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Blurs, Blots and Clouds: Architecture and the Dissolution of the Surface

Vittoria Di Palma

Uta Barth's *Ground #2* is the photograph of a landscape. To the left we see an outcrop of wild golden grasses, while to the right the dark green of a tree rises up, its branches splaying and curving around to meet the photograph's top edge. Beyond, the blue sea stretches out to the horizon, where it meets the hazy white of a summer sky. The photograph's composition is conventional: it uses a tree as a framing device; it is divided into foreground, middle ground and background; and it contains familiar landscape elements – a chunk of cliff, a strip of sea, an expanse of sky. But although this photograph is recognisably a landscape, its claim to representation is subverted by the fact that the image is unquestionably out of focus. The landscape is a blur.

Ground #2 is one of a number of photographs Barth made during the 1990s that use the blurred image to question conventions of representation and perception. In the photographs comprising the two series entitled *Grounds* and *Fields*, objects are recognisable, but not clearly visible. We can identify this shape as a tree, that one as a traffic light, but none of the details is discernible. The photographs are both representational and abstract – they are at once images of everyday scenes, and abstract compositions of fields of colour. In these photographs, Barth explores the similarities between the camera lens and the human eye. Although the images' blurred appearance results from a careful manipulation of photographic processes, the blur, Barth argues, is equally an aspect of our everyday vision.¹ A blurred image is characteristic, for example, of peripheral vision – it results when we are not focusing directly upon an object that is within our visual field. But when we confront Barth's blurry photographs, our instinct is to try to bring them into focus, and their resistance to that optical tendency is what gives the photographs their critical power. Barth's photographs aim to present an image that is optically confusing. By depriving the eye of its ability to focus, or, more precisely, by forcing it to focus on an image that refuses to be brought into focus, her photographs produce a sense of visual

frustration. As Barth explains: 'The opticality of the image becomes even more exaggerated because you don't see the surface, you don't know where to stop and focus.'² Focusing, whether in the eye or in a camera lens, involves a process of lengthening and contracting, moving in and out. With their negation of the surface, Barth's photographs give the eye nowhere to rest. The conjunction of the blurred image and the dissolved surface make the act of seeing not just confusing, but also uncomfortable. Nonetheless it is precisely by producing confusion and discomfort that Barth's photographs focus the viewer's attention on processes of perception, on the limitations of sight and on internalised conventions of viewing.

This article is about architecture and its role in the production of a self-aware viewing subject. It explores how colour, the blurred form, the evanescent surface and the overt display of representational techniques come together to create a mode of seeing that involves an awareness of perceptual processes – a configuration of visuality central to definitions of modernity itself.

The work of Herzog and de Meuron exhibits an ongoing preoccupation with the status of the architectural surface. In their Pfaffenhof Sports Centre of 1989–93, a chemical wash applied to the concrete cladding gave rise to a mottled biomorphic pattern. In the 1999 Eberswalde Library, photographic images were etched onto the glass and concrete panels of the building's exterior in a repeating pattern. With the Eberswalde Library, Herzog and de Meuron specifically set out to challenge Adolf Loos's characterisation of ornament as crime. For if Loos defined ornament as something accessory and applied, here the ornament was etched *into* the glass – a negative rather than a positive process. The monochrome images do not allow for any separation between ornament and wall: the two are fused into a single entity. Both Pfaffenhof and Eberswalde aim to reposition the status of the architectural surface. But whereas they both engage with the relationship between architecture and ornament, the building Herzog and de Meuron completed in 2003 for an institute of contemporary dance in London – Laban – questions the relationship between architecture and colour.

Theorists who have striven to define what is essential to architecture – what makes it distinct from the other arts – have seized upon issues of structure, function, form or space. Colour, however, has never been deemed one of these essential qualities. Not only is colour a variable of other art forms, like painting, but more importantly, colour cannot itself be an essence. Whether

applied in the form of pigment, or arising from qualities particular to the material, colour is a superficial, or surface, characteristic that is dependent on our perception rather than inherent in the object itself. As a purely optical phenomenon, a sensation produced in each individual viewer, colour cannot be described or represented. Colour simply is. In architectural criticism, terms such as 'supplementary', 'ornamental' or 'cosmetic' have been deployed to denigrate colour's appearance in a building. As something applied to a surface, like other ornament, colour has been deemed dispensable. If ornament could be characterised by Loos as crime, colour, at best, was deception – a secondary, sensory quality, distracting and seducing the viewer and deflecting attention from what really matters about architecture. But it is precisely this power to distract and seduce that is the key to colour's critical and destabilising potential.³

The beginnings of a sense of colour's power to challenge established architectural certainties can be located historically with great precision in the debates on polychromy of the early nineteenth century. The idea that Greek temples were not originally white but rather painted in gaudy colours was famously championed in France by the architect Jacques Ignace Hittorff, whose polemical paper on Greek polychromy, *'De l'architecture polychrome chez les Grecs...'*, was presented to the Parisian academic establishment in 1830.⁴ It caused an uproar. The Greek temple was the paradigm of architecture, encapsulating both architecture's origin in the primitive hut and its ultimate perfection in the Parthenon. It had achieved that status because of its pure expression of structural concerns: even its ornaments – capitals, triglyphs, acroteria – had been interpreted as arising directly from structural considerations. Colour, in the form of applied pigments, not only disturbed the aesthetic purity of the white structure but also was an ornament with no structural origin or function. Colour was unnecessary and excessive, and the implications of the discovery of traces of pigment on Greek temples questioned the definition of architecture itself. Rather than ornamenting and reinforcing the building's structure, colour drew attention to its surface. The use of colour and reflective or lightweight materials for this purpose can be traced, in twentieth-century architecture, from the work of Mies van der Rohe to (most importantly for Herzog and de Meuron) that of Raphael Soriano – with the latter's Curtis House, Case Study House and Colby Apartments, all dating from 1950, providing especially important precedents.⁵ However, the specific ways colour is employed in Laban denote a reconfigured approach to the architectural surface that results in a new kind of interaction between the building and its viewers.



