuned with its lubricating and mutagenic potentials: Graphite is an allotrope of Carbon (allotropy is a property held by certain chemicals that allows them to take two or more different forms - the other common form of Carbon being Diamond). Graphite is an electrical conductor that displays superlubricity (a regime in which friction vanishes). Carbon is, also, coincidentally, the chemical foundation of Life as we know it, which has no bearing at all on drawing, but makes the substance itself a bit heavier in your hands. This potent combination of physical/mechanical properties conspires, under fortuitous conditions, to assist the discovery of unexpected and spontaneously emergent forms and images – a lubricated automatic 'writing' of sorts'.

"Drawing", as we know, is a kind of pulling. Drawing with Graphite amounts to pulling your hands through a lubricant. The feeling, when it is going right, is a bit like moving grease around with your fingers, or modeling wet clay, although all this is taking place in an infra-thin space though microscopic, translucent, layers clinging to the minute surface landscape of the paper. This is all felt through the hand and fingers – a kind of remote sensing of the drawing paper's surface and the microscopic dry, greasy, particles piling up and clinging to it.

The geometry of the Graphite tool tip (the pencil's point) changes as it is drawn across the paper in the following ritual sequence: first a cone, then a truncated cone, then a chisel that sloppily erodes towards a ball-point, now too far gone . . . then sharpened to a cone, and so forth. These minute changes in the shape of the tool tip are 'seen' by feeling its special friction across the paper's surface. The difference, for example, between a sharp tip and a ball point is immediately felt, even though the altered geometry is barely visible to the naked eye. The shape of the point is seen through the sensors of the fingers. If you are attentive, the fingers enlarge the tool point, like a microscope, until the pencil tip is felt more like a bar of soap being drawn across a sidewalk's concrete surface. The Graphite's microscopically fine grease is grabbed by the hilltops of the paper's surface through dark repetitions in this enlarged internal landscape. The mutual lubrication of paper, hand, and mind begins to pull the mind's eye through this same darkened landscape, causing a mutual lubrication of interior and exterior perspectives. Hand and eye, charged with this slippery darkness, slide along a surface landscape of emergent forms and images, pulling them across and through the paper's surface. It is a falling, where perfectly clear forms volunteer themselves, exactly as they do to us in clouds.

These drawings are made by clarifying the forms that appear in the gray Graphite clouds. Such a drawing produces a picture that is not a depiction, or at least not a depiction of anything existing in the world outside the drawing. The forms that offer themselves, if they are clarified with sufficient gentleness and fidelity, present a vivid and compelling realism – though this sense of realism is attached to things which don't exist outside of the drawing's illusions. The vividness of the illusion, however, is a seduction towards the sense that these things *could* exist. These are not drawings that indicate or function through signs; it is quite a bit more like conjuring than representing.

Consider for a moment how odd it is to see things in clouds. These images, however strange or contorted, are so perfectly formed, and their perception is so effortlessly and spontaneously arrived at, that it appears that clouds actually form themselves into these shapes. But this is, of course, absurd. Clouds are not shaped like men's faces or whales, or horses bodies, or any of the other myriad figures we see in them. They are only, and always, shaped like clouds. It is *we* who see these other figures in the cloud's own forms, produced in a kind of waking dream. Indeed, they won't appear at all without taking time to *stare* into them for a while.

In a form-eruption drawing, the fundamental act is one of dutiful and meticulous clarification of the images that spontaneously appear before one's eyes. This must be done gently with the lightest of strokes and the most sensitive spreading of the translucent Graphite. Anything too brash, willful, or forward will collapse the game, and you will end up merely making marks on the paper indicating this or that, and the compelling "realism" of the illusion will be lost. As the image one sees is gently clarified, it is simultaneously and necessarily altered into its next mutation, obscuring the very image being clarified and resolving into a new image according to its own altered terms. This new emerging image is itself clarified/altered, in a fluid game of an image chasing itself, destroying itself, to find an emerging new self. A time-laps film of such a drawing would show a slowly seething field of mutually emergent and altering forms, rolling, roiling towards the final image (which is chosen and fixed through nothing more than a timely suspension of action). In this way the final image both contains and obscures the many previous forms and images that constitute the morphogenesis of the picture. They are "in there", yet no longer visible as themselves. The author of such a drawing – if we can use that word for someone who is only following what is already given to sight – holds a secret knowledge of the drawing's inside story. The drawing is felt, at least by its author, to be more alive because of its inner geology, its hidden layers and past incarnations.

