This is the unpublished manuscript of a paper delivered as part of the conference organized by Christian Berger and Annika Schlitte, ‘Sublimation: Mind, Matter, Concept in Art after Modernism’, Johannes Gutenberg-Universität Mainz and Kunsthalle Mainz, Germany, 14th-16th December 2017.

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PROCESS ART AND FORM

The period of the late 1960s in American art is often characterized as containing tendencies that involve a shift in state from the material to the immaterial, or from form to ‘Anti Form.’ In the case of Process Art, the dispersal of the material that hitherto would have constituted the solidity of the object meant that the work was interpreted as ‘dematerialized,’ and, in its apparent condition as mere residue or sublimate of a process, as formless. These conditions can be attributed to an artistic concern with the phases of matter, which may be seen, on one side, in Robert Morris’s *Steam*, from 1967, and on the other, in Richard Serra’s *Splashing*, from 1968, or in Robert Smithson’s interest in material deposition or crystal formation. The shift in phase may be from a liquid to a gas, or from a liquid to a solid, but what seems to be important is the process of the shift itself and how it entails a change in sense of the traditional notions of material and form, and of their relation.

As a way into defining this changed sense, we can begin with two representative descriptions of Richard Serra’s early process work by Philip Leider, the editor of *Artforum*. In his review of ‘9 at Leo Castelli,’ the exhibition organized by Robert Morris in 1968 that first thematized the artistic concern with process, Leider wrote of Serra’s *Splashing* that “…the material… has assumed no form other than the one entirely natural to its own fluid, formless properties.” Leider’s description is entirely congruent with the terms of Morris’s article, ‘Anti Form,’ published in *Artforum* earlier in the same year, which placed a similar emphasis on the properties of materials. The second description is from Leider’s review of Serra’s solo exhibition at the Castelli warehouse in late 1969. Leider wrote that although *Cutting Device: Base Plate Measure*, one of the works in the exhibition, initally appeared to consist in a more or less random dispersal of materials similar in appearance to other process works, the materials were in fact brought together according to the action to which they were all subjected, namely cutting or sawing. “The work [Leider wrote] is thus a process piece in a very elegant sense, for it delivers to us in an admirably straightforward way not only the process of its making, but also the information that the same process is also the solution to the problem dealt with in the work, *i.e*., the sawing plainly both *makes* the piece and is also that which unifies the various materials in the work.”

There is a shift in the meaning of form in these two interpretations. In the first, the form of the work was determined by what Leider referred to as the “natural” formlessness of the material. Form did not exist prior to material—this is the essential argument of Morris’s ‘Anti Form’—but rather came after it as its merely contingent attribute. The second interpretation, on the other hand, introduces a principle of unity that is absent in the first. This was not a formal unity in any conventional artistic sense. It had nothing to do with the relationships between part and whole that have traditionally defined the unity of the work of art. Instead, what unified the various materials in *Cutting Device* for Leider was the consistency of the action that produced the relations between the materials.

The problem addressed here was how to reconcile form, defined as unity, with the temporality of process. This sense of form was further complicated by the necessity of taking into account the process of reading the process, on the forming actions of the viewer, as suggested by Leider’s use of the word “information.” The temporal nature of this reading was pursued in its most theoretically suggestive way in the contemporary discourse by the artist Dan Graham, particularly in his essay ‘Subject Matter,’ self-published in 1969 in his book *End Moments*. In this text, Graham sought to distinguish the positioning of the viewer as an object, characteristic of Minimal Art, from later post-Minimal work by artists such as Bruce Nauman and Serra. This later work instead saw the viewer as a subject continuous, in terms of its mode of existence, with the action of the artist and the process of shaping or placing the materials of the work. Graham saw these elements—artist, work, viewer—as in a continual process of change that he called “in-formation” (with a hyphen). In the case of Nauman’s early latex rubber pieces, the materiality of the work was inseparable from the prior and continuing forces acting upon it. “[T]hese 1965-66 works of Bruce Nauman [Graham wrote] transform the medium (rubber) as it (the medium) acts as a medium conveying its material in-formation. It acts as a record of its material changes of interaction and of its own material nature in yielding to natural forces (its own, the environment’s, and the artist’s physical presence and procedures in placing it), while it (also) is inseparable from the material environment continuum in which it is present (to us, the viewers).” There was, for Graham, a necessary correlation between the action of the artist in shaping the materials and the action of the viewer in reading this action. The meaning of the word “in-formation” was thus much closer to a temporal sense of forming, as a process taking place “*in fact*” as opposed to the conventional sense of information as the transmission of facts.

