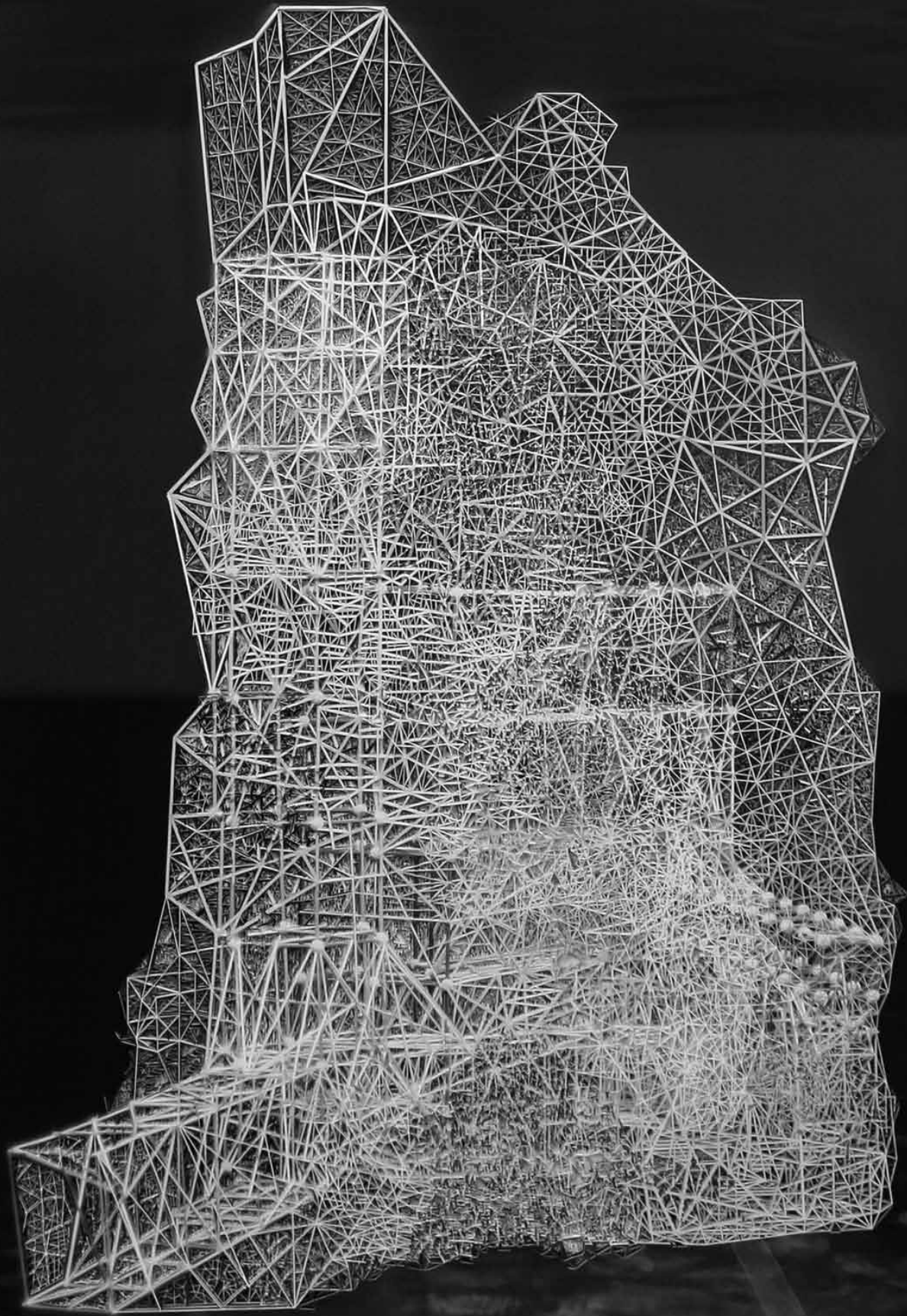


**ANTHONY BAAB**  
A STRENUOUS NONBEING



## ANTHONY BAAB

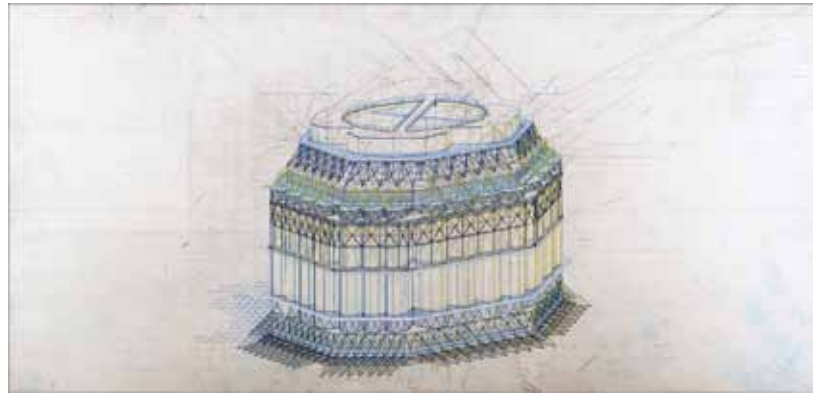
*We will continue to feel alienated until we realize that it is we who are the aliens.*<sup>1</sup>

One critical difference separates Anthony Baab's past work from the photographs, *décollage*, and moving images in *A Strenuous Nonbeing*.

Baab made a name for himself by carefully applying lines of thin tape on panel to delineate detailed geometric architectural structures (see *Baths*, 2005). In more recent iterations of these labor intensive drawings the artist has applied the technique on found photographs and print advertisements; at once obscuring, abstracting, and representing certain elements from the found image he works on top of, and making sacred geometries (see *Chanel*, 2010 and *Temple*, 2011). Baab begins with visual materials that relate to modernism; as he progresses, his own labor accumulates in the form of tape on top of the picture plane.

In *A Strenuous Nonbeing*, however, the artist's labor is no longer materialized and offered as a direct sacrifice made on top of the foreground. Instead labor is invested on the other side of photography itself where it is deeply encrypted in a complex of non-linear production processes.

