

THE INTERACTION OF THE BODY IN ITS PROJECTED ENVIRONMENT

1. A wider view

My goal is to arrive at a concept of the generous in architecture. To do that I want to arrive at an ontology of use, a phenomenology pragmatism: a way of describing the pragmatist view so that it slots in easily with the phenomenological existentialism in which I feel at home. My purpose is to come to a description of the concept *use* in the arena of our doing, thinking and making and to then mobilise this description in the construction of an *aesthetics of use*.

Use pervades every aspect of our being. It denotes the territorialisation of our environment in activities such as possession, enjoyment, displacement and arrangement by a process of objectification. A renegotiation of the idea of use can, I believe, place the relationship between the useful and the poetic at the centre of the discussion concerning design and aesthetics and place the verb *human being* firmly in its environment as an active and conscious participation in something larger than the self. Above all, it can make that relationship *immanent*, released from having to invoke a separate *other*. The question is how the concept of use can be seen as central to an understanding of that relationship. One solution might lead to a concept of *the complex body*, the body as a dynamic assemblage, constantly reterritorialising its environment, constantly renegotiating the always *political* boundaries of taste. With this we could explore the fundamental role architecture plays as ‘a morphological practicing of society’, resituating our attitude to design to incorporate a key spatial and social quality, namely the generous.

Form-behaviour

Early on in his career Merleau-Ponty posited that “behaviour is a form”. The relationship between the two however, appears to be such that they verge on becoming interchangeable: can we also turn these words around without violating the sensitivities of the syllogism? Is *a form* behaviour?

Behaviour, “a kinetic melody gifted with meaning” is the *forming* of the environment, a *spatialising* of the world. Form is the differentiation of the foreground from the background in the process of identifying things presented to us. Our ability to recognise *styles* of form is bound up with our ability to know what to do with them and how to place our bodies relative to them. Form is *the world described with reference to use*. Through description by the mind, space is *prepared* for behaviour. The relationship between a thing and a bodily intention relative to that thing as expressed in *the decision* to allocate meaning and unleash action is, I would argue, always a form of *using*. Use *happens* where the indeterminate relationship between thing and significance is clenched and determined in attitude and action. A form therefore is a form on the condition of behaviour. A form is behaviour in that form is *a-description-in-use* of things in the surrounding space expressing itself in movement, orientation and posture. A *thing* becomes *a form* when it is described with reference to its use to us. Form is the difference between a thing in its indeterminacy and an object as described relative to a perspective. Form and behaviour are the two directions that relate a body with its environment: behaviour is the centrifugal term and form the centripetal term of the contiguity that use presupposes in any relationship. An echo of that relationship resides in the word perform.

A good meeting of faces

Take *the form* of the Chapterhouse in Wells Cathedral. It is surely one of the great emblems of (social) space. The architecture *performs* the superb magic of form-behaviour. Such a space is a set of immediate relations, expressed in use-as-gesture, between a body and the partial objects of its environment through the visually "silent" medium of air, whereby form and behaviour unfold in the practice of the space. The central column of the chapterhouse is the start of a kinetic melody of lines which reach to the ceiling, do a glorious thing with ribs, fans and vaults, and then come down again, fitting their way around the lacy windows and the arcade of niches, all the way back to the silent ground. The architecture begins and ends with a seat. A centrifugal seat at the centre sprouts *the matter of space, i.e. the surfaces behind the medium*, to be confronted with a centripetal seat on the other side of an apparent emptiness, the pregnant air, the ground, silent as all messengers should be after they have delivered their message. It is the grand setting of an epic confrontation between faces. An interfacial space as Sloterdijk described so beautifully. It affords a kind of activity and makes that activity special. It does not *symbolise* or represent that activity. It affords the activity of the meeting of faces and makes that activity special. That is all.

use it in silence

Space, as Bergson puts it in *Matter and Memory*, is an arrangement privileging the body in the intentional analysis of its environment. Space in architectural terms is an event, whereby body and environment find a fit in appropriate behaviour, that is, an interaction of the body and what it faces. "Perception," Bergson says, "is the master of space". It is master because it is good at what it does within its own frame of reference and it is master in that perception *commands* space as a general does his army. It works with what its got and focuses strategically on what is important but cannot ever control everything all of the time. Perception is a political activity: it prioritizes the given towards something. Perception does this through description, that is finding possibilities or forms with regard to use. The physiology of perception decides what it selects from the multiplicity, what it focuses on and so perception is a way of determining direction through space and one's behaviour in space. The more one practices one's perception, the more one is able to take on board, making one's journey through space more exciting, better grounded and more fluid. The use of space in this sense is a machinic assemblage of aggregates: perception and form-behaviour.