Of his contemporaries, it was probably Graham who went furthest in formulating a theory of form consistent with an ontology of process. In order to take this theory into a more philosophical register, his terms can be related to those of the French philosopher Gilbert Simondon, the main part of whose *Individuation in Light of the Notions of Form and Information* was first published in 1964. Although there is no direct influence, there are certainly affinities between Graham’s use of the term “in-formation” and Simondon’s emphasis on “information” as one of the terms he employed to develop his philosophy of individuation as the process of taking on form. Simondon’s philosophy was initially posed in terms of a critique of an implicit assumption concerning individuation where this process was only considered from the point of view of the already formed individual, as if this individual were anterior to its own becoming in the sense of providing its forming principle. (This was an error effectively consisting in a “*reversed* ontogenesis,” as Simondon put it.) He reversed this privileging of the already formed individual by positing what he termed the “preindividual,” a prior reality consisting in potentiality, a state of being that, if it was not to be itself an individual, for example as atom or substance, had to be defined as more than, or different from, itself. According to Simondon, the process by which individual entities came into existence was one of resolving the asymmetry inherent in this prior reality.

An initial physical metaphor that Simondon employed to stand for individuation in general was crystallization. The formation of crystals depended first of all on an oversaturated solution in which the crystals were already contained in a state of potential. It was through the introduction of a new material element or a change in the surrounding conditions that crystals would begin to form as the resolving of this material difference. In Simondon’s terms, any shift in the phases of matter, whether this shift defines crystallization or sublimation, occurred as the resolution of an asymmetry between two different material states.

This process of taking on form becomes more complicated once human technique is involved, but for Simondon technical processes were subject to the same determinations. He was critical of philosophical explanations, from Aristotle to Kant, that depended on a relationship between form and matter, where form is defined as the active principle that imposes shape on matter, which is, in contrast, defined as passive or indifferent. The historical model for this hylomorphic schema, according to Simondon, was a particular organization and conception of labour. The problem with the form/matter distinction was that it worked backwards from the already constituted entity to divide it into a matter and a form, terms that were themselves held to exist as individuated before the process that brought them together. Simondon argued instead that the process of relation itself should be seen as prior to the terms that it related.

A technical example that Simondon employed to illustrate the problem was that of the shaping of a clay brick in a mould, a classical hylomorphic motif. As he pointed out, the relation between the mould as form and the clay as matter was first prepared by other form/matter relations in both the mould and the clay, since each had to be made or altered from its natural state. The coming together of the mould and the clay, the form and the matter of the brick, was really the coming together of a series of prior actions, a series of prior form/matter relations. The mould had to be constructed out of a material in a way that allowed for the release of the material being moulded and the clay itself had to be refined, that is, subjected to a process of interior shaping, to provide it with the necessary consistency to be moulded. The form of the brick thus consisted only of a moment within a series of processes, actual and potential, that met within it. In Simondon’s critique of hylomorphism, the terms form and matter effectively lose their separateness and become more or less interchangeable, so that there is no form that is not already materialized and no matter that does not already contain form.

To make this ontology of process more concrete within the realm of art, one can return to Serra’s piece *Splashing*, which was made by throwing molten lead at the junction of the wall and the floor in the Castelli warehouse. As Leider had written, the form that the lead took was determined by its own “formless properties” as a liquid. Yet there were prior determinations involved, such as the heating of the lead and Serra’s own bodily actions, and there were also limits placed on the action of the material by the material around it, namely the materiality of the wall and the floor, and by the conditions that caused the material to cool and solidify. The form that the material took was not only determined by its own properties but also by resolving its own materiality in relation to the material and energetic conditions that constituted its environment, its “material environment continuum,” to use Dan Graham’s phrase.