Starting with cardboard, bamboo, and Zome kit pieces, the artist designs simple components that he proceeds to assemble, configure, disassemble, and reconfigure into larger structures. In the artist's studio and other non-descript locations, these models are staged, lit, photographed, re-staged, re-configured, deconstructed, reconstructed, photographed, ad infinitum. For any captured photograph, Baab may continue the mediation process by mapping in digital textures, layering disparately photographed structures and layers, and adjusting tone. The range of processes available to the artist at any time take Baab in multiple simultaneous directions



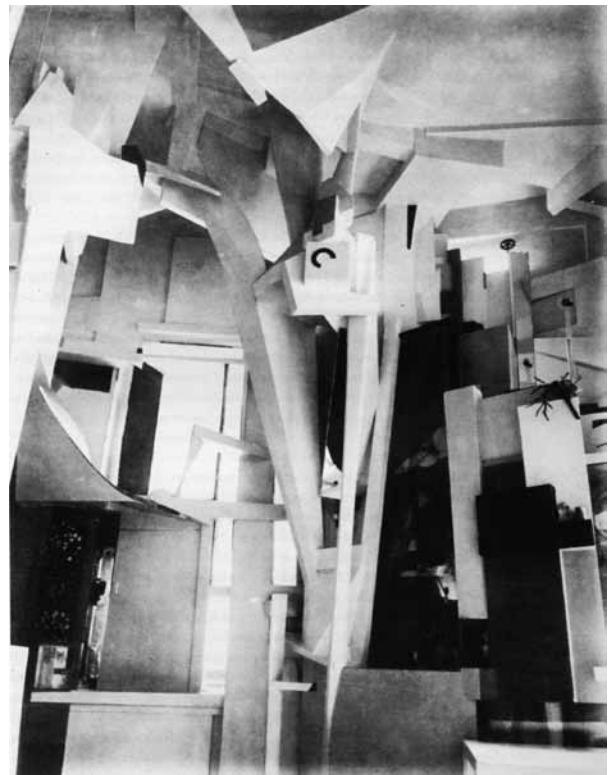
Anthony Baab, *Baths*, 2005. Acrylic, graphite, and tape on board, 24"x48".

and liberate him from the determinism of linear productivity—a notion that hovers over some of the industrial architecture that formally inspires the artist. Once collapsed into flat black and white photography, Baab's histories are not available to us.

