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From Forms to Form-Fields : On Life Living

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"We assume," writes artist/architect Frederick J. Kielser (1890-1965), "that because an object does not express itself in visible activity, it (...) is dead. (...) Our assumption of what is alive or dead is chiefly the result of optical observation." (1) We, he adds, "see only through the total coordination of human experiences (...) we see by creative ability and not by mechanical reproduction." (2) We, as Brian Massumi puts it, "perceive more than we see." (3) Here Kiesler's remarks hinge on two sets of problems : on the one hand, the manner in which visual forms reduce life's dynamic activity to objective movement ; and on the other hand, how aesthetic experience transforms the objective world into creative subjectivity. From an architectural point of view, what holds these two sets of problems together is the question of form.

It is a commonplace of discourses on contemporary (bio)architecture to say that buildings are alive when their forms resemble – or function like – living organisms. This architectural wisdom entails a simplistic interpretation of life that reduces it to a set of functions whose expressions are assumed to be localizable in objective space. It also promotes a mechanical understanding of architecture that negates life's experiential reality. The engineered fabrication of life's formal equivalent renders experience a residual or more positively an outcome of what is already inscribed in the replicated form. Experience is not conceptualized as that which moves across forms in the making, but as the act of encountering constituted forms. Experience is reduced to a mere subjective compensation that occurs afterwards, once life has become objectified in the formal aspects of a building. For Kiesler, life living is experiential. Visual forms, whether spatially localizable, or structurally observable in objective space-time, can only dimly illuminate life's active and forceful manner of becoming. To think of life living, we must segregate it from bare visible activity, from formal expression in objective space and time.

For Kiesler, experience occurs between vision and material forms, within and among the total coordination of natural, technological, physical and mental forces. Kiesler takes this two-sides aesthetic relation – between mentality and physicality on the one hand, and between technology and the natural environment on the other – as a life form, that is, as a distinctive mode of existence. Instead of putting emphasis on how visual forms resemble or act like organic forms, he insists on the total coordination of experiences, on the relational politics of perceptual occurence. In so

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doing, he warns us against the pitfalls of attributing the concurrence of architecture and the life sciences to observable forms. And in the same stroke, he constructively removes the architectural possibility of attuning ourselves to life from the physical materiality of visual forms to the psycho-physical energetics of visibility (which also strives for invisibility).

Kiesler was passionately invested in resisting and subverting the normative standardization of architecture. He sustained its functional role yet he refused to reduce it to the prevailing idealized standards of beauty, durability, practicability and low cost. Opening up architecture to a set of techniques that can modulate and also be attacked by sensation and perception, he defined its function as the capacity to intensify humans' health. Architectural forms, Kiesler insisted, should not emerge out of previous architectural projects. They should instead figure "the study of life processes and the needs they create." (4) In Kiesler's terms, architecture should be at the service of the body, acquiring its value in its very capacity to provide humans with a space that protects them from fatigue. "Man's health," he wrote, "declines in a progression from fatigue to death." (5)

Kiesler defined health as an embodied experiential reality that results from a complex entanglement between mental, physical, natural and technological forces. In defining health synchretically, as the dynamic co-becoming of heterogeneous forces, he made a persuasive intervention into our understanding of life by defining it as a form of aesthetic relation. In his own terms, to intensify health is not to identify a problem to be solved. It is to develop techniques that work within and among the heterogeneous forces that condition its synchretic individuation. It is to develop techniques capable of triggering the creative expression of humans' potentials toward an intensification of their capacity to action.

Kiesler did not approach health through the lenses of a paradigm ingrained in the technological optimization and enhancement of the biological body. Neither did he define architecture as a technology of subjugation, which, in a biopolitical regime populated with bodies exploitable and controllable by means of biotechnological optimization, could serve to visualize (bio)power's *modus operandi*. Rather, he experimented with the ecological and ethological obligations and requirements proper to techniques of exhilaration. In the light of his oeuvre, contemporary biotechnology is no longer rooted in a curative regime. Nor is it promising anything. It is taking off to reach synchretic expression.

