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## **ORCHID ARCHITECTURES**

**Neil Leach**

One of the best known works of the Baroque  
is *The Ecstasy of St Teresa*, the exquisite  
sculpture by Gian Lorenzo Bernini in the  
Cornaro chapel of the church of Santa Maria  
della Vittoria in Rome. This work has caught  
the interest not only of enthusiasts of the  
Baroque, but also of contemporary theorists  
from the world of psychoanalysis and  
philosophy. Why then has this piece proved  
of such interest to these theorists and how  
might their thoughts on this sculpture begin

to inform a discussion of contemporary  
architecture?

St. Teresa of Avila (1515-1582) was a  
Carmelite nun and religious mystic. She  
was a reformer who established her own  
order, and who set up seventeen new  
convents throughout Spain. She was  
regarded  
As a saint in her own lifetime, and was well  
known for her ecstatic religious experiences,  
of which Bernini would no doubt have been  
aware when he captured her so vividly in his  
exquisite sculpture. -*The Ecstasy of St  
Teresa*, in the Cornaro chapel of the church  
of Santa Maria della Vittoria in Rome.  
Certainly St Teresa's – visions had been  
cited when she was canonized in Rome in  
1622, within thirty years of when Bernini  
began his sculpture.

To the contemporary world she is most  
famous for her vivid and incisive accounts of  
her ecstasies or raptures that are recorded  
in her autobiography.

...Rapture is, as a rule, irresistible. Before  
you can be warned by a thought or help  
yourself in any way, it comes as a quick and  
violent shock, you see and feel this cloud or  
this powerful eagle rising and bearing you up  
on its wings.

The eagle is, of course, God and a  
fundamental aspect of the rapture is the  
feeling of being raised aloft by God.

One sees one's body being lifted from the  
Ground and though the spirit draws it up  
after itself and does so most gently if one  
does not resist, one does not lose  
consciousness. At least I myself was  
sufficiently aware to realize that I was being  
lifted.

The majesty of one who can do this is so  
manifest that one's hair stands on end, and  
a great fear comes over one of offending so  
great a God.

Overwhelmed in this state of religious convulsion the rapture takes hold it is a bittersweet moment of ecstasy that is both pleasurable and painful. In this her ecstasies share something of the sublime.

One seems to be on the point of death, only the agony carries with it so great a joy that I do not know of any proper comparison. It is a harsh yet sweet martyrdom...

Yet at the same time this pain is so sweet, and the soul is so conscious of its value, that it now desires this suffering more than all the fits that it used to receive. It believes this to be the safer state, too because it is the way of the cross, and, in my opinion, it contains a joy of exceeding worth, because the body has no part in it but agony, whereas the soul, even while suffering, rejoices in the bliss and contentment that this suffering brings.

As the word ecstasy implies this experience takes place beyond the body. "Ecstasy" means a standing outside of the body. The ecstatic rapture is an experience of the soul, an extra corporeal sensation. During the process the eyes remain closed or half closed, but in any case, the individual is almost oblivious to the outside world.

Very often the raptures seemed to leave my body as light as if it had lost all its weight, and sometimes so light that I hardly knew whether my feet were touching the ground. But during the rapture itself, the body is very often like a corpse, unable to do anything of itself. It remains all the time in whatever attitude it was in when the rapture came on it seated, for example and with the hands open or closed. The subject rarely loses consciousness. I have occasionally lost it entirely, but not very often, and only for a short time. Generally the senses are disturbed and though absolutely powerless to perform any outward action the subject still sees and hears things though only dimly, as if from far away. I do not say that he can see and hear when the rapture is at its height and by its height I mean those times when the faculties are lost, because closely united with God.

But what begins to emerge is a markedly erotic undertone to St. Teresa's description of her raptures. In particular, when she is being stabbed with a long golden spear as in the sculpture by Bernini, her language shares much of the discourse of erotic pleasure. She uses a metaphor of penetration for her ecstasies which seems to echo operations in sexual intercourse. Moreover her ecstasy is clearly a corporeal (or perhaps extra corporeal ecstasy).