Laban was designed as part of a broader project for community regeneration in Deptford, an area of London known more for its industrial wasteland than its cultural monuments. Vertical bands of magenta, turquoise and lime bloom on the building's plastic sheathing, creating the impression of a mutable and sensitive skin. The coloured bands also participate in the skin's variable transparency: once inside, users find that the panels of colour create differentiated translucent backdrops for the dance studios, library and other internal spaces, and alternately occlude and frame views of the surrounding urban context. The three colours achieve their greatest degree of saturation and opacity on the interior's concrete walls, where they solidify into thick, shiny coats of neon paint. The colours ornamenting Laban are manifestly modern, industrial, artificial. In fact, it is said that their choice was inspired by the sight of an oil slick floating on the surface of Deptford Creek, an industrialised waterway running next to the site.⁶ The reflection of the building on the adjacent water seems to recall that original oily patch, and the view of Laban from a railway bridge running over the creek evokes and encourages those conjoined responses of repulsion and allure characteristic of the industrial sublime. This careful framing positions Laban as both the product of the industry that has laid waste to the Deptford area, and the engine of its renewal. Laban is a manifestly artificial object, and its engagement with the notion of artificiality is further reinforced both by the material of its cladding – plastic in the form of a semi-translucent twin-wall polycarbonate – and in the way colour functions as a part of that plasticated skin.

In 'Plastic', a very short essay written in 1957, Roland Barthes locates the significance of plastic in its artificiality.⁷ Both awed and repelled by the potential and ubiquity of plastic, Barthes identifies it as the ultimate modern material, a material without qualities. Plastic 'hardly exists as substance', Barthes writes. '[I]ts reality is a negative one: neither hard nor deep, it must be content with a "substantial" attribute which is neutral in spite of its utilitarian advantages: *resistance*, a state which merely means an absence of yielding.'⁸ But it is precisely because plastic lacks any inherent, natural qualities that it is magically – alchemically, he writes – able to be made into any object: it is the stuff, or matter, of a parallel, man-made world. More than a substance, plastic 'is the very idea of its infinite transformation [...] it is less a thing than the trace of a movement'.⁹ The transformative potential of plastic 'gives man the measure of his power [...] the euphoria of a prestigious free-wheeling through nature'.¹⁰ Plastic abolishes the traditional hierarchy of substances because 'the whole world *can* be plasticized' – even life itself. Plastic, for Barthes, heralds the ultimate triumph of the artificial over the natural.¹¹

The notion of the artificial is also present in the way that the colours appear on Laban's surface. Jeffrey Kipnis has argued with respect to other buildings by Herzog and de Meuron that it is the concept of the cosmetic – with its connotations of artificiality – that is more relevant than that of ornament. Whereas ornaments, according to Kipnis, 'retain their identity as entities', cosmetics 'relate always and only to skin, to particular regions of skin [...]'. '[They] work as fields, as blush or shadows or highlight, as aura or air. Thinness, adherence and diffuse extent are crucial to the cosmetic effect, which is more visceral than intellectual, more atmospheric than aesthetic.'¹² The notion of the cosmetic is in many ways relevant to Laban: the bands of colour, with their blurred edges and variable saturation – intense at the centre of the band, and bleeding

Four views of Laban (Herzog and de Meuron), Deptford, England, 2003



into colourlessness at the sides – do suggest an aura or blush. But the notion of the cosmetic implies a layer applied to a surface, as in Warhol's silk screens of Marilyn Monroe, where the superficiality of the image is conveyed by the way the colours of her makeup refuse to remain within their outlines. In Laban, colour is not applied *to* the surface, but is an integral part *of* the surface. The coloured bands do not adhere to the building's plasticated skin, but are inherent in the material of the cladding. Furthermore, rather than reinforcing the visibility of particular elements, in Laban the bands seem placed arbitrarily: the three colours do not alternate according to a repeating pattern, and more importantly, they do not correspond to particular zones that require highlighting – to indicate, for example, function or programme. The colours bleed and blur with no particular reference to any overarching system. They simply appear.

The bands of colours also resist fixity in terms of their intensity. Not only does the colour seem more saturated at the centre of each band than at its edges, but the degree of saturation changes with the movement of the viewer: most intense when it is seen head on, less so when seen obliquely. When one walks around the building, the bands of colour seem to move and change, the impression of their presence varying as they are approached, confronted and passed by. This too distracts from a reading of the colour as a superimposed, applied addition, suggesting rather a potential inherent in the

material, a potential triggered by the variable point of view of the moving subject.

Laban's skin encases the building tightly – windows and doors are set flush, their thin frames lying just on top of the plastic surface; the entrance doors slide apart rather than opening out. And with alternating areas of translucency and reflectivity, colour and colourlessness, the skin reinforces its own two-dimensionality by functioning as a screen for the display of images. At night the building glows like a magic lantern, the windows become transparent and the translucent walls are transformed into a shadow-puppet theatre, making visible the students in the studios within, whose choreographed movements ornament the exterior with a frieze of dancing forms. Punctuating the skin and its translucent expanse are reflective windows, arranged in an asymmetrical yet balanced pattern. These windows, in contrast to the screen-like walls, act as framed pictures. In the day, at the lower levels, the mirrored windows reflect the surrounding landscape: on one side, the industrialised waterway of Deptford Creek; to the back, the parking lot. On the front they function as a curving backdrop for an outdoor amphitheatre, providing not a stage set in traditional terms, but rather an episodic and fragmented replication of the dancers and their spectators, united in the same performative space. On the upper levels, the windows frame and reflect only the sky – a London sky with its fast-moving and ever-changing panorama of clouds. Surrounded by slight frames, and set off by the lack of reflectivity of the majority of the surface, they ornament the exterior with a series of cloud pictures.