Kiesler is a joyful companion to think how the exchanges between architecture, biotechnology and neurosciences can create new problems that go beyond the exploitation of the activity of living beings in new contexts. Following the way he uses health to rethink what living might mean, my aim here is to speculate on what happens to architecture when life is thought in terms of aliveness. Instead of asking

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what happens to life as a conceptual category when it is fabricated in scientific labs, artistic and architectural studios, that is, instead of asking how architecture can mold, carve, frame or hold life in space, architectures of aliveness ask how architecture can catalyse the feeling of aliveness. Taken up in life's experiential co-reality, the forms produced by architectures of aliveness are not mere forms. They are form-fields. A form-field is a form to which nothing visible corresponds as such. A form-field is a form tuned to a field, which acts on it at distance. The question then is not whether life is a form observable in objective space and time, or whether life is explicable in terms of a set of functions that can be captured in formal expressions. The question is how life is more than form.

Empty Space as the Space of Life

"If matter alone were reality," wrote Kiesler, "life would be static." Architecture, in the forms it produces, harbours matter in simple location. Alfred North Whitehead vigorously challenged the reduction of "life-living" to a spatial phenomenon. For Whitehead, life and nature can only be understood if they are fused together as "essential factors in the composition of "really real" things." (6)Whitehead makes the point that matter in simple location, or space occupied, is synonymous with a lifeless nature. It is bare activity without content ; "activity in which nothing is effected." (7) It is the reality of material bodies interpreted in the contiguity of their external relationships. In contrast, nature alive is concerned with the "study of the internal relations within a complex state of activity." (8) For nature to be alive, he adds, life ought to be interpreted as a characteristic of empty space. (9) When nature is lifeless, empty space is "the substratum for passive geometrical relationships between material bodies." (10) When nature is alive, when activity is contentful, "space apparently empty is the theatre of activities which we do not directly perceive." (11)In Whitehead's terms, life "lurks in the interstices." (12) In other words, empty space is not tantamount to passivity but to activity; it is the dynamic betweenness, the relational co-reality that renders life a creative and evolutionary process.

Nature lifeless is a conception of nature "in abstraction from the notion of life." (13) Nature lifeless is matter segregated from life and mental activity. To think nature alive, Whitehead clarifies, we ought to include "mental operations as among the factors which make up the constitution of nature." (14) Life, he goes on to say, is a "passage from physical order to pure mental originality, and from pure mental originality to canalized mental originality." (15) Mentality is however not substantially different from physicality. Mentality, Whitehead explains, is non-spatial, yet it is always a "reaction from and integration with physical

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experience, which is spatial." (16) Mental activity aims at originality in that it bestows entities with the capacity to connect with their own potentialities and to creatively act in their environment. Mental activity is as a mode of dynamic efficiency endowed with the power to bring contextual conditions to new possibilities. From a Whiteadian point of view, life living is immediately mental and physical, spatial and non-spatial, yet durational, meaning that its reality is the reality of change. It can be vaguely described as that which cuts across, or streams through the mental-physical continuum in such a way that the novelty or originality it produces cannot be localized.

Empty Space as Endless Space

Kiesler's own term for life living in empty space is endless space. Instead of producing formal equivalents of living organisms, his architectural project questioned how architectural forms can activate non-habituated spatial engagements. He refused to produce new forms "wrapped around conventional ways of living," (17) focusing instead on how forms can trigger atypical modes of living. Put otherwise, he experimented with the creation of new forms of life as opposed to the physical fabrication of pre-given life forms. He observed that design strategies based on an immersive continuity between the inhabitants and their surrounding environment is endowed with the capacity to activate new forms of confluences between mentality and physicality as well as to trigger unconventional modes of inhabitation. Instead of isolating the architectural elements that compose space (floor, ceiling, walls, etc.), Kiesler attributed the same value to the elements and to their in-between space, formulating a design strategy informed by an equipotential continuing-across.

To overcome conventional modes of living, Kiesler noted, new functions must be invented. Refusing the "form follows function" motto, he made the point that the problem of the relation between forms and functions cannot be thought without at the same time addressing the problem of structures. An equipotential continuing-across capable of triggering inventive modes of inhabitation is thus a design strategy that rethinks the relation between form, function and structure.