In his hands I saw a long golden spear, and at the iron tip there appeared to be a point of fire. This he plunged into my heart several times so that it penetrated to my entrails. When he pulled it out, I felt that he took them out with it and let them utterly consumed by the great love of God. This is not a physical, but a spiritual pain though the body has some share in it even a considerable share. So gentle is this wooing which takes place between God and the soul that if anyone thinks that I am lying, I pray God in His goodness, to grant him some experience of it.

It is through her raptures, then, that St. Teresa comes into union with God. In this state of ecstasy, the boundary between the self and the other is broken down. The ecstasy allows for a form of mystical bonding which while religious in its essence, shares certain characteristics with a more carnal form of love. Indeed Bernini's highly expressive portrait of St. Teresa with her blissful expression and the spent appearance of her feet and hands only reinforces this connection.

**Bataille and Eroticism.** Georges Bataille (1897-1992) was intrigued by this connection between mysticism and the erotic. Bataille was of course, a theorist who delighted in the excess, a critic who both wrote and theorized on the subject of obscenity and eroticism, alongside his own often highly erotic fictional work. In *The Story of the Eye* he wrote a theoretical text, *Eroticism*. In *Eroticism* Bataille picks up on

the way in which the religious always threatens to fold into the erotic He compares an contrast these two overlapping moments. Bataille is no interested in Simplistic equations which collapse the two into the same category, reducing the religious to the erotic and treating rapture as little more than a form of sexual orgasm The contrast between divine and carnal love, he notes is a very marked one We must a void two reefs we must not try to diminish the experiences of the mystics for the sake of comparison, as psychiatrists have done albeit unintentionally. Neither must we spiritualize the domain of sexuality to exalt it to the level of ethereal experiences Moreover, the key difference for Bataille is that the mystical experience leaves the individual in a state of exaltation, whereas the sexual experience leaves that person in a state of disgust and the inability to continue In contrast, a promise of light awaits at the lifts of the mystical outlook.

Nonetheless he admits that there are staggering similarities and then corresponding or interchangeable characteristic the two systems Marie Bonaparte he notes, had compared the rapture directly with the sexual act, citing the example of a nun who had experienced such raptures only to discover n later life when she left the convent and became married, that these raptures had been in fact a from of sexual orgasm. St Bonaventure had also observed that mystics are not infrequently "sullied with the flow of carnal flux" during their ecstasies.

Eroticism was published in 1957, a few years before Bataille's own death, and it is perhaps no coincidence that a key theme in this text is that of death and its relationship Co life in the context of the erotic. For it is not simply that on occasions the propagation of life may lead literally Co death, as in the case of a mother dying during child-birth. Rather the two become entwined within the erotic moment. Eroticism, Bataille observes, is 'assenting to life up to the point of death.'

At an explicit level there is a direct connection between death and the erotic in the French slang for orgasm, 'le petit mort' — 'the little death'. It is this theme that Bataille pursues through the figure of St. Teresa who had herself acknowledged the sense of death that accompanied the vital experience of her raptures. For Bataille it is as though the desire to live life lo the limits of the possible and the impossible with ever-increasing intensity' brings with it the desire for death, but it is a desire for death that amounts — seemingly paradoxically — to a transcendence of death:

It is the desire to live while ceasing to live, or to die without ceasing to live, the desire of an extreme state that St. Teresa has perhaps been the only one to depict strongly enough in words. 'I die because I cannot die.' But the death of not dying is precisely not death; it is the ultimate stage of life; if one dies because I cannot die it is on condition that I live on; because of the death I feel though still alive, and still live on. St. Teresa's being reeled but did not actually die of her desire actually to experience the sensation. She lost her footing, but all she did was to live more violently, so violently that she could say that she was on the threshold of dying, but such a death as tried her to the utmost though it did not make her cease to live.

The ecstatic of the religious mystic is one in which all differences are effaced, and all distances overcome. The ecstatic subject is lost in a sea of oceanic bliss: "There is no longer any difference between one thing and another in any respect; no distances can be located; the subject is lost in the in the indistinct and illimitable passing of time. He is absorbed in the everlasting instant, irrevocably as it seems, with no root in the past or hopes in the future, and the instant itself is eternity." <sup>1</sup>

Here there are clear links with Bataille theory of sacrifice. The "death" of the erotic moment

is a kind to the death of the sacrificial moment. Eroticism leads to a dissolution of the boundaries of the self, but so too a fusion on the self with the other, which overcomes the "self-contained" character of our normal existence. Eroticism, the, like sacrifice, leads to a transcendence of the self, and opening up to the fundamental continuity of existence: "Erotic activity, by dissolving the separate being that participate in it, recalls their fundamental continuity, like the waves of a stormy sea, In sacrifice, .... A violent death disrupts the creature's discontinuity; what remains, what the tense onlookers experience in the succeeding silence, is the continuity of all existence with which the victim is now one."