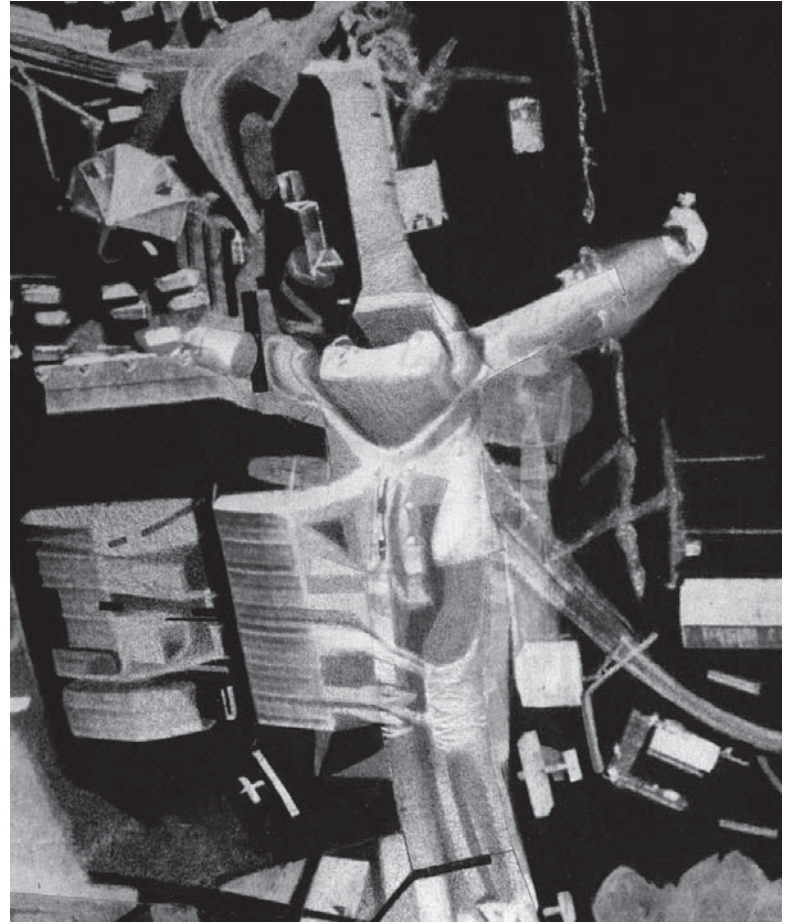
2. On Form-Eruption Construction

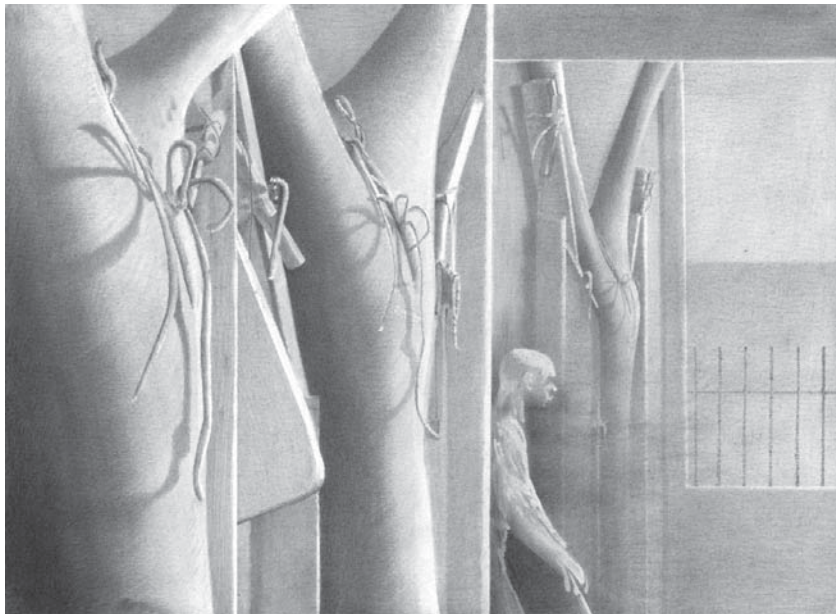
The forms erupting from this way of drawing, though made of real graphite, are only illusions. The actual physical structure and density of the graphite and paper disappear as the illusion is perceived. Actual form, full-dimensional form, on the other hand, is entirely consonant with the shape of its material, and material has a lot to say about these forms. The best critique of concrete I know was written by Peter Schjeldahl in 1992: He says:

Liquid rock, concrete is born under a sign of paradox and does not care. It doesn't care about anything, lazy and in love with gravity but only half in love. Pour concrete on the ground and it will start to puddle and spread, in rapture to gravity but then will think better of it: enough spreading! Concrete can't be bothered; it heaps up on itself in lazy glops, sensual as a frog.

. . . Promiscuous, doing what anyone wants if the person is strong enough to hold it, concrete is a slut, a gigolo, of materials. Every other material - wood, clay, metal, even plastic - has self-respect, a limit to what it will suffer to have done with it, and at the same time is responsive within that limit, supple in the ways it consents to be used. Not concrete.

Concrete is stupid and will do anything for anyone, without protest or pleasure, so long as the person indulges concrete's half-love of gravity, its lazy mania to lie down. Concrete does not care if you respect it. It does not know the meaning of respect. Only give it a place to lie down, a place of any shape, and concrete will do your bidding.