The emphasis given to Laban's surface is complicated by the translucency of that surface, and by the fact that the structural framework is visible through the cladding. The twin-wall polycarbonate's translucency, and the way the colours seem to appear within it, endow the material with thickness, giving the surface depth. And the fact that one can see the structural support through the material – an effect most evident at the building's corners – sets up a tension between the building's orthogonal structure and its evanescent outline. This sense of evanescence is heightened by the fact that the building does not have the shape of a regular geometric solid, but rather is a box that seems to bend and morph: swelling delicately at the back, and blowing inward like a sail at the front. Thus Laban's surface both delimits the boundaries of



the building, defining it as a volume, and makes that volume appear insubstantial, mutable, almost ephemeral. The tension produced through this interplay between gridded structure and ephemeral surface is thus a tension between an impression of the building as a stable volume and as a mutable object; between a solid and a blur.

* * *

For a number of weeks during the summer of 2002 a cloud appeared to be lingering over Lake Neuchâtel. Unlike most clouds, it stayed low, skimming the surface of the water, and unlike a fog or a mist, it did not dissipate with the heat of the midday sun. Also – most unlike a cloud – it appeared to be inhabited: people could be seen strolling towards it along a narrow walkway that stretched from the shore into its heart, disappearing into its depths, and emerging some time later on a parallel walkway that conducted them back to shore. This cloud was, however, no natural phenomenon, but a pavilion constructed by Diller+Scofidio for Expo 2002.

Blur, as this cloud-pavilion came to be called, consisted of a mass of vapour and a steel tensegrity structure that created the vapour and enabled it to cohere.¹³ The steel structure, suspended above the lake by four piers, was made of a network of hollow pipes fitted with jets. The jets pumped out a fine spray of vapour which coalesced into a mist that shrouded the structure and created the appearance of a cloud. Within the cloud were also two platforms at different levels – one oval, the other of a biomorphic shape. Visitors, equipped with plastic raincoats, could roam the pavilion's various levels, ascending to the 'Angel Deck' to take in the view, or descending to the 'Water Bar' to sample an array of bottled waters that enabled them literally to consume the pavilion, or at least its primary material component (the water from Lake Neuchâtel was presumably not one of the available options). Blur was both a cloud and the representation of a cloud; as a representation, it was used by Diller+Scofidio to explore notions of architectural ephemerality that are central to the idea of a pavilion as well – after all, no work of architecture could be more ephemeral than a building that was no object, but simply atmosphere that changed, moved and dissolved from one moment to the next. In this way, Blur pushed the idea of a pavilion – a construction that was intended to exist only briefly, that embodied a concept and that was to survive only as image (rather than ruin) for the duration of its afterlife – to its limit and logical conclusion.

Although Blur's absolute ephemerality seems to challenge one of the fundamental defining characteristics of architecture – its

constructedness, or the Vitruvian quality of *firmitas* – the appearance of the cloud was in fact entirely dependent on the pavilion's structure. Blur's cloud could not have existed without the steel network out of which it emerged and which made the experience of visiting it possible. Rather than negating architecture as construction, the cloud was implicated by and dependent on it. Thus, Blur's cloud was presented as constructed in two ways simultaneously: first because it could not have existed without the emissions from the high-pressure jets, and second because it was a cloud-pavilion. In other words, it was as much a cloud as the representation of an idea of a cloud. With Blur, the artifice of architecture was shown to be necessary to the production and representation of a natural phenomenon.

The pavilion's blurring of the distinctions between nature and artifice, its positing of a relationship of mutual interdependence between cloud and grid, questions the very definition of an architectural object. Architecture, in the case of Blur, could not be distilled to a mere question of structure, for the pavilion both exceeded and compromised its structural dimension, being composed of both structure *and* vapour, with that vapour veiling and hindering the apprehension of the structure. Nor could Blur be understood in terms of volume: it neither had a firm outline, nor did it delineate a space. Rather than confronting viewers with an architectural object, Blur immersed them in atmosphere. Blur defined architecture not as object, nor as surface, but as pure effect. And by resisting definition in terms of any inherent or objective qualities, Blur existed primarily in the realm of experience. Blur made any objective notion of the pavilion conceptually impossible, since the pavilion was an ultimately ungraspable apparition in a state of constant change. In so doing, it created an architectural experience of absolute subjectivity. And in this deliberate construction of an architectural experience that highlights the impossibility of objectivity, that makes everything utterly dependent on the viewer, Blur locates the question of architecture within a particularly modern understanding of the nature of perception itself.¹⁴

The linking of ephemerality and subjectivity can be traced back to aesthetic preoccupations of the eighteenth century – in particular, to an interest in exploring the fleeting nature of perception, to an awareness that even such a seemingly stable object as a building would look different from different points of view, at different times of day, and from one viewer to the next, or even to the same viewer at different moments. Unity was understood to exist only in a single, discrete moment of experience – one object, seen at one moment,



Facing page: Interior view, Blur
(Diller + Scofidio), Expo 2002,
Yverdon-les-Bains, Switzerland
(photo Diller + Scofidio).

This page: Aerial view, Blur
(photo Diller + Scofidio).



by one viewer. Beyond that, perception exploded into a bewildering heterogeneity. This attention to the variability of perception was further complicated by an awareness of the changeability of objects themselves. The flourishing of interest in depicting growing, crumbling, moving, exploding or dissolving objects such as trees, ruins, waterfalls or volcanoes highlighted a problem central to the act of representation: the problem of fixing an object in a state of constant change. One solution to this problem of making perception and representation coincide was to divorce representation from the task of depicting an actual object or scene. Another was to limit representation to the depiction of one single moment of perceptual experience. And a third was to transform representation in such a way that it was able to express the ephemerality present both in objects and in a viewer's perception of those objects.