Above all, it is important to recognize that, in Bataille's terms, sacrifice – like love— leads not to discord, but to a form of harmony: It is the common business of sacrifice to bring life and death the upsurge of life, life the momentousness and the vertigo of the unknown. Here life is mingled with death, but simultaneously death is a sing of life, a way into the infinite.

While Bataille does not make any explicit reference to aesthetics experience in general, he draws a connection between poetry, death and eroticism, and articulates clearly the fusion that poetry itself may offer: "Poetry leads to the same place as all forms of eroticism- to the blending and fusion of separate objects. It leads us to eternity; it leads us to death, and through death to continuity. Poetry is eternity; the sun matched with the sea."

Thus, for Bataille, the erotic and the mystical come together to some extent in the ecstatic moment, and they do so within the symbolic framework of life and death.

**Lacan and the Jouissance of St. Teresa**  
Jacques Lacan was also fascinated by Bernini's sculpture, The ecstasy of St. Teresa's, and uses an image of it to the front

cover of his volume. Encore. And like Bataille, he too observes the parallels between eroticism and religious mysticism to which the sculpture seems to allude. Certainly, for Lacan, St. Teresa's experiences as conveyed by Bernini's to immediately understand that she's coming. There's no doubt about it. 'There is, admittedly, a certain reductive and patronizing tone to Lacan's somewhat flippant comments about St. Teresa. Lacan's crucial contribution, however, is to locate the whole question, however, is to locate the whole question of ecstasy within the broader contexts of *jouissance*.

In this work Lacan focuses on the sense of *jouissance*. Has been used in English literature since the sixteenth century, It might literally be translated as 'pleasure', referring to the "pleasure" of the text, and so on. In French *jouissance* maintains a certain erotic purchase that has been lost in English appropriations of the term – it has a more overtly sexual connotation, referring to the pleasures of the sexual act itself. If poststructuralist writers from Derrida to Cixous constantly evoke the term, it is in extended sense of the erotic pleasure to be derived from reading the text.

In Lacan the term *jouissance* exceeds the simple sense of "pleasure". It is at point when we go "beyond the pleasure principle", when the sheer overload of pleasure principle, when the sheer overload of pleasure constitutes a form of pain, that we experience *jouissance*, which can therefore be understood as a form of 'painful pleasure. For it is the moment of *jouissance* that reveals a trace of the intensity of the "real", which – in Lacanian terms - is always inaccessible. The "real" cannot be symbolized. It remains a foreclosed element that may be approached, but never grasped. Thus *jouissance* itself comes to stand for what is hidden. And when we encounter an object that bears witness to the "real". Like the terrifying angels of Rainer Maria Rilke's second Duino Elegy, it is always a traumatic

event. Hence the bittersweet ecstasies of St Teresa offer a perfect example of *jouissance* at work.

**The Erotic's of the Orchid.** How, then, might we appraise Bernini's sculpture from an architectural point of view, and what insights might it offer for an ecstatic engagement with architecture? What begins to share similarities with, on the hand, the state of religious ecstasy, as observed by Bataille, and, on the other, the *jouissance* of the text observed by Lacan and others objects of aesthetic contemplation, the latter category of the "text" we might begin to recognize that the mechanisms in play with aesthetic contemplation replicate those in both an erotic and a religious encounter. Hence we might explore the fundamental nature of aesthetic contemplation by comparing it with these latter two. Throughout there is a sense in which the engagement with the other' - in the case of architecture, the built environment – amounts to a forcing of a relationship with the "other".

We might therefore recognize the potential of the aesthetic realm to provide a sense of "belonging" that echoes the attachment of a religious or erotic sense the attachment of a religious or erotic sense devotions. As such the aesthetic realm might be seen to play an important social role in compensating for the demise of other structures of "belonging" such as religion or the family. It may provide a means of overcoming the homogenizing placelessness of contemporary society and inscribing individuals into their environment. Thus, in an increasingly nomadic words where identities are always plural and in a state of flux.

