

Curtis Grahauer, *Slump*

SFU School for the Contemporary Arts main office, second floor, 149 W. Hastings St.

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Review by Justin Ramsey

Walking into Simon Fraser University's main office space at the School for the Contemporary Arts (SCA), you will notice its high, dark ceilings and narrow corridors lined with the personal offices of professors and administrators. You might stop momentarily to take in the panoramic view of Gastown, Vancouver's historic downtown neighbourhood, through the large, bright windows. It is a beautiful, fairly young building, so an encounter with an elegant, inviting space is to be expected. Nevertheless, this is an art school—so where is the artwork?

The office space delivers on that front. Up the corridor, a short walk up from the reception desk, you will glimpse what appears to be a large painting. It seems to follow stylistically in the tradition of the Abstract Expressionists; a vertical, murky streak bisects what looks like a large white canvas with nearly symmetrical flecks of grey speckling each side. From this distance, the monochromatic work seems to show a gradient of greys: light, wispy strokes begin to pepper the white space about halfway down, condensing into darker, more clustered lines towards the bottom, all the while metred by that singular, dark stripe running almost the entire height of the painting.

Simple, modern, elegant; suitable for an office space. And yet, something seems off about the artwork, even unsettling. For all its perceived formalism, some quality about it is a bit too accidental—haphazard to the point of negating any involvement of an artist in its creation—and the longer you gaze at it, the more out-of-place it feels. But surely, you are mistaken; you venture nearer to absolve your absurd unease. Along the way, concrete slabs of varying shapes, nestled along the walls or in corners, contribute to your creeping sense of dislocation.

Finally, as you stand before the work, what had begun as mild confusion descends into outright discomfort. Indeed, this is an office wall, not a canvas; and what was mistaken for paint is—well, not paint. Grey and crusty, the substance intrudes into the otherwise pristine space through a hole in the wall; beyond this hole, its source is a mystery. The substance is the same stony colour of the ceiling, which causes all sorts of bizarre pseudo-hypotheses to emerge, each as ridiculous as the last. (Maybe some liquid cement flowed through one of those industrial-looking pipes near the ceiling and ejected out into the office?) Running down the wall, the substance then heaps on the floor, where it has produced an explosive array of sandy, brittle dust. For the unsuspecting passer-by, the exact nature of this heap defies immediate categorisation, running a strange gamut from

dark rock on the bottom to what resembles white foam atop, and all the mottled greys in between. How did this happen? Why is it here? And—perhaps most importantly—is it safe?

Slump is an artwork by Curtis Grahauer, created by breaking a hole in the wall of the SCA office space and pouring cement through; the titular word “slump” refers to a particular consistency of liquid cement. For those of us unacquainted with cement outside of its normal context of roads and buildings, *Slump* looks like something quite different. Grahauer himself notes that the work is meant to conjure the sensation of coming home to one’s apartment and finding an unexpected and unwanted presence—a “gross spill” of unknown origin that might variously herald a nasty inconvenience or a health hazard. Regardless of the exact nature of this unwelcome visitor, it is clearly making itself known, demanding our attention, and, to borrow the words of Jane Bennett, “at one moment disclosing [itself] as dead stuff and at the next as live presence.”ⁱ

Bennett’s writing on “vibrant matter” provides an apt lens through which to examine *Slump*. Bennett contends that nonhuman, and even nonorganic, matter has the capacity to affect and be affected by human life. While more humanist scholars would contest that affects of nonhuman matter—machines, garbage, buildings, electricity—stem from human agency, Bennett argues for the vital integrity of these “actants,” a term derived from Bruno Latour meaning “any entity that modifies another entity in a trial,”ⁱⁱ human or nonhuman. *Slump* challenges and reterritorialises the pristine order of the office space through its self-governing vitality and disruptive, even violent affects; one can sense a latent and even teleological energy in its visible trajectory, starting at the hole, moving down the wall, and landing in that dynamic burst on the floor.

One might argue, though, that the affects of *Slump* originate with Grahauer’s act of pouring cement into the office space, and can thus be traced to human agency; nevertheless, I would suggest that the affects of the work arise *after* its installation, at the moment that the cement ceases to be cement and instead becomes a “substance.” To recap Grahauer’s own discussion of the work, its “project,” as it were, is to recreate the sensation of encountering a “gross spill”—a feeling familiar to anyone who has run weird-coloured water from the kitchen tap, found an unexpected bloom of mould or mildew, or stepped in something sticky on a supposedly clean floor; moreover, such experiences perfectly capture the ability of nonhuman matter-energy to impose itself upon us. As *Slump* is completely recontextualised from “cement” to “substance,” it takes on—quite fittingly—a life of its own.

The use of the word “substance” is not accidental; Bennett’s materiality is informed by Baruch Spinoza’s single-substance ontology, whereby all entities are made of the same substance, be it derived from “God or Nature.”ⁱⁱⁱ Spinoza writes that “[any] thing whatsoever, whether it be more perfect or less perfect, will always be able to persist in existing with the same force whereby it

begins to exist, so that in this respect all things are equal."^{iv} So, in a Spinozist turn, what happens when we concede that *Slump* is made from the same "substance" as us? Does it go too far to suspect that the artwork *wants* to make us uncomfortable? Or, rather than intellectualising *Slump*, perhaps positing that our bodies are not so distinct from this "gross spill" serves to decentre the human, placing us within an ecological aesthetics wherein we can no longer boast superiority over the other forms of life and non-life with whom we share our spaces. Either way, it seems that *Slump* finds a way to tease us.

Bennett observes that "[we] need to cultivate a bit of anthropomorphism—the idea that human agency has some echoes in nonhuman nature—to counter the narcissism of humans in charge of the world."^v Thus, it may be appropriate to intellectualise *Slump* as a stone-faced prankster with a cold sense of irony. There is, after all, a cheekiness in *Slump*'s site-specificity, and a vocabulary of wordplay surrounding its placement in an office. Institutional bodies—whether of the arts, education or government—are quick to demand "concrete" ideas from artists; and Grahauer has mentioned a lack of "consistency" within some administrative processes. Even the word "slump" is evocative of a creative block experienced by artists under pressure, or maybe the posture of the rule-writing, grant-adjudicating bureaucrats who sit in their offices. Perhaps *Slump* unwantedly draws attention to this in its own, quiet way. (Moreover, Simon Fraser University's main campus is an iconic example of brutalism; is it a coincidence that *Slump* structurally resembles a flaw in weathered brutalist architecture?)

Ultimately, *Slump* fosters a forceful aesthetic experience, one imbued with energies, troubles, and even humour. But as it vacillates between "cement" and "substance," "other" and "us," and even "concrete" and "abstract," it is hard to pin down exactly to what artistic discipline *Slump* belongs. The technicality of its creation might imply installation, while its stony structure could suggest sculpture. The affects produced between *Slump* and its human officemates may even render it a performance work. In returning briefly to our original impulse of abstract expressionist painting, I am tempted to liken its defining line of poured cement to the "zips" in Barnett Newman's paintings. Newman compared the experience of his "zips" to the "immediate, total reaction" of meeting another person for the first time.^{vi} It might suffice to say, then, that *Slump* is the zip's socially awkward distant cousin—shrewd, brutalist, and brutally honest.

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ⁱ Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, p. 5

ⁱⁱ Bruno Latour, *Politics of Nature*, p. 237

ⁱⁱⁱ Baruch Spinoza, *Ethics*, Book I, prop. 29

^{iv} *Ibid*, Book 4, prop. 37

^v Bennett, p. xiv

^{vi} Barnett Newman, "Interview." <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N6sU6ft9Xjg>