In the subsequent variations of the work, Serra thematized these determinations through repetition. In a later elaboration of the work, *Casting*, installed in the 1969 exhibition ‘Anti-Illusion: Procedures/Materials’ at the Whitney Museum in New York, Serra removed a series of the residues of the process, laying the lengths of solidified lead in sequence away from the gallery wall in order to foreground the temporal nature of the action. But the sequence of removals also revealed a succession of acts of moulding according to the particular shape contained in the meeting of the gallery wall and floor. Towards the end of 1969, in the work that may be seen as the culmination of this series, *Splashing with Four Molds*, Serra included the lead sheets that functioned as the moulds in the piece. The sheets shaped the material in four different ways, according to whether the sheet was left flat or folded into 45 degree or 90 degree angles. (The fourth mould consisted of two 90 degree angled sheets used together). These moulds were used over a number of weeks to produce *in situ* a set of variations of sequences of casts, a process documented in a series of black and white photographs by Gianfranco Gorgoni published in Gregoire Müller’s 1972 book *The New Avant-Garde: Issues for the Art of the Seventies*.

In *Splashing with Four Molds*, the same material was used for the forming elements as for the material formed. The lead manifested itself according to two of its own material phases, liquid and solid, that came together in the work through a series of actions. These two states of matter necessarily formed one another, according to the reversibility of form/matter relations described by Simondon in his dismantling of the hylomorphic presuppositions contained in the example of the process of making a brick. The molten lead was defined in terms of the immanent self-forming action of the material itself, with the lead sheets able to act as a limit to this action through their own material properties. In this work the same material had been made different from itself, put out of step with itself according to its material phases, in order to produce an asymmetry that was resolved within the general form of the work.

Form in its conventional artistic sense, which is a version of the long-standing philosophical distinction between form and matter, cannot account for the process of taking on form itself, since in working backwards from already existing form it can only imagine matter as passive and formless. The change in terms from ‘form’ to ‘information,’ which one finds in Simondon, and in Dan Graham, thus registers a shift that reconceives materiality itself as self-forming. In Simondon’s terms, information is defined as the resonating of form within a material system comprising interior differences, and involves a series of form/matter relations neither side of which is prioritized. There is no such thing as immateriality or formlessness, just as there is no materiality that has not already been formed and no form that has not already been materialized.

In discussing Serra’s process pieces, Graham interpreted them in similar terms, incorporating, as with his discussion of Nauman, the further dimension of the viewer’s experience of the work. (Serra clearly valued this reading, since he included Graham’s text in a selection of documents relating to his work published in the art magazine *Avalanche* in 1971.) For Graham, the experience of Serra’s work, or rather, to use his own less aestheticized word, its ‘reading,’ was part of the material system of the work through which its form resonated. According to Graham, the action that produced the work *To Lift*, from 1968, in which Serra lifted one edge of a large sheet of thick rubber to produce a self-supporting form, was read by the viewer at the same time as their present encounter with the work, which were together seen as part of the same process. Referring to this work, Graham wrote: “A specific activity performed upon a specific material is available to the viewer as residue of an in-formation time (the stage of the process described in applying the verb action to the material). The viewer’s time-field is as much part of the process (reading) as is the artist’s former relation to the same material and the material’s process in the former time.” Thus, for Graham, works of art did not consist of material that is formed, but rather of a material and a form in process, a process of “in-formation” that continues in the process of reading the work. It is implicit in this formulation that the process of reading involved can never reach any form of totalization, but must remain in a state of continual change.

Finally, Graham’s sense of ‘reading’ may be compared to Simondon’s extending of his account of individuation to encompass its own knowledge. For Simondon, knowing and thinking produced individual entities in the same way as that attributed to the process of existence. The way that forms of knowing and thinking were seen to follow their own materiality meant that the epistemological relation between subject and object took on the same kind of interchangeability as that between form and material, since the process of individuation was essentially the same. Just as for Simondon the forming of a material depended on a prior series of form/matter relations, Serra’s work, according to Graham, depended on the relation of a past process of making to a present one of reading, with the residue of the former providing the material for the latter. When one considers a work such as *Cutting Device* according to a process that encompasses both its production and its reading, its material character becomes, as it were, dispersed in time, and its phenomenal appearance becomes only a moment within this extension of time. *Cutting Device* continually produces the sense of its own production. The phenomenality of the work, as an object, is completely meaningless by itself, and is really only a kind of empty centre within a series of form/matter relations that extend both before and after it. Even in its photographic documentation, it continually produces the temporal circle of its own production.