* * *

When Alexander Cozens published *A New Method of Assisting the Invention in Drawing Original Compositions of Landscape* in 1785, his aim was to publicise a mechanical compositional method that he deemed 'sufficiently expeditious and extensive to draw forth the ideas of an ingenious mind disposed to the art of designing'.¹⁵ Cozens claimed that he discovered his method by accident: one day, while sitting with a pupil whom he was instructing in the principles and practice of drawing landscapes, Cozens reached for the nearest piece of paper – which happened to be slightly stained – and proceeded to make a quick sketch to demonstrate a point. To his surprise, he found that '[t]he stains, though extremely faint, appeared upon revisal to have influenced me, insensibly, in expressing the general appearance of a landscape'.¹⁶ Struck by this coincidence, Cozens proceeded to replicate the stained appearance of the original sheet by marking a sheet of clean paper with a mixture of ink and water. Giving it to the pupil, he found that the student 'instantly improved the blot, as it may be called, into an intelligible sketch, and from that time made such progress in composition, as fully answered my most sanguine expectations from the experiment'.¹⁷

'The blot is not a drawing', Cozens explained, 'but an assemblage of accidental shapes, from which a drawing may be made. It is a hint, or crude resemblance of the whole effect of a picture, except the keeping and colouring; that is to say, it gives an idea of the masses of light and shade, as well as of the forms, contained in a finished composition.'¹⁸ A blot, in other words, was not the representation of a landscape, but the expression of its effect, an effect that depended on general impressions rather than exact depiction. A blot looked like a drawing whose details were blurred or obscure. Cozens's description brings Uta Barth's photographs to mind: 'If a finished drawing be gradually removed from the eye, its smaller parts will be less and less expressive; and when they are wholly undistinguished, and the largest parts alone remain visible, the drawing will then represent a blot, [...]. On the contrary, if a blot be placed at such a distance that the harshness of the parts should disappear, it would represent a finished drawing, but with the appearance of uncommon spirit.'¹⁹ A blot looked like a landscape seen indistinctly in one's peripheral vision, or from a great distance, or from the window of a moving vehicle, or under any other circumstances that prevented the attentive observation of its particularities.

Since a blot was intended to convey general impressions rather than precise observations, it was not intended to be the product of traditional practices of sketching from nature. As Cozens explained: '[t]o sketch in the common way, is to transfer ideas from the mind to the paper, or canvas, in outlines, in the slightest manner. To blot, is to make varied spots and shapes with ink on paper, producing accidental forms without lines, from which ideas are presented to the mind. This is conformable to nature: for in nature, forms are not distinguished by lines, but by shade and colour. To sketch, is to delineate ideas; blotting suggests them.'²⁰ Not only did the blot dispense with drawing outlines – or *disegno* – relying instead on broad masses of light and shade, but it also reconfigured the process of artistic composition: the artist was not first to observe nature, then gather ideas, make a sketch and turn the sketch into a final composition; rather, it was the blot itself that suggested ideas, usurping the place of nature in the design process.



The blot's irregular, imprecise forms, though initially 'rude and unmeaning, as they are formed with the swiftest hand',²¹ were to be transformed into recognisable landscape elements such as mountains, rocks or trees by 'studying each individual form with attention till you produce some proper meaning'.²² Thus with Cozens a determining link was made between the irregular and accidental, and the act of representation. His blots conjured up such objects as rocks, ruins, waterfalls, mountains or trees because of their equally irregular outlines, and their common resistance to precise apprehension, or delineation. The design process was redefined as the production of meaning from indistinct shapes, as a passage from obscurity to visibility, as bringing a blur into focus. This was possible because the landscape compositions produced through Cozens's method were never intended to be representations of any actual

This page: Alexander Cozens, *The Passage of Hannibal over the Alps* (blot) (V&A Images/Victoria and Albert Museum).

Facing page, from left: Alexander Cozens, *The Passage of Hannibal over the Alps* (drawing) (V&A Images/Victoria and Albert Museum); Alexander Cozens, *Compositions of Sky, A New Method of Assisting the Invention in Drawing Original Compositions of Landscape* (London, 1785), plates 25-8 (© Trustees of the British Museum).

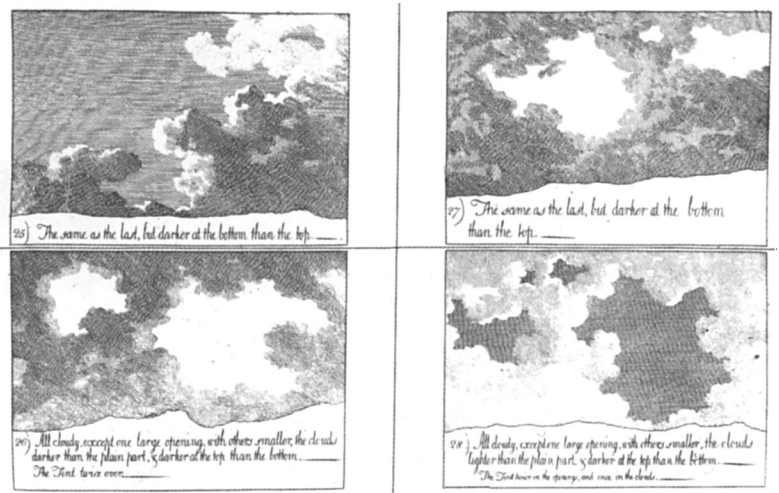
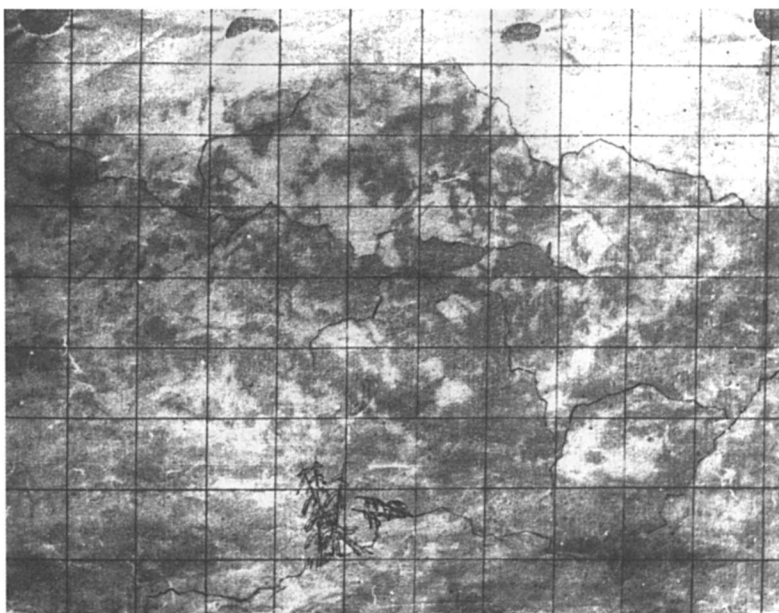
scene. Cozens provided illustrations of 16 different types of landscape compositions, whose titles, such as 'Groups of objects on one hand, and a flat on the other, or an irregular form next to the groups, at a moderate distance from the eye', 'A single or principal object, opposed to the sky; as a tree, a ruin, a rock, &c. or a group of objects', or 'Objects, or groups of objects, placed alternately on both hands, and gradually retiring from the eye. The horizon above the bottom of the view', convey the abstraction and generality, the distance from detailed observation that is characteristic of his entire method.²³ Finally, the drawing was to be completed by inserting one of the 20 sky compositions included in the treatise, which were to be chosen on the basis of considerations relating strictly to the internal logic of the composition rather than with reference to any observable configuration of the sky: Cozens noted that the artist should take care to place 'the greatest quantity of clouds on that side of the picture where the landscape part is lowest, in order to preserve the balance of the composition'.²⁴

