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FOUNTAINS FAILURES FUTURES: THE AFTERLIVES OF PUBLIC ART

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In 2020, a national call for a Designed Living Environment / Gestaltad livsmiljö was made through a unique collaboration between Formas (a Swedish Research Council for Sustainable Development), Boverket (Swedish National Board of Housing, Building and Planning), Riksantikvarieämbetet (Swedish National Heritage Board), ArkDes (Swedish Centre for Architecture and Design), and Statens konstråd (Public Art Agency Sweden). The aim of the call was to highlight aesthetic perspectives and the role of public art in sustainable public architecture and design.

Ten interdisciplinary research projects on the role of public art were each awarded a four-year research grant. The Fountain: An art-technological-social drama is one of those projects, and the symposium Fountains Failures Futures: The afterlives of public art is a key part of our research process.

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WORKING PAPER

“The LTH Fountain and the anti-normal condition”

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The LTH Fountain and the *anti-normal* condition

In 2017, I wrote a paper which unpacked the relationship between the identity of late architect Zaha Hadid (as an Arab woman) and her frequently deemed controversial approach to design, materiality, and geo-political ethics.¹ Through an analysis of her work and her role as an architect, I devised the theory of the *hybrid monstrosity*; defining it as a flexible architectural identity which generates both an ontology and an impact of the *anti-normal* due to a structure's capacity to disrupt the norms (social, political, cultural, aesthetic etc.) which produce and maintain its spatial setting. Through the anti-normal condition, structures *become* architectural monsters, not in any kind of terrible, frightening, or mythical sense, but more in their everyday capacity to demand reflection, questioning and troubling of these norms which shape our spatial experiences.

In the abstract to the paper, I offered a rather simplistic and extreme example of a hybrid monstrosity by way of clarity. We might imagine that a Tokyo vending machine finds itself in a Norwegian fjord; the structure of the vending machine, with its Japanese aesthetic, sonic and performative condition, situated within the rural and organic landscape of the fjord, a space culturally saturated by Norse myths and rituals, creates a simultaneous structural dislocation and spatial disruption. Thus, the vending machine assumes the identity of monster through the duality of its own *anti-normal* ontology and the perceptual impact of those encountering it within its unexpected spatial setting. Hybridity is generated in two interconnected capacities: through the coming together of structure and spatiality which *produces* the anti-normal condition and thus the monstrous, and through the subsequent interaction between human or non-human actor and the monstrous structure-space which *affirms* the hybrid monstrosity identity and generates particular behaviours in response.

As someone who has only recently joined the research team investigating the *LTH Fountain*, I am writing from a peripheral position, a position which has just started to peer into the processes of sifting and searching through the complex web of histories, relationships, stories, which have cemented the Fountain across time; processes my colleagues have found themselves immersed in over the last three years. Rather unglamorously, my first encounter with the Fountain was socially distanced through zoom in 2021. Maddie and Mick were introducing the project at our annual departmental research day and I distinctly remember them showing some aerial footage of the Fountain, a moment which, retrospectively, drew me to it.² Watching the Fountain loom across the screen to the crooning of Marlon Williams and Delaney Davidson's 'Please Don't Let Me Love You', I felt a pointed sense of sadness for this decrepit yet solid giant, a feeling not dissimilar to the one I had at eight years old when reading Roald Dahl's *The BFG*. The Fountain felt monstrously

¹ Cathryn Ladd (2018). "Zaha Hadid: Spatializing Identity through the Architectural Monster". *The Popular Culture Studies Journal*, 6 (2&3), 326-344. The author has since changed their name.

² You can view this footage on the project's blog. Accessed 30 July 2023. <https://fountain.ghost.io/the-fountain-fontanen-summer/>

incongruous to the blandly familiar 1960s red brick of the faculty buildings, a feeling enhanced by the dense and unkept foliage surrounding its base – supporting an image in my mind of a forsaken cyborg having erupted from the earth quite by mistake.

Reacting to this initial image of the lonely cybernetic monster, I wish to consider the ways in which the *LTH Fountain* functions as monstrous structure-space through its capacity to produce the condition of the anti-normal. To guide me, I have turned to a book which I not only love, but one which was critical in supporting the theoretical formulation of the hybrid monstrosity: Joshua Comaroff and Ong Ker-Shing's *Horror in Architecture*. They investigate how particular cultural typologies of horror can be located within architecture, two of which provide critical support for my anti-normal reading of the Fountain – 'Partially and Mostly Dead' and 'The Incontinent Object'. Through my brief analysis of the Fountain through these two framings, I will conclude by reflecting on what this anti-normal condition and consequent monstrous identity may offer us when considering the possible futures of the *LTH Fountain*.