For philosopher Raymond Ruyer, creativity and invention cannot be substituted by mechanical links. They can only be captured in their process of formation. Ruyer promts us to not confuse functioning and formation. Life living, he argues, is a process of formation and not simply a functioning. Ruyer relates functioning to structures, anatomy and physiology and formation to development and embryology. A functioning is a reality observable in the spatio-temporality of formed

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structures. Structures, by this account, can be deduced from other structures. In contrast, formationamounts to the emergence of new forms that cannot be deduced from pre-given forms (and therefore to functionings). (18) A form, Ruyer goes on to say, is a sensation and sensation only has one side (surface). If sensation would have two sides, he adds, it would be an object. (19) For Ruyer, life living is not an object or a static form ; it is an absolute form, meaning a form without any spatial referent. An absolute form is a form that knows itself without observing itself; it is a form that requires no point of view outside of itself ; it is "neither a Gestalt nor a perceived form but a form in itself, one that does not refer to any exterior point of view [...] it is an absolute form that surveys itself independently of any supplementary dimension." (20) By this account, life living is spiritual more than formal or material, that is, it can only be partially grasped physically. In other words, absolute forms cannot be reduced to, and are not exhaustively explicable in terms of actuality. To fully capture the pragmatical implications that absolute forms entail for the emergence of unconventional modes of inhabitation, let us consider two installations by Kiesler.

In 1925, Kiesler formulated a series of demands to reinvent architecture. He requested a liberation from the ground, the abolition of the static axis, of the walls and foundations, to emphasize a system of spans in free space. Two of his installations, City in Space and the Endless House, are concrete, yet abstract, speculative and pragmatic experimentations with his radical approach. City in Space is a three dimensional elevated structure composed of plain surfaces connected by and through straight lines. The intersecting lines and surfaces generate nodes that express locus of encounters. They also illuminate the empty space that permeates the installation. The Endless House is a single family house shaped in the form of a flattened spheroid also freed from the burden of the determining constraints imposed by the ground. City in Space does not resemble an organic form yet the shape of the Endless House recalls an organic form. It should however be interpreted as a living occurrence and not as a banal reminiscence of an organic form. The house is not alive because its form resembles a life form, meaning a form that cannot be reduced to an ideal form. Rather, writes Kiesler, "the spheroid shape derives from the social dynamics of two or three generations living under one roof." (21) Also described as an "architectural form based on a lighting system," (22) the resulting shape enables light to pervade across the house. The form can thus be said to be pragmatically produced as the configuration with the least resistance to inner and outer stress. In making relative the distinction between the inside and the outside, the Endless House is better described genetically in relation to what it triggers, rather than visually in relation to what it represents. That is, it is better described as "a nucleus of new forms of life and coexistence with man's mental, physical and social circumstances." (23)

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Kiesler's installations, even though observable in a motionless state, are not static spatial localizations that represent a new form of spatial organization. They are metastable or dynamic structures that express an organic relationship. The organic relationship emerges out of the radical connectivity between the elements that compose space. This radical connectivity is endowed with the power to trigger the emergence of non-habituated spatial engagements, themselves capable of setting in motion the individuation of new forms of subjectivities. The radical connectivity bears witness to the power of these connections to reinvent the structure anew. Put otherwise, City in Space and the Endless House are relational forms of activity irreducible to visible forms. They render visible the excess of potentials generated by the endless encounters of life's finalities in empty space, and the potency of that excess to regenerate the structure anew. Kiesler's endless space, or equipotential continuing across, constructively affirms the impossibility of capturing domestic or urban behaviour and activities in visual representations.