Dadaist Kurt Schwitters took a similarly ahistorical position with *Merzbau*. Developed within the rooms of the Schwitters' Hannover family home between 1923 and 1937, the *Merzbau*, "never cohered as a unified architectural space or sculptural object. It came to formation, rather, as the site of Schwitters' practice of continuous, and non-coded, production and destruction."<sup>2</sup> The *Merzbau* had two dimensions: an architectural structure of plaster and wood and an inner core. The inner core included an accumulation of objects and discarded fragments—things friends would leave around the *Merzbau* found their way into sculptures in the installation.<sup>3</sup> According to Hans Richter, after one visit to the house, "all the little holes and cavities that we [avant-garde artists] had formerly occupied by proxy



Anthony Baab, *Temple*, 2011. Tape on found picture, 12"x9".



Kurt Schwitters, *Merzbau*, 1933. Photo by Wilhelm Redeman. © 2013 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn.

aesthetic effect. While the series *Water Towers*, 1988, may produce a profound existential effect in the viewer, the artists' production of the work is highly technical.

Baab's own technical machinery is also set to erase certain aspects of reality and push form into the aesthetic realm. The processes he sets in motion in his studio generate a variety of monumental forms and liminal fantasies where there is no color, scale is uncertain, and location remains unspecified. Four of these fantasies are outlined below.

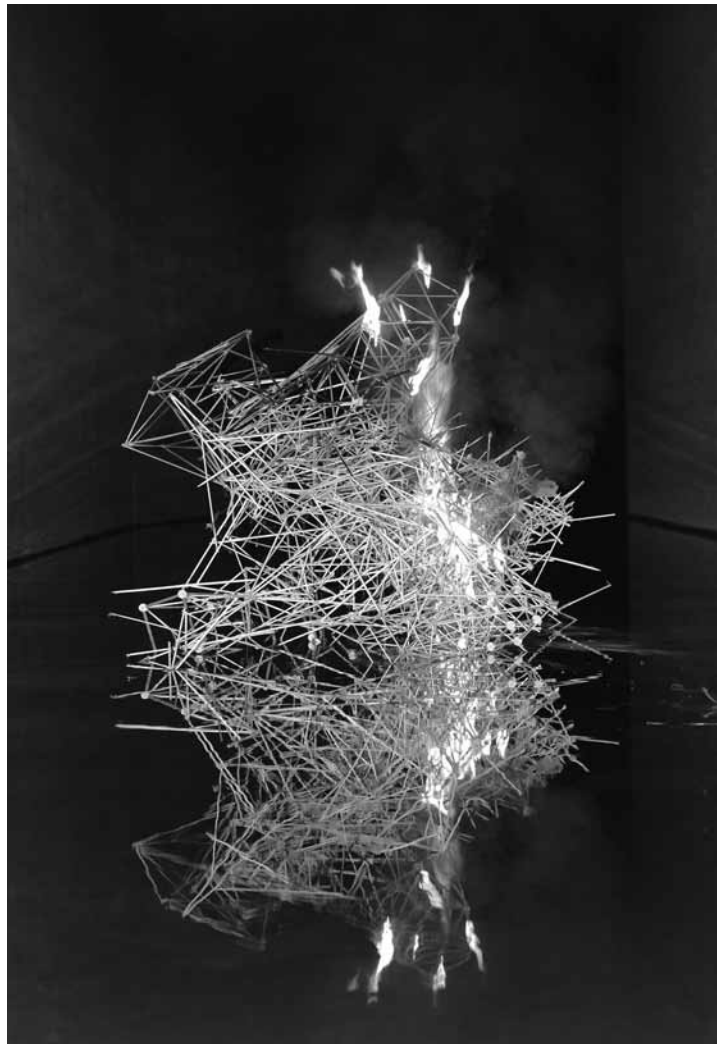
## THE FORMAL

Photography has a way of reducing everything to light. *Etraphy fore* is one of two straightforward photographs in *A Strenuous Nonbeing*. The image shows us a collapsing structure on fire, facing its own disappearance and reflection in water. As the bamboo burns, we are free to take pleasure in formal elements of the composition, symmetry, contrast, texture. We can look at a fire and see no fire at all.