Cozens's method posited the blot, rather than nature, as the origin of the eventual landscape scene. But unlike Leonardo's mouldering wall or variegated stone, Cozens's blot is not a found object, but a created one. Before ever setting brush to paper the artist was to think of and concentrate fully on the intended subject of the work, so that the resulting blot would have 'a general disposition of these masses, producing one comprehensive form, which may be conceived and purposely intended before the blot is begun'.²⁵ Chance and accident – identified as nature's generative principles – played a role, but just as important was the designer's agency: '[c]omposing landscapes by invention, is not the art of imitating individual nature; it is more; it is forming artificial representations of landscape on the general principles of nature',²⁶ Cozens explained. By making the blot take the place of natural scenery as the generator of the eventual landscape composition, Cozens located the act of creation not in nature but in the artist's mind. And by locating the origin of the composition in the mind, Cozens's method was able to produce a dazzling degree of variety: 'from the rudeness and uncertainty of the shapes made in blotting, one artificial blot will suggest different ideas to different persons;

on which account it has the strongest tendency to enlarge the powers of invention, being more effectual to that purpose than the study of nature herself alone'.²⁷ The blot's power to generate a multiplicity of results was further demonstrated by illustrations of four different landscape compositions Cozens produced from one single blot.

Cozens's method depended on the generative potential of the indistinct, blurred form. It systematised chance and accident in order to produce an unparalleled variety of compositional solutions. But by taking chance, accident and variety – qualities associated at the time with nature's creative processes – and putting them in the service of representation, Cozens reconfigured the relationship between nature and art. '[F]orming artificial representations of landscape on the general principles of nature' was doing more than simply blurring the boundaries between art and nature, it was locating perception and representation squarely within the realm of subjectivity. The self-referentiality of Cozens's method subverted the independent existence of exterior objects, redefining them as purely mental constructs. Through Cozens's method, nature itself was made artificial.

Cozens's blot method is an important precursor of nineteenth-century explorations of questions pertaining to the representation of the transitory, the ephemeral, the seemingly unrepresentable – explorations that found paradigmatic expression in the depiction of clouds. Clouds, whose 'divisions of surface are grotesque and endless [...], brilliant beyond all power of colour, and transitory as a dream',²⁸ as Ruskin put it, presented a particular challenge to the artist since their instability profoundly questioned the fixity characteristic of representation. Although Cozens's treatise contained numerous images of clouds – images that were studied and copied by Constable – clouds, for Cozens, operate as two-dimensional, discrete compositional elements. Instead, Constable and Turner – both of whom made numerous sketches and watercolours of clouds both as studies for paintings and as works in their own right – saw clouds not as objects but as atmosphere. Clouds were variable not simply in terms of their outlines, but also because they were an integral part of a changeable, mobile skyscape.





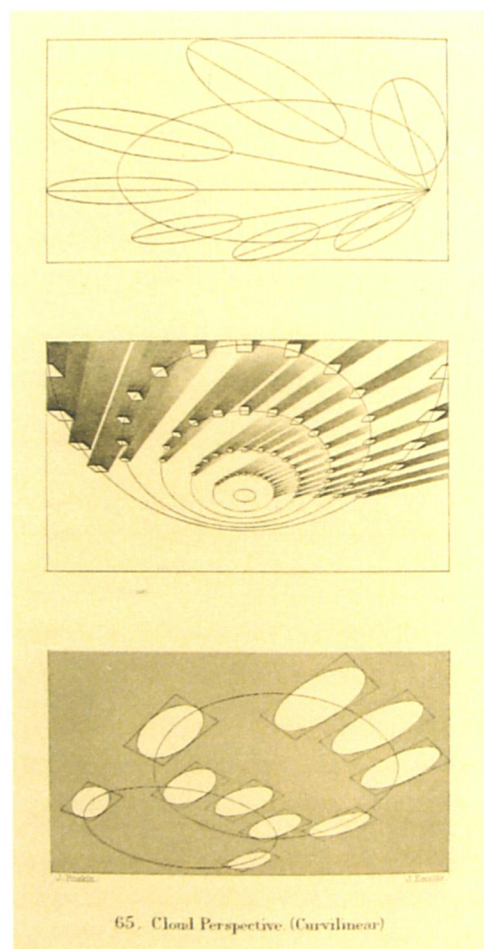
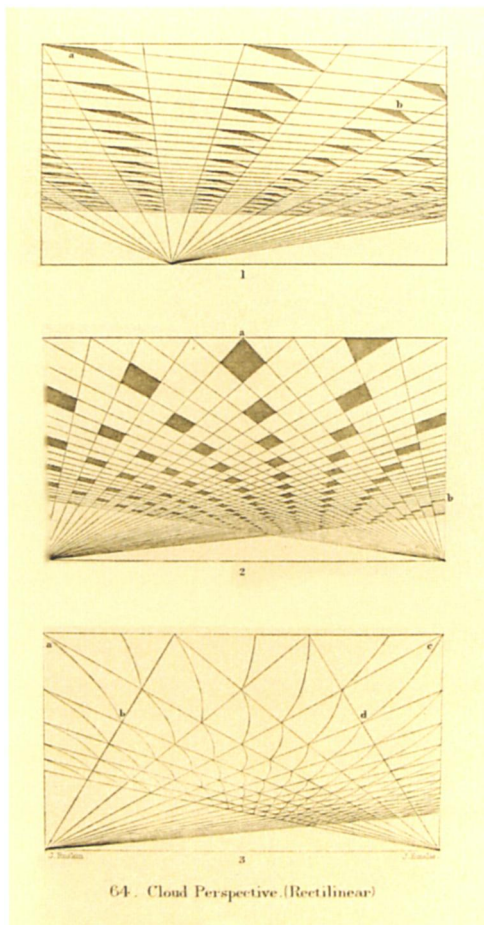
This page: Joseph Mallord William Turner, *Pools of Solomon*, 1834–5 (Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge).