Kiesler's installations are complex systems whose initial conditions can be dramatically transformed in the activity of inhabitation. They are dynamic structures that spontaneously take a life of their ownin virtue of the ways in which their contextual elements combine and recombine. These endless (re)combinations assert behavior as the dynamic activity that modulates the co-relationality between form, function and structure. That is, Kiesler's installations are functioning structures in an endless process of formation. In putting behavior as that which upholds the dynamic activity of his installations, Kiesler introduced the possibility of thinking formation in the immediacy of its relation to functioning. Instead of distinguishing them dialectically, formally or substantially, he insisted on how behavior affirms their co-relationality. Ruyer also posited behavior that which is endowed with the power to link formation and functioning. (24) There is, he writes, a process of formation in all behaviors. Behavior, he adds, is "synthesis of functioning and formation," "improvisation of a structure," (25) anticipation of a possible functioning. (26) That is to say, behavior marks the advent of an open-ended process. Behavior synthesizes, improvises and anticipates through linking themes that are not spatially pre-given. (27)Themes, Ruyer adds, are immanent to the becoming of forms yet they are not localizable in space and time. The conclusion to be drawn is that the structures of both installations do not function as closed sets of operations. Rather, they are open structures in an endless process of individuation. They are the nucleus of incident relations across incipient forms or virtual motifs. By this account, absolute forms are not merely forms, they are surfaces of emergence; they are triggers of relational connectivity.

Design practices that aim at generating absolute forms are practices that modulate time in empty space. "Bergson claimed," write Deleuze and Guattari, "a particular

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status defined by duration, “multiplicity of fusion,” which expressed the inseparability of variations.” (28) In Semblance and Event, Brian Massumi clarifies that fusion is another word for nonlocal linkage.” (29) Absolute forms are vectorial in that they figure actions at distance. In Whitehead’s own terms, vectors “feel what is there and transform it into what is here.” (30) In requiring no point of view outside of themselves, absolute forms are durational forms whose process of formation is conditioned by the goings on in other regions; they are vectorial surfaces that trigger unexpected connections. The vectorial reality of absolute forms is what I term form-fields. In effecting a passage from simple location in objective space to absolute forms in vectorial fields, form-fields emphasize the nonlocal linkages immanent to the becoming of forms. These nonlocal linkages cannot be localized; they bear witness to the impossibility of reducing life to visual forms. Their effects can be felt, but not seen.

Form-Fielding

> Between the corporeal units there lie the various empty fields of tension that holds the parts together like planets in a void. (31)

Kiesler’s project is particularly important in the contemporary juncture in which architecture is turning into a variety of techniques associated with biotechnology. Linking his radical approach to experiments carried in biology, he made a significant reference to the work of surgeon and biologist Alexis Carrel. In 1912, at the Rockfeller Institute in New York, Carrel removed an embryonic chicken heart from an hatching egg and cultured it *in vitro* for over 30 years (until 1946).(32) Carrel’s experiment, Kiesler remarked, shown that “by changing the physical environment, life may be quickened and increased, retarded or destroyed.” (33) In other words, it confirmed the pre-active role of the environment in which cells and tissues are cultured.Here “pre” does not connote temporal linearity. It does not bestow any temporal priority to the environment. Rather, “pre” magnifies the fact that the culture cannot exist without its environment. “While life comes only from life,” Kiesler clarifies, “it is also dependent on its technological environment.” (34) That is, a form is alive in virtue of the environment within which it is tuned. Kiesler showed that while the “criterion of life is activization,” (35) it can only be approached on a super-empirical level. That is, life’s formal expressions are always in relation with an associated milieu or surface of emergence. Milieus and surfaces that tend to vanish when forms reach full concretization. Kiesler’s reference to Carrel is noteworthy. It affirms that aging is not an intrinsic condition of a cell but a process that is conditioned by the environment. That is, it puts forth the vectorial reality of life’s formation.

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In asking how forms and fields co-produce each other, biologist Rupert Sheldrake's theory of formative causation by morphic fields provides a contemporary biological explanation of vectorial fields. Following Peirce, Sheldrake argues that the laws of nature are habitual rather than transcendental and eternal. That is, the laws that govern evolution are not static but evolutionary. "Habits," he writes, "may depend on cumulative influences from our past behaviour to which we tune in." (36) However, he adds, "there is no need for them to be stored in a material form within our nervous system." (37) That is, "the form and behaviour of organisms (...) depend on the fields within which the organism is tuned." (38) By this account, life forms cannot be segregated from their morphic fields, which Sheldrake describes as "non material regions of influence extending in space and continuing in time," (39) as "potential organizing patterns of influence" (40) situated "within and around the systems they organize." (41) They, he add, resist the disappearance of the organism to which they are related in that "can appear again physically in other times and places, wherever and whenever the physical conditions are appropriate." (42) Morphic fields act at distance to transmit formative influences. They affirm life's evolutionary process as the complex co-relation between the corporeality and incorporeality of living organisms ; they express the biological reality proper to form-fields.