## THE INFORMATIC

*Poratrix separates* depicts a densely-webbed white structure in a vacant, carpeted commercial space. The structure appears to be outgrowing its environment, self-organizing, and possibly alive. Once the informatic paradigm began, it was only a matter of time before structure got smart and all that was solid melted into code. In this fantasy, vibrant matter glows brightest. "Obscenity begins precisely when there is no more spectacle, no more scene, when all becomes transparency and immediate visibility, when everything is exposed to the harsh and inexorable light of information and communication. We are no longer a part of the drama of alienation; we live in the ecstasy of communication."<sup>7</sup>

Anthony Baab, *patristic isizons*, 2012. Digital print, 48"x32".



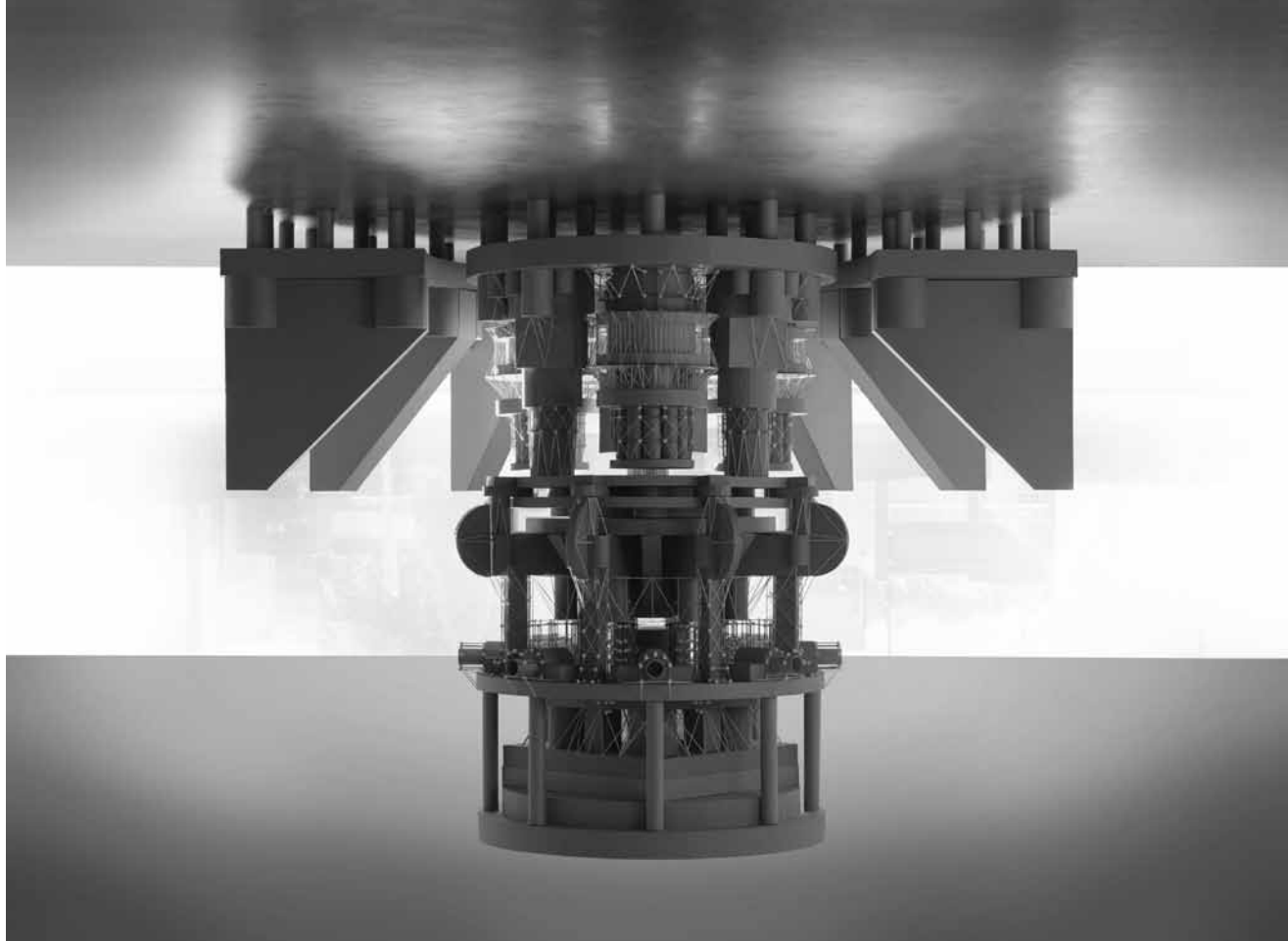
Anthony Baab, *Blackstone ixtenten*, 2012. Digital print, 60"x40".