Facing page, from top: John Ruskin, 'Cloud Perspective (Rectilinear)'; John Ruskin, 'Cloud Perspective (Curvilinear)'. Both from *Modern Painters* (Kent, 1888), vol. V, plates 64 and 65.

For Ruskin, it was Turner who stood 'more absolutely alone in this gift of cloud-drawing than in any other of his great powers',²⁹ a power particularly evident in the *Pools of Solomon* of 1834–5. In this watercolour, Turner not only depicts a variety of ephemeral atmospheric effects but also conveys a sense of the vapour's motion through space, with the clouds and haze hurtling towards the blue horizon and yellow glow of the sun. For Ruskin, the *Pools of Solomon* enabled viewers to 'walk through the passages of mist as they melt on the one hand into those stormy fragments of fiery cloud, or on the other into the cold solitary shadows that compass the sweeping hill'.³⁰ Turner's rendition of atmospheric effects created an unprecedented sense of space, encouraging viewers to proceed beyond the image's surface and virtually enter into its depths. Turner's attention to the appearance of clouds, his sense that they were not objects suspended in the sky, but local and transitory condensations of a unified, fluid atmosphere, demonstrated his profound understanding of what Ruskin called 'the truth of clouds'. The *Pools of Solomon* exemplified this truth because its techniques were akin to the qualities of clouds themselves. Countering implied criticisms of Turner's technique, Ruskin thundered: 'when you find an inch without air and transparency, and a hair's breadth without changefulness and thought; and when you can count the torn waves of tossing radiance that gush from the sun, as you can count the fixed, white, insipidities of Claude; or when you can measure the modulation and depth of that hollow mist, as you can the flourishes of the brush upon the canvas of Salvator, talk of Turner's want of truth!'³¹ Like a cloud, the *Pools of Solomon* was transparent, changeful and extensive; like a cloud, it resisted measurement, quantification and fixation; and like a cloud, it posed questions central to the act of representation. Reinforcing the sense of aerial transparency, turbulence and motion are the pools of the title: the three rectangular basins that step down towards the

distant horizon. The pools reflect the aerial turbulence on an earthly plane, the calm of the water's surface both reduplicating and contrasting with the extreme mobility of the sky above. They function as subsidiary and multiple frames within the frame of the picture. And in thus framing and reflecting the sky, they are representations of a representation, bringing this tension between ephemerality and depiction, mobility and fixity, to centre stage.

Turner's *Pools of Solomon* is not only a history painting but also a painting about painting. It is a sustained exploration of the representational technique known as aerial or atmospheric perspective, that variant of perspective that encompasses atmospheric effects. Whereas linear perspective concerns the apparent diminution in the size of objects by virtue of their distance from the observer, aerial perspective (which can be divided into three subcategories – colour perspective, acuity perspective and chiaroscuro perspective) addresses the apparent degradation of the colour, form and relief of an object due not only to its distance from the observer, but also to the effects of the intervening atmosphere. Renaissance artists – Leonardo in particular – had noted that objects tended to appear increasingly flat, blurry and bluish according to their distance, and acknowledged that aerial perspective was critical to conveying a sense of recession and depth, but attempts to impose rules comparable to those governing linear perspective had found few followers.³² Furthermore, Brunelleschi's demonstration of linear perspective at the entrance of Santa Maria del Fiore left the problem of meteorological representation unresolved: the sky was not depicted but reflected in a mirror attached to the tablet expressly for that purpose, because the mutability and changeability of the Florentine sky exceeded the capacities of his system.³³ However, by the end of the eighteenth century, aerial perspective and the representation of atmosphere were becoming subjects of increasing



concern to artists and theorists.³⁴ In 1795 Humphry Repton stressed the limitations of linear perspective, 'since we observe that objects not only diminish in their size, but in their distinctness, in proportion to the body of air betwixt the eye and the objects: those nearest are strongly represented, while other parts, as they recede, become less distinct, till at last the outline of a distant hill seems melting into the air itself', and in his paper on aerial perspective of 1774, Johann Lambert went so far as to claim that even the clearest air was not to be understood as an absolutely diaphanous substance, but rather as a very fine and dispersed fog.³⁵ Mistiness, rather than clarity, became the norm. In its attention to atmosphere – one could almost say cloudiness – aerial perspective addressed both the representation of skies and the effects of haze and mist, thus reconfiguring the concerns of representation. And this reconfiguration, according to Ruskin, played a critical role in the art of his time – he noted that the paintings of his contemporaries exhibited so much 'attention to the real form of clouds, and careful drawing of effects of mist; [...] that the appearance of objects, as seen through it, becomes a subject of science with us; and the faithful representation of that appearance is made of primal importance, under the name of aerial perspective'.³⁶