Notions of any fixed home are losing their hegemony, the aesthetics realm holds out the potential of offering some momentary sense of "belonging" is hinted at in the discussion of "becoming" in the work of Deleuze and Guattari.

Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari provide an evocation commentary on the relation of insects to their habitat in their description of a wasp setting on an orchid and the interaction between the two. Here they appear to be referring to the digger wasp (*Gorytes mystaceus* an *Gorytes campestris*), and the fly orchid (*Ophrys insectifera*). What is remarkable about the fly orchid is its physical resemblance to the digger wasp. The fly orchid both looks and smell like the female digger wasp. As a result, the male wasp is seemingly duped into thinking that the fly orchid is a female wasp. Whether the wasp is deceived, or knowingly plays along with this ruse, it allows itself to be seduced by the orchid. Once it has landed on the orchid, the wasp act in an excited manner as though indulging in a form of copulation, rubbing its abdomen against the velvety surface of the labellum and flutter. In its wings. Friedrich Barth describes this process as a form of "pseudocopulation". The frenetic activity causes pollen to be deposited on the wasp. Eventually the wasp tires, and tries its luck on another orchid. The wasp is thereby lured into serving as a surrogate sexual partner for the orchid, helping to transfer pollen from one plant to the next.

The relationship between wasp and orchid is a complex one. The orchid has adapted to the wasp, but so too the wasp has develop a pattern of behavior that serves the orchids. As Deleuze and Guattari observe, wasp and orchid enter into a mutual reciprocity, such that the wasp influences the orchid, lo less than the orchid influences the wasp. The terms "becoming" captures the dynamics interactions between wasp and orchid. "Becoming"- becoming animal, becoming female, becoming molecular, becoming imperceptible, becoming other – is a key concept for Deleuze an Guattari. All forms of becoming other, and involve a creative engagement with the other on the part of the subject. At the same time a state of "becoming" is not constituted by any particular entity. It concerns the space between various entities, and constitutes a

“flight” between them: A becoming is neither one nor two, nor the relation of the two, it is the in-between, the border of line of flight. “Becoming” is clearly an interactive process. It can never be limited to one individual entity “becoming” another. Becoming always involves a reciprocity, a mutual interaction. Deleuze and Guattari refer to this as a “bloc” of becoming:

It is not term which becomes the other, but each a counters the other, a single becoming which is not common to the two, since they have nothing to do with one another, but which is between the two. Which has its own direction, a bloc of becoming, a-parallel evolution. This is a double capture, the wasp AND the orchid: not even something that would be in the other, even if it had to be exchanged, be mingled, but something which is between the two, outside the two, and which flows in another direction.

For Deleuze and Guattari “becoming” is a highly suggestive term that hints at new strategies of “belonging” within our contemporary world. What should not be overlooked, however, in any discussion of “becoming” is the deeply eroticized nature of interaction between wasp and orchid. It is an interaction that reveals the ‘sensuous correspondence that might exist between a creature and its habitat. In effect, they provide a highly architectural analogy for an aesthetic cocoon – a form of temporary sanctuary within a society of fluidity and flux.

#### **Barragan and the Architecture of Ecstasy**

Within this heady mix of aesthetics, erotics an religion, brought together under the realm of ecstasy, we can begin to reconfigure our understanding of aesthetics. The aesthetics domain, in other words, need lo recognized not as some discrete, pure operation, but one that both borrows from, and shares affinities with, the erotic and the religious. It is not simply, as psychoanalytic thinkers remind us, that art is a form sublimation of the erotic. Nor is it simply that the religious

depends upon the aesthetics (witness, for example, the angelic singing of the choir, the incense and the splendid ornamentation of the church, just as the religious has been outlined above. But rather these different realms are thoroughly inter-connected, such that it makes little sense to talk about one isolation. These three separate domains are bound together as a constellation through the logic of *jouissance*. It is as though the *jouissance* of an aesthetics experience has direct affinities with the bittersweet pain that Lacan alludes to in his discussion of the raptures of St. Teresa.