Staring at the Fountain on a grey and thoroughly miserable day, Maddie points out to me where the 11th basin was and should be, intended to jut out across the now intensely slime-green pond. The LTH Fountain is missing a limb and I wonder if it feels the loss.



Image by author. Lund, 1 August, 2023.

The *LTH Fountain* is 53 years old and at undeniable risk of existential crisis, having surpassed the generally expected 50-year life span of a public art work. Due to financial and organisational strain from various stakeholders, the Fountain has found itself partially if not mostly dead, impossible to repair and upkeep, having entered into *unmanageable* territory sometime in the 1980s. Arguably the Fountain has defied cultural custodian norms; it is unashamedly refusing to die. Here lies a necrotic object, without a vital ~~blood~~ water supply it exists perpetually with one steel foot in the grave, a zombie 'whose body continues to labor under a horrid automatism after the soul and intellect have been evicted'.³

Yes, a rather bleak take, but observing the Fountain it is hard to ignore the stark signs of morbidity. Comaroff and Ker-Shing make reference to the *quasi-deceased body* explicitly detailing the missing limb as a tell-tale sign. In this case, the Fountain's amputation in 1996 was a political decision, stemming from the 'cold-blooded rationality of the economic'.⁴ The limbs that do remain are negotiating a life of grime, having become closely acquainted with various species of lichen and atmospheric residue. The vast overgrown greenery, leftovers from the lack of upkeep,⁶ is slowly but surely climbing, setting the basins in its sight. *How old will the LTH Fountain be when it is swallowed?*

The vitality of ecological life which radiates from the green opaque mass, in opposition to the structure itself, produces an anti-normal condition, as the Fountain becomes where 'life and death coexist in the same being'.⁷ While not a tension per se, the greenery forces an attention to how the Fountain has become 'deflated and devalued' yet not abandoned or destroyed as is often the fate of unruly architecture.⁸ This state of limbo reflects its own typological instability – *is the LTH Fountain architecture or artwork?* There is a lack of clarity here, as revealed through the multiplicity of ways the object has been named and framed over the years. As such, the Fountain ruptures categorical social and cultural convention, something only heightened by the rigidity of the other built structures surrounding it, all of which are proudly marked by discipline. The Fountain is left with nothing to do but accept its status as campus deviant.

³ Joshua Comaroff and Ong Ker-Shing. (2013). *Horror in Architecture*. Novato (CA): ORO Editions. p.94.

⁴ Comaroff and Ker-Shing. p. 101.

⁵ I find this bizarre or were/are slingshots all the rage at architecture and engineering schools then/now? See also 'Skott från slangbella?', *Arbetet*, 9 September 1970.

⁶ In images from the 1970s of the *LTH Fountain*, it sits on a well-manicured lawn.

⁷ Comaroff and Ker-Shing. p. 101.

⁸ *Ibid.*

Partially and mostly dead things are often assumed to be haunted.⁹ In the case of the Fountain, we, and perhaps it, are haunted by its failure to exist as a working fountain. Haunted by the memories of joy, of laughter, of dashing past it trying not to get wet on your way to class, haunted by the feeling of water running down your spine – steel and skin. I find it so apt that on 18th August 1996 – the celebration which marked the Fountain’s final day of its sub-par performance as fountain – Verdi’s Requiem was played¹⁰. The ultimate death knell.

Perhaps we are also haunted by the ways the Fountain has been failed. Kept on life support but with no indication of a future of recovery and rehabilitation, a series of decisions has produced the taxidermic corpse that we ponder upon now. Yet what Comaroff and Ker-Shing point out, is that mostly dead and haunted architecture can become sites of imaginative investment, converting death into life.¹¹



Image: “....och i Lund, läcker den nya fontänen!” *Lördags Expressen*, 13 October, 1969. Photo by Olle Karud/TT.

⁹ Comaroff and Ker-Shing. p.99.

¹⁰ Requiems are traditionally sung to honour the dead. Verdi’s Requiem tells of the fate of the living who fear death and beg for deliverance. <https://houstonsymphony.org/verdis-requiem-an-opera-in-disguise/> (Accessed 4 August 2023).

¹¹ Comaroff and Ker-Shing, p.105.

As noted, the reason the *LTH Fountain* has found itself partially and mostly dead is due to its inability to function as fountain. Highly ambitious in design, the water was intended to cascade down among the basins and fall elegantly into the pond below, much like a champagne tower.¹² Yet in actuality, as we know, the Fountain almost immediately starting producing leak after leak and the glass, unable to withstand the pressure of the water and windy conditions, began cracking. Arguably, as soon as umbrellas became a necessity within the Fountain's vicinity, a condition of normality was unattainable. The Fountain has only ever been a fountain in the imaginary of its authors; to those who encountered it, it has almost exclusively existed as *incontinent object*.