Ruskin's cloud perspective diagrams indicate the uses of perspective for the representation of aerial phenomena. But whereas the rectilinear system aided the depiction of extension, Ruskin noted that it was often not sufficient for conveying the buoyancy and motion so characteristic of clouds. Instead, he argued, the curvature present in most cloud systems necessitates the employment of a curvilinear system – his analytical sketch of the sky in the *Pools of Solomon* demonstrates that Turner used 'a concentric system of circles of this kind, and thus lighted'.³⁷ For Ruskin, it is the curvilinear system which allows the mobility and changeability of the atmosphere to be expressed. In the paintings of the Old Masters, he writes, 'cloud is cloud, and blue is blue, and no kind of connection between them is ever hinted at. The sky is thought of as a clear, high, material dome, the clouds as separate bodies suspended beneath it; and in consequence, however delicate and exquisitely removed in tone their skies may be, you always look *at* them, not *through* them'.³⁸ But, he continued, 'if you look intensely at the pure blue of a serene sky, you will see that there is a variety and fulness in its very repose. It is not flat dead colour, but a deep, quivering, transparent body of penetrable air, in which you trace or imagine short falling spots of deceiving light, and dim shades, faint, veiled vestiges of dark vapour'.³⁹ Turner was able to capture these atmospheric qualities because '[h]is blue is never laid on in smooth coats, but in breaking, mingling, melting hues, a quarter of an inch of which, cut off from all the rest of the picture, is still *spacious*, still infinite and immeasurable in depth. It is a painting of the air, something into which you can see, through the parts which are near you, into those which are far off; something which has no surface, and through which we can plunge far and farther, and without stay or end, into the profundity of space; – whereas, with all the old landscape painters except Claude, you may indeed go a long way before you come to the sky, but you will strike hard against it at last'.⁴⁰ Through its dissolution of surfaces, aerial perspective broke through the limits of space, and subverted the objecthood of clouds, allowing the ephemerality of the atmosphere to be expressed. By conceptualising the sky as a 'deep, quivering, transparent body of penetrable air', this variant of perspective did not compromise the representation of ephemerality, but in fact allowed the ephemeral to appear.⁴¹



John Ruskin, Analytical sketch of the sky in Turner's *Pools of Solomon*, from *Modern Painters* (Kent, 1888), vol. V, figure 83

The development of a technique designed to express the atmosphere's ephemerality was important not only in itself but also because it epitomised modern painting. In his chapter on modern landscape painting, Ruskin noted that when 'we turn our eyes [...] to the most characteristic examples of modern landscape [...] the first thing that will strike us, or that ought to strike us, is their *cloudiness*'.⁴² Modern viewers were 'expected to rejoice in darkness, and triumph in mutability; to lay the foundation of happiness in things which momentarily change or fade; and to expect the utmost satisfaction and instruction from what it is impossible to arrest, and difficult to comprehend'.⁴³ For Ruskin, ephemerality was not just a feature of clouds, but emblematic of a modern condition of viewing. The modern viewer was a subject who could not see objects distinctly because objects were no longer understood as discrete entities but as indeterminate forms, or suggestive blurs, without clear outlines or surfaces. Attention to atmosphere defined vision not as a confrontation between subject and object, a process where clear seeing leads to comprehensive understanding, but as a condition characterised by its obscurity and partiality. It is only when the viewer is unable to see clearly, when she sees only partially, or peripherally, or hazily, that the limitations of vision become apparent. The object's obscurity, its indeterminacy, required completion by the viewer's imagination. And in this, the blur turned the question of vision back to the subject. Vision could no longer be understood in terms of a distinction between subject and object, but was instead a relation of interdependence between the two. Thus, modern vision was defined not as *looking at*, but *seeing through*: the blur reconfigured modern aesthetics as an immersive, self-reflective experience.

* * *

An interest in addressing the relationship between viewing subject and aesthetic object is part of minimalism's legacy, and Herzog and de Meuron have long acknowledged their indebtedness to minimalism and to the work of Donald Judd in particular.⁴⁴ Minimalist sculpture, in the words of Morris Louis, makes one 'more aware than before that he himself is establishing relationships as he apprehends the object from various positions and under varying

conditions of light and spatial context'.⁴⁵ However, for Louis this heightened awareness of perception was dependent upon the knowledge of the object's constant shape, or gestalt, and his insistence on the wholeness and integrity of the work resulted in a pillorying of colour. Colour, by being 'essentially optical, immaterial, non-containable, [and] non-tactile' was 'inconsistent with the physical nature of sculpture' because 'intense color, being a specific element, detaches itself from the whole of the work to become one more internal relationship'.⁴⁶ Thus, despite the importance of minimalism's precedent, Laban goes further. Laban, I have suggested, produces a tension between an impression of the building as a stable volume and as a mutable object; between a solid and a blur. But more than just presenting a tension, Laban actually subverts its own claim to volumetric presence by its insistence on the blur. A blur questions and undermines ideas of stability; it resists objectification and essentialisation. A blur is pure appearance, and Laban is a building that embraces appearance by refusing to be a stable object. Plato's critique of representation in *The Republic* uses the metaphors of the screen and the mirror: the screen that reveals the shadow, not the substance; the mirror that reproduces the appearance, but not the truth. In Laban, the movie-screen façades, the picture-like windows (which don't just reflect, but also multiply), the framing of the motion of dancers and clouds, the use of colour and the appearance and dissolution of those colours as one changes point of view: these qualities all engage with questions of representation. Detracting from any sense of fixity or objectivity, they draw the viewer into the work, directing attention to the instability of one's perceptions of the building, and thus to the subjectivity of perception itself.

Laban is a building that celebrates its artificiality, and by artificiality I refer not only to its plastic sheathing or fluorescent colours, but to the broader sense of the word 'artificial' as including everything that is not natural, everything that is a product of human making. Perception is a process that turns the natural into the artificial, transforming the world into a set of sensory impressions that do not necessarily correlate to the qualities of objects themselves. Laban engages with the artificial by presenting itself as a series of subjective impressions, and the dissolution of its surface is central to this engagement. Ruskin's writings and Turner's

paintings blurred the distinction between object and viewer by undermining the surface and its traditional role of contributing to an object's intelligibility. The atmospheric qualities of Turner's paintings require not just engagement, but immersion. Laban's dissolved surface – its translucent skin, the visibility of the structural grid through that skin and the appearance of colour within it – produces an impression of evanescence that undermines any notion of an architectural object. And in Diller+Scofidio's *Blur*, architecture is redefined simply as atmosphere. The engagement of these works with questions of perception locates them within a modern configuration of aesthetic experience. Blurriness connotes that the object we are attempting to see is located outside our range of focus – it is either too close or too far, or somewhere to one side. It makes us aware that we are looking from the wrong place, and that it is impossible to gain objective knowledge from where we are standing. The insistent blurriness of works such as Uta Barth's *Ground #2*, Diller+Scofidio's *Blur* and Herzog and de Meuron's Laban emphasises that there is no place from which that objective knowledge could be gained. The dissolution of the surface repositions us as viewers – we are immersed in the work, but without a firm foothold – creating an aesthetics of uncertain and pure effect.