Let concrete set, however, and sense the difference. . . . Set concrete insists, insists, insists. It insists on the rightness, permanence, godliness of the form into which it flowed so carelessly. You must smash concrete to bits if you would shut up the voice of its insistence, and even then the smashed bits will lie around insistently piping. I was in Berlin in 1990 and remember a thousand hammers banging away at the Wall, banging out “die, die, die!” The concrete of the awful thing was shrieking back “wall, wall, wall!” It took a long time for the hammers to win the argument, and even then the shattered corpse would not give in. I brought a handful of fragments home, and the ones that retained any flat surface shrilled “wall” in tiny voices, totalitarian for eternity.¹

But Peter Schjeldahl, in 1992, did not know concrete cast in textile molds. A strange transformation of character occurs when concrete meets fabric. The concrete reluctantly sloughing down the chute is Schjeldahl feckless, promiscuous mix, but when a fabric mold swallows this load, see what happens:

The first petulant arrival at the bottom of the mold finds concrete unchanged and the fabric no more than an empty sack, but as the wet concrete lays down against the sides of its container a spark occurs. The fabric, a limp membrane with no fixed shape, is first nudged, and then pushed with increasing urgency by the growing mass of concrete. Awakened to a life of structure, it offers resistance through the only means at its disposal. It is energized as a pure tension field, responding to the press of the wet concrete with a mirroring, opposite force. It becomes a skin.

Concrete’s urge to lay down is frustrated by this thin and supple enclosure. See now how its great stupid weight is squeezed into a *pressure*, transforming this “lazy glop” into a powerful and willful fluid. A struggle ensues. As concrete presses harder against its newfound skin, and the skin tenderly matches each new trust with a corresponding strain, see how they surprise each other in their mutual transformation! Their struggle slides into a collective dance, a mutual search for stasis.

In a continuous fluid adjustment, they fall together into an improvisation of collective resistance. They find that together they are capable of instantaneously calculating and occupying new forms in space, immaculate new forms of mutual repose. They find themselves effortlessly inventing new shapes of resistance that perfectly balance the skin’s tension against fluid urgencies. Here they are, locked in a fateful mutual embrace, fateful because they are approaching a final, permanent geometry, one that is not precisely known until it is reached. When the builders stop filling the mold there will be a last found form of repose.

But the dance is not over. Did you know that when concrete is mixed it is forced to accept water beyond its own desires? Yes, we give it enough water to suit our own purposes of transport and placement, but this extra water will make the final Concrete member weaker than it should be. The gentle caress of a permeable fabric mold teases out this excess water as the urgencies of the concrete’s pressure pushes its fluids through its surrounding skin. See how the fabric has become wet. It bleeds. It weeps. Passing the fluid virtue of the concrete through its skin it accelerates and strengthens the coming harness. And when the hardness does come, and this dance of emergent form is over, see how the rigid form remembers the struggle of its own becoming. These emergent events are “in there” even after they are no longer occurring. See how the concrete remembers its original wetness, its fluid origins! What has happened? Concrete has fallen in love. It was concrete’s dream to be held in this way. Why did we not see this before?

¹ Schjeldahl, P., *Columns and Catalogues*, in the chapter: Scott Burton: *The Concrete Work*, Max Protech Gallery, New York, 1992. Concrete and Burton, pp196-98. Published by Geoffrey Young, 1994 ISBN 0935724680, 9780935724684

3.

Building

A variant of form-eruption drawing we might call “collage construction drawing” provides a way of making test “constructions” of spaces and buildings based on existing models and experimental full-scale constructions. In these drawings, photographic fragments from various physical constructions are optically projected onto a sheet of paper and roughly assembled as a collage. Then they are drawn into, by both willful and hallucinatory techniques, to find and render a possible architectural reality. The selection of the source material and their initial collaged arrangement sets the nature of the game, which is played out in a series of improvisations that oscillate between the free-fall of form-eruption “finding” and the willful invention and depiction of designed constructions. In this way, a dream-like freedom is maintained even as possible constructions are tested and architectural propositions are made.

The state of mind induced by this way of drawing is reminiscent of descriptions of lucid dreams where a mixture of vivid and unexpected occurrences are guided by the author’s active will. These more willfully constructed drawings can begin from strange collisions of source material, but they can also dream into a particular set scene -- for example the fabric-formed ‘cover version’ of Giuseppe Terragni’s Italian rationalist Casa del Fascio, or the transformation of roman sculpture in *Diana’s Robes*. Drawings like those of the *Hotel Edward Hopper* or *Train Drape* are closely directed collages, mixing a specific set scene with hallucinatory suggestions and projected ideas of construction.

The connection between illusion and construction in this mode of drawing is both explicit and instrumental. But there are deeper fundamental dream-like connections between drawing and construction in the larger project of this work. The things we see in clouds are made of our dreams of form, while each material is always dreaming of its own desired forms, induced no doubt by its internal molecular anatomy, its prodigiously active atomic geology, and its remembered or anticipated mechanical and chemical fates. Following Graphite’s hallucinatory instigations is essentially the same act as following the formal instigations of fabric and concrete in gravity. There are, of course, serious differences of situation, technique, time-scale, etc., but the aspect of dreaming something into being (my dreams, or concrete’s dreams) remains the central and constant accompaniment to all of this work.