were no longer to be seen. They were concealed by the monstrous growth of the column, covered by other sculptural excrement, new people, new shapes, colors, and details."<sup>4</sup> The structure, a living, changing artwork, was destroyed in 1937 after Allied bombing. Aside from textual accounts, we know what the *Merzbau* looked like from Wilhelm Redemann photographs, but the camera freezes and makes alien what was once a living architecture where Schwitters worked.

"When you go to a place that is constructed specifically for work, you can go and you can work, and you can work, and you can work. When you're in your studio, your studio tells you to work—it doesn't tell me when to finish, where it should go, whether it's good or not; it just tells me to work." ~ Anthony Baab.<sup>5</sup>

The studio is a place where artists go to practice getting free. Rather than work toward any one image in particular, Baab takes a lead from Schwitters and builds topological space itself in the studio. Baab builds space and time to work, space and time to waste, structures to inhabit or not, to add or subtract, zero histories in bizarre scale.

A second and equally strong influence on *A Strenuous Nonbeing* is the lifelong practice of Bernd and Hilla Becher. Critics often misread the artists' serial photographs of industrial structures as a contribution to social or industrial history. Rather, the Bechers have the following to say about their strict, quintessentially minimalist practice: "Through photography, we try to arrange these shapes and render them comparable. To do so, the objects must be isolated from their context and freed from all association."<sup>6</sup> By taking great measures to erase unwanted detail, the artists achieve tonal balance, visual stillness, and a powerful



Anthony Baab, *etraphy fore*, 2012. Digital print, 60"x75". Photo by E.G. Schempf.

## THE IDEAL

*Blackstone ixtenten* is perfection in virtual concrete, marble, granite, and pure math. It exists in a place we have never been in an unknown time. Likewise, the structure in *PTogen PETS* is a temple, with a portal leading to ideal Forms on the fourth floor. The trouble is, there's no easy way up there and the door appears to be a black hole. Both structures resound with silence. "Monumentality in architecture may be defined as a quality, a spiritual quality inherent in a structure which conveys the feelings of its eternity, that it cannot be added to or changed."<sup>8</sup>

## THE ETHEREAL

In the live video stream titled *A Strenuous Nonbeing*, we view another abstract architecture, but in real time. A cat wanders through the frame and stops to nap on the structure. The cat ignores us, but seems to understand that we are watching. Perhaps this cat was once terrestrial, a pet even. Or maybe it is Bastet, Egyptian Goddess of independence, and the structure she lounges on was left as a model in the tomb of modernism. Either way, the cat is our only guide, so we should pay close attention and try to learn something useful.

Stephen Lichty  
New York City  
January, 2013

<sup>1</sup>Stephen Lichty, misremembered quotation from Terence McKenna, "New Maps of Hyperspace," *Magical Blend*, 1989.

<sup>2</sup>Jaleh Mansoor, "Kurt Schwitters' Merzbau: The Desiring House," *Invisible Culture*, 2002. Online.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

<sup>4</sup>Dorothea Dietrich, *The Collages Of Kurt Schwitters*, (Cambridge University Press, 1993), 188.

<sup>5</sup>Conversation with Anthony Baab, December 4, 2012.

<sup>6</sup>Liliane Touraine, "Bernd and Hilla Becher: The Function Doesn't Make the Form," (*Artefactum*: April/May 1989): 9.

<sup>7</sup>Jean Baudrillard, *The Ecstasy of Communication*. (Autonomedia: New York, 1988), 21-22.

<sup>8</sup>Louis I Kahn, "Monumentality (1944)," in *Louis Kahn: Essential Texts*, ed. Robert Twombly (New York: Norton, 2003), 21.

## THANK YOU

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Cover: Anthony Baab, *poratrix separates*, 2012. Décollage on layered digital print, 60"x40".