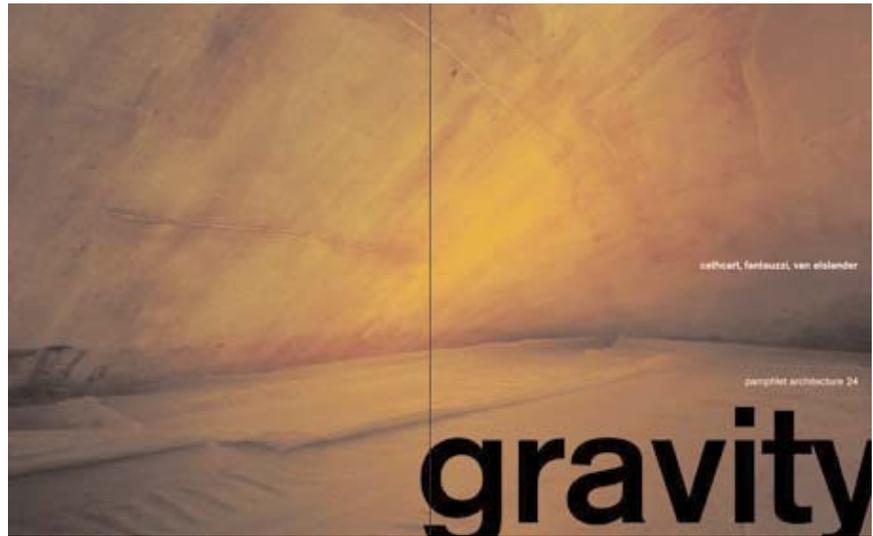


Gravity  
Cathcart, Fantauzzi, van Elslander  
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Hallwalls Contemporary Arts Centre



## Push Pull

*Philip Beesley*

*A mechanical empathy.*

The first thing is the smell: a recipe full of ammonia. The invisible atmosphere leeches from the 400 litres of latex rubber painstakingly layered over the 80-year old concrete floors of the warehouse building. It surrounds you and gives a faint bite inside as you breathe it in. The acrid taste that you find inside you leaves the question of its origin uncomfortably hanging. You know latex is artificial, but it doesn't feel that way: urine? Disease? A bundle of ancient instincts are aroused in reacting to the space. You find yourself on guard.

One space has taut metal cables from the centre of the ceiling holding a spine set inside the rubber skin. The spine pulls the latex up into a huge long upside-down hull. The rubber walls curve inward up to the spine and suck hard at the floor. The air around pushes hard back down on this collapsing void, bulging the surfaces inward.

The second space is filled by an opposite twin, a long air-filled blister breaking outward from the rubber skin of the floor and rising up to head-height. An inner-tube valve that declares the method of inflation marks the smooth surface of this immense pillow. A rectangular slip-sheet set into the centre of each lamination breaks the bond between the rubber and the floor slab to made these voids. Two instant rooms.

Already there, my daughter chuckles and bounces against them both. This might be a recreation. The title 'Push /Pull' does sound like a simple play. By operating primary forces against each other you construct a kind of gravity. This construction sounds elegant and quite tidy.

To the 19th century German theorist Robert Vischer this kind of experience was an act of easy grace and a profound good: *"We thus have the wonderful ability to project and incorporate our own physical form into an objective form... Thus I project my own life in to the lifeless form, just as I quite justifiably do with another living person. ... We seem to perceive hints and traces of attitudes, of emotions- a secret, scarcely suppressed twitching of the limbs, a timorous yearning, a gesturing and a stammering. These signs are instantly translated into their corresponding human meaning. In the branches of a tree we spread our arms longingly... [T]he whole person and all his vital feeling are lured into compassion. The apparent movement of form is thus unconsciously accompanied by a concrete emotional element of feeling that is inseparably bound up with the concept of human wholeness..."*[1]

His contemporary Heinrich Wölfflin said it with even more optimism: *"...The rhythmic waves press in on us, take hold of us, and draw us into the beautiful motion: everything formless dissolves and for a few moments we enjoy the good fortune of being freed from gravity and the downward pull of matter..."*[2]

Today in this warehouse the sucking pull and the blowing push give messages that are more mixed, and tinged with loss. The world of these instant rooms is nearly warm, nearly here, nearly a greeting. They might feel me. Elegant simplicity and pure catenaries are still there and so is revulsion of bloated things that want to ingest me. Why are they bulging? The looming pair puff, and suck, and lurk. They have the diffuse presence of blow-up love dolls writ large.

The friction on your feet is persistent. The first steps were a pleasure. They held pleasure of firm ground; the offering of a firmly planted location salving the slightly tensed posture that comes inevitably from living on hollow city slabs. But if you think this ground is there to serve as your firm foundation, you now have a problem. Pressing down by the weight of your body weight into the multiple laminations, the rubber reacts like the flesh of a succulent, letting you in first softly and then with a diffuse hunger, closing on the soles of your feet. You are going nowhere fast.

I become the object of a mechanical hunger, abject. Julia Kristeva calls it *"...an intense subjective attitude, but an indeterminate, ambivalent one. Being fluid, it can easily occupy both ends of the drive scale, from acceptance to rejection. Excitement and disgust, joy and repulsion [...] pitted with blank spaces where emotion does not allow itself to be dolled up in flower sentences..."*

Push/Pull offers a space for concrete action unrelieved by shelter. The inversion of basic instincts yields a new substance steeped in vertigo. Kristeva describes the fundamental ambivalence of this kind of experience and says it is *"neither jovial, nor trustful, nor sublime, nor enraptured by preexisting harmony. It is bare... Never anything resembling treatise, commentary, or judgement... but instead an apocalyptic laughter."*[3]

A strained kind of laughter, then. My daughter deliberately spins to taste dizziness, and Push/Pull works to make gravity out of a void. They are not so different. The vertigo that Push and Pull gives is tinged with something solemn because the firm ground secured by natural gravity has been lost, but play prevails. It holds less optimism but it seems cousin still to Robert Vischer's empathy. He says that when we encounter work like this *"the whole person and all his vital feeling are lured into compassion."*[4]

Push and Pull: constructing gravitas.

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#### References

[1] Robert Vischer, "On the Optical Sense of Form: A Contribution to Aesthetics" in Empathy, Form and Space: Problems in German Aesthetics, 1873-1893 (Santa Monica, Getty Centre, 1994) p. 104 with ellipsis.

[2] Heinrich Wölfflin, "Prolegomena To A Psychology of Architecture", in Ibid., p. 155.

[3] Julia Kristeva, Powers of Horror Roudiez, tr. (New York, Columbia University Press, 1982), p. 208.

[4] Vischer, Ibid., p. 107.