Aliveness as Dynamic Meta-Form

City in Space and the Endless House are prototypes that were never built. They should however be interpreted pragmatically as unfolding envelopes of potentialities that resonate with pressing issues of our contemporary moment. In the context of today's global mobility, information, bodies and goods are circulating across the globe, and even further into outer space. However, their modes of transportation do not necessarily increase their psycho-physical mobility. Kiesler's project is timely in that it affirms the social potential that emanates from architecture to intensify humans' mental and physical activity.

City in Space and the Endless House are not finished products but platforms for movement ; they are processes to modulate, processes that figure procedures (43) rather than forms. They question our sense of weightedness and weightlessness by foregrounding techniques of gravitation based on movement across surfaces. By inviting its inhabitants to rise above the ground, and to move across plain surfaces, they put forth how proprioception and techniques of gravitation condition the experience of the feeling of aliveness. City in Space and the Endless House are architectures whose formation is conditioned by incident connections across

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heterogeneous elements related in empty space. They are heterogeneous unities in movement that invite the body to endlessly calculate its position in relation to the elements actually and virtually present across their surfaces.In their capacity to grasp the totality of a field according to a principle of ubiquity, the architectural elements of both installations are not juxtaposed – fused or confused – but given all at once. City in Space and the Endless House are form-fields that capture life in the immediacy of its mental physical, technological and natural modalities.

Forms impose a burden on physicality, whose reality is reduced to staticity. Form-fields introduce the difference between a form only understood in its external physical reality and a form understood in its internal and equipotential modes of activity. A form-field is a distinctive mode of becoming that valorizes the plurality of the elements that compose space, a dynamic form of activity that swirls in the endless and synchretic relationship between and among physicality, mentality, technology and nature. Form-fields move from a conception of space based on objectivity, physicality and materiality to a definition of space as a pluralistic unity in movement, as the co-presence of heterogeneous forces and elements. In brief, a form-field is tantamount to continuity clutching at originality ; it is a continuing across that is immediately a continuing anew. Visual, material and physical forms are however not meaningless. They act as pauses that introduce cycles. These cycles are crucial as they break the linearity of time and enable the production and expression of change and novelty. (44) Physical or visual forms are thus to be interpreted as snapshots of an intensive process of individuation.

Aliveness is a mode of dynamic mode of activity on the edge of the amorphous. It can be interpreted as an energetic establishment of a relation between forms ; a “form of forms” (45) that moves across forms ; a dynamic meta-form endowed with the power of transformation ; a trans-form. Aliveness is a non-localizable yet pervading form-field that prevents life’s identification and localization through producing analog or continuous space. In *Métamorphoses du corps,* JoséGil explains that the energetic establishment of a relation between forms replaces the traditional figure/ground relation by that of a rhythm. Gil defines this peculiar rhythm as one of disparation that gives rise to a rhythming space where the body is in relation with space as opposed to be represented in it. (46) An energetic establishment of a relation between and across forms is what prevents forms from being reduced to their physical materiality. Thus, aliveness is a relational mode of activity, which, as Brian Massumi beautifully writes, “does not reflect what is outside the organism” it “inflects what takes off from it.” (47)

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dusk. The rays are filtered through the interior through a convex mirror, and the dweller can gauge the hour by the color of the tinted light around him. Instead of depending solely on a mechanical clock, splintering his life into minute particles of time, he becomes aware of the continuity of time and of his own dynamic integration with natural forces." Frederick J. Kiesler, Endless House and its Psychological Lighting, p. 50.

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PLAN

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