Incontinence, as articulated by Comaroff and Ker-Shing, is “a form of physical deviance in which bodies resist enclosure”.¹³ From an etymological stance, the term arose in the late fourteenth century to mean “Immoderate, intemperate, not holding back” but later shifted in the 1640s to an inability to control which aligns with its contemporary usage.¹⁴ Interestingly Comaroff and Ker-Shing speak of it in its original articulation – a deliberate intension to resist – architectures of refusal. The *LTH Fountain* is automatically assumed to be *unable* to function - structurally deficient through no fault of its own - whether blame be placed on dodgy mathematics or unforeseeable environmental circumstances. But what if the Fountain is actually *unwilling*? Maybe we're just not giving it enough credit.

Humans continue to cling to a delusional belief regarding technology that it will perpetually serve our needs because our minds and hands birthed it into the world. But, as parents of unruly children know, there is always the moment of defiance, of becoming something other – the moment of monstrosity.¹⁵ There is almost something humorous about an image of the Fountain shouting “NO” via the spraying and bursting of its elements, a way of speaking that we haven't been able to hear.¹⁶ This possibility of unwillingness is rather appealing when hollered slap bang in the middle of the university as a supposed site of innovation – a place where things work. I find myself wrestling with the notion that perhaps it has never been the case that the Fountain has not been heard because those who control its fate *cannot* hear, but because they do not *want* to. The neoliberal university is content with appearances after all; incontinence can be hidden behind the illusion of progress.

¹² This image was discussed in a 2020 interview with Christer Lundgren, son-in-law of Arne Jones (the sculptor who co-designed the *LTH Fountain*). It is also noted in the Archive of Destruction. See <https://archiveofdestruction.com/artwork/the-fountain-an-art-technological-social-drama/> (Accessed 7 August 2023).

¹³ Comaroff and Ker-Shing, p.123.

¹⁴ See <https://www.etymonline.com/word/incontinent> (Accessed 7 August 2023).

¹⁵ I would recommend reading Kevin Roose, “Why a Conversation with Bing's Chatbot Left Me Deeply Unsettled. *The New York Times*, February 16, 2023. <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/02/16/technology/bing-chatbot-microsoft-chatgpt.html> (Accessed 10 August 2023).

¹⁶ “I beheld the wretch— the miserable monster whom I had created. He held up the curtain of the bed; and his eyes, if eyes they may be called, were fixed on me. His jaws opened, and he muttered some inarticulate sounds, while a grin wrinkled his cheeks. He might have spoken, but I did not hear; one hand was stretched out, seemingly to detain me, but I escaped and rushed downstairs”. Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 3rd edition. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020. p.41.

Yet, despite attempts to uphold the illusion, as evidenced through the wire which was installed to maintain the visual impression of the glass basins (wire which is, ironically, now broken), it is precisely the Fountain's incontinence as an onto-logic which not only repeatedly imbues it with the anti-normal condition but also drips it closer to artwork than architecture.¹⁷ Without its incontinence which grants it the capacity to defy the architectural disciplinary expectation of precision and designed function, the Fountain's artistic potentiality, i.e. its capacity to become other, would be non-existent.



If you remain open to the Fountain as *hybrid monstrosity*, as generator of an anti-normal condition, then perhaps you can also be open to another proposition, one which I believe is critical for the futurity of the *LTH Fountain*. Having begun observing, talking, and now briefly writing with the Fountain, I realise what is both appealing and perplexing about it is its transcendence of object-hood. Put simply and boldly - the Fountain is not an architectural or artistic object but rather an *experimental subject*. By understanding it as a shifting subject with agency to ask questions of us, defy our expectations, disrupt our sense of normativity – we have to ask ourselves whether the *LTH Fountain* deserves to self-determine its future. This requires us to be willing to pull apart our desire for tidy solutions and artistic achievement. I often tell my students that when an artwork *becomes* a subject, its maker must relinquish control over it – they must reject their desire for legacy and genius and ego and praise – and reach a sense of not only acceptance, but a mindset of openness. Open to meet this artistic subject as an equal, open to being taught by it, open for it to challenge and unsettle us. A question I leave you with then is: *How might we generate tools to support a process of self-determination?*

¹⁷ Two points of clarification: By onto-logic I am meaning a foundation for ontologies to exist in relation to. I am using the word 'repeatedly' in the Deleuzian sense, i.e. a repetition of difference.