Such an approach might allow to open up our frame of reference, when dealing with the discourse of architecture, beyond the come what straitened understanding that has become the architecture, an architecture of bliss, an architecture of the ecstatic. How the might this allow us to reappraise the work of an architect, such as Luis Barragan, whose own exquisite orchid-like architecture comes close to offering us a state of the ecstatic found is Bernini’s sculpture of the St Teresa? How might this sumptuous architectural production be configures within the schema of the aesthetic, religious iconography everywhere evident in Barragan’s work is not only testimony to his own deep religious conviction, but it also hints at a connection between the religious, the erotic and the aesthetic.

A visit to Barragan’s own house is every revealing. As his living arrangements show, Barragan lived a seemingly acerbic life, despite the relative ‘lasciviousness’ of the architecture that he created, with its sensuous play of from an color. Barragan’s bedroom closely resembles a monastic cell with its simple single bed beneath an image of the crucifix, further religious can be found in the whips here? And if he did, what was their purpose? Are we to assume, as the guide to the house would maintain, that they were left there simply because Barragan would change into his riding clothes here? Or go they have some other role? Why, for

example, would whips be left here and not in the room in which other riding tackle—the stirrup, saddle etc.—would be stored? It is not that we should assume that these whips would have been used for any other purposes, such as self-flagellation or the like. Indeed, we need not assume that items left left on display need to have a direct utilitarian significance. The average house, for example, is full of items that are never used as such, but are kept on display for a purely symbolic reason. Rather we might question whether such items might have a certain suggestive potential to open up particular corporeally embedded ideas. They become objects of the crucifix. They become objects of contemplation that allow us to image the possibility of pain. By extension, they also allow us to imagine the possibility of pleasure.

Could these whips, then, not hold a clue to Barragan's whole Outlook on aesthetics? Are we able to glimpse within the orchid like beauty of Barragan's interiors a certain erotics of pain, but so too an erotic of pleasure? And could these erotics not be understood within religious terms as part of the operations of the ecstatic? Might this give us an insight not only into the nature of Barragan's own aesthetic vision, but also into the nature of the very discipline of architecture? Is Barragan's work, in other words, not a perfect example of the operations of *jouissance*, of a *religio-erotic* aesthetics that lies at the heart of all good architecture?

#### **POLITICS FOR PUBLIC ART?**

**Lorena Wolffer**

To speak of politics concerning art in public spaces "I prefer to use this expression rather than more problematic -public art" – in the current context of Mexico City inevitably involves a whole series of complications. Those of us who have undertaken – or have attempted to undertake—art projects in this city's public sphere know that, in doing so, we are forced to act as negotiators between

political powers, inadequate and limiting laws, and bureaucrats or government officials with conflicting interests. Talking about any project of this nature would be like narrating a long, farcical soap. Opera about useless meetings, arbitrary decision-making and simply baffling scenes, worth turning into a comic strip. I am referring to projects that do not exactly fit the patterns of the recent sculpture show on *Reforma* Boulevard, but are rather pieces that are made based on the connects in which they are shown and that aim to establish a dialogue with this specific space.

It seems appropriate, to mention but one example, to refer to the reasons why Cesar Martinez changed the color of his piece *Piedad entubada* (Piety in a Pipe) – an intervention he did last year on a section of the *Viaducto* expressway as part of the *Agua/Wasser* exhibition. Using blue paint, Martínez wanted to outline what had once been the course of the *La Piedad River*.<sup>41</sup> However, after over a year of negotiations, Mexico City government officials "invited" him to change the color he had proposed to use, arguing that it made reference to a particular political party.<sup>42</sup> Thus, the intervention that can be seen today on the *Viaducto* is aqua green, –a color that instead recalls the one in high schools kindergarten handrails, or public restrooms, –to quote the artist. And this is just one of countless stories of how government officials and/or bylaws have transformed (sometimes willfully, sometimes unintentionally) art projects in public spaces.

Yet, to discuss the role that art plays in public spaces in this city we must first, in my mind, deal with the complex organization of, –our public space *per se*. As has surely been discussed in this symposium's precious panel, our public space consists of a series of territories that are not necessarily clearly set, outlined or regulated, and there are no standards to determine the "quality" of one public space *vis-à-vis* another. Certain city planners and sociologists have