Notes

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- 1 Pamela M Lee, Matthew Higgs and Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe, *Uta Barth* (London, 2004), p. 57.
- 2 Ibid., p. 16.
- 3 See David Batchelor, *Chromophobia* (London, 2000).
- 4 See Robin Middleton, 'Color and Cladding in the Nineteenth Century', *Daidalos* 51 (March 1994), pp. 78–89.
- 5 See Wolfgang Wagerer, *Raphael Soriano* (London, 2003). Soriano's work was published in

Bauen + Wohnen in the issues for December 1957, April 1962, June 1963 and June 1967. I am grateful to Robin Middleton for these references.

- 6 The colours were chosen in collaboration with Michael Craig-Martin – an artist best known for paintings of everyday objects like shoes, chairs, forks and mobile phones rendered in supersaturated hues of orange, lime, turquoise, yellow and magenta. Craig-Martin also designed the large mural that stretches across one of the walls in Laban's entrance area. See Emma Dean and Michael Stanley (eds.), *Michael Craig-Martin: Surfacing* (Milton Keynes, 2004).
- 7 Roland Barthes, 'Plastic', *Mythologies* [1957], trans. Annette Lavers (New York, 1972), pp. 97–9.
- 8 Ibid., p. 98.
- 9 Ibid., p. 97.
- 10 Ibid., pp. 97–8.
- 11 Ibid., p. 99.
- 12 Jeffrey Kipnis, 'The Cunning of Cosmetics', *EL Croquis* 84 (1997), p. 26.
- 13 See also Elizabeth Diller and Ricardo Scofidio, *Blur: The Making of Nothing* (New York, 2002), and Hubert Damisch, 'Blotting Our Architecture? A Fable in Seven Parts', *Log* 1 (2003), pp. 9–26.
- 14 See Jonathan Crary, *Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle, and Modern Culture* (Cambridge, MA, 1999).
- 15 Alexander Cozens, *A New Method of Assisting the Invention in Drawing Original Compositions of Landscape* (London, 1785), p. 4. See also Jean-Claude Lebensztejn, *L'art de la tache: Introduction à la Nouvelle méthode d'Alexander Cozens* (n.p., 1990).
- 16 Ibid.
- 17 Ibid.
- 18 Ibid., p. 8.
- 19 Ibid.
- 20 Ibid., pp. 8–9.
- 21 Ibid., p. 7.
- 22 Ibid., p. 26.
- 23 Ibid., pp. 32–3, compositions 3, 6 and 11.
- 24 Ibid., p. 28.
- 25 Ibid., p. 7.
- 26 Ibid., p. 2.
- 27 Ibid., p. 11.
- 28 John Ruskin, *Modern Painters* (Kent, 1888), vol. V, p. 126.
- 29 Ibid., vol. V, p. 122.
- 30 Ibid., vol. I, p. 234.
- 31 Ibid.
- 32 See Janis C Bell, 'Zaccolini's 'Theory of Color Perspective'', *Art Bulletin*, v. 75, n. 1 (March 1993), pp. 91–112.
- 33 For a fuller account see Hubert Damisch, *A Theory of [J]Cloud: Toward a History of Painting*, trans. Janet Lloyd (Stanford, 2002), and *The Origin of Perspective*, trans. John Goodman (Cambridge, MA, 1995).
- 34 The first two publications devoted entirely to the question of aerial perspective appeared within a few years of one another: Johann H Lambert, 'Sur la perspective aérienne', *Nouveaux Mémoires de l'Académie Royale des Sciences et Belles-Lettres* [1774] (Berlin, 1776), pp. 74–80, and M de Saint-Morien, *La perspective aérienne* (Paris, 1788). See Janis C Bell, 'Zaccolini's Unpublished Perspective 'Treatise: Why Should We Care?', in Lynne Massey (ed.), *The Treatise on Perspective: Published and Unpublished*, Studies in the History of Art 59 (Washington, DC, 2003), pp. 79–103.
- 35 Humphry Repton, *Sketches and Hints on Landscape Gardening* (London, 1795), p. 32; Lambert, op. cit., p. 74.
- 36 Ruskin, op. cit., vol. III, p. 254.
- 37 Ibid., vol. V, p. 120.
- 38 Ibid., vol. I, p. 204.
- 39 Ibid.
- 40 Ibid., pp. 204–5.
- 41 Hubert Damisch instead asserts that Ruskin's attempt to reconcile perspective with the depiction of the ephemerality of clouds demonstrates 'the extent to which Ruskin (if not Turner himself) remained a prisoner of the tradition of thought that stubbornly strove to set in opposition the scientific geometrical and abstract infinite [...] and a pictorial and expressive infinite [...]. Behind the screen of mists and clouds, the paramount excellence of linearity remains assured [...].' Damisch, op. cit., pp. 191–3.
- 42 Ruskin, op. cit., vol. III, p. 254.
- 43 Ibid.
- 44 For the canonical critique, see Michael Fried, 'Art and Objecthood', republished in *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* (Chicago, 1998), pp. 148–72.
- 45 See Morris Louis, 'Notes on Sculpture, Part 2', *Art Forum*, v. 5, n. 2 (October 1966), p. 20.
- 46 Morris Louis, 'Notes on Sculpture', *Art Forum*, v. 4, n. 6 (February 1966), p. 44; and Louis, *Art Forum*, v. 5, n. 2 (October 1966), p. 20. However, Louis does make a distinction between added colour and colour that is a constituent property of the material, and Judd's attitude towards colour is demonstrably different from Louis's: see Dietmar Elgar (ed.), *Donald Judd: Colorist* (New York, 2000).