Our *being* is a *form of using*, that is an interacting with the environment for the specific purposes of self-preservation, self-maintenance, self-exploration and self-fulfilment. All applications of the word *use* refer to some sort of affirmed relation between the body and the environment of which it is a part. Every interaction, between the body and its environment can be characterised as a form of use through the dynamic contiguity between body and environment. There is a fundamental non-difference at the root of all our doing, our being, requiring no dualism. Every aspect of our being-in-the-world can be referred to the topology of use. So the question becomes: what do I do when I am being utilitarian, and what do I do when I am being poetic? What is the difference between those two activities? And if we can resolve the difference, might this improve our attitude to the design task or indeed our ability to experience spaces well and creatively? If being utilitarian and being poetic can in

principle constitute the same kind of activity be it with different effects in differing contexts might we then not reduce the whole problem of aesthetics to one of attitude and context, requiring not a science, but a politics of beauty, whereby beauty is that what a person brings to a thing? And is it not his bringing that is at issue? Is being human not the relationship we maintain *between* our body and the environment? Does not *the human* in fact reside in that *relationship*, rather than in the body by itself? Does it help us to *humanise our environment* by putting that relationship at the centre of our concern and make it more consciously part of ourselves?

useless objects

Perhaps we can say that the difference between the utilitarian and the poetic, is that aspect of univocality implied in the objectification of a thing and its silence with regard to its manifold: its virtual uses. Objectification privileges a particular description of a thing and everything that is not said is turned away from, it becomes *useless*. Reducing an aggregate as complex as a person, a self, to a single use while keeping his/her multiplicity silent is an act of objectification and objects are partial descriptions of things in the world reduced to an immediate use without being allowed to escape. *Conscious use* privileges and narrows simultaneously. That is its glory *and* its tragedy, it is always both an act of creation, in that it sets the condition for the thing's being as an object in relation to the using body and an act of destruction in that it *narrows* the thing to that object. In its thingliness it is indeterminate; as an object it has been brought into a relation with us: it is being used. We must allow things to escape their objectivity, to be freed from their univocal use, not by trying to recover a state of indeterminacy, but by being generous after the act of determination. Just as Man Ray set objects free by denying their designed use through a carefully aimed destruction of purpose. In this way the object is reterritorialised as a work of art. And every work of art is a beginning of a wonderful journey of interpretation and silence.

an endless beginning: design vs experience

The more one practices one's perception, the more one is able to shed *and* take on board, making one's journey through space more exciting *and* more fluid. Apart from making us more skilled in negotiating a certain space, practiced perception also leads to habituation, increasing the univalence of a space. Habituation to a glorious room as the chapter house in Wells would be a tragedy. Therefore we would do well to institute a complementary practice. On the one hand we should practice space morphologically and fit our movements and gestures to it. On the other, we practice our looking critically through the constant undoing of habituated uses, our addiction to the familiar, through improved looking, searching for the wild growth of possible other uses, whereby even the search itself becomes useful, if only to escape habituation. As one practices perception things can be made to loosen their programmed purpose; practiced perception introduces the virtual and the indeterminate in one's looking. That is art: the offer of a constant beginning in the renegotiation of the body's boundaries. This will help both design and experience.

generosity

In his essay on Hume, Deleuze makes a crucial point. Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* start with the anchoring of belief as the fundamental existential act upon which all our doing and knowing is based and ends by a series of steps with the idea that the passions and inclinations that rule our spheres of concern need to

expand from the family to the sphere of society. Society's challenge in fact, is to invent, maintain and reform *artifices* in the form of institutions and social spaces.

"The problem is not how to limit egotisms, [i.e. encouraging repressed behaviour in order to make society possible] but how to go beyond partialities, how to pass from a "limited sympathy" to an "extended generosity," how to stretch passions and give them an extension they don't have on their own. Society is thus seen no longer as a system of legal and contractual limitations but as a system of institutional inventions: how can we invent artifices, how can we create institutions that force passions to go beyond their partialities and form moral, judicial, political sentiments (for example the feeling of justice)? (...) Thus the entire question of man is displaced [...] it is no longer a matter of the complex relation between fiction and human nature; it is rather, a matter of the relations between human nature and artifice."

This is a central text to my project. The reason is twofold. On the one hand it reformulates society not as a repression of the self, but as a project engaged in the extension of the self to include society, making generosity the fundamental mechanism in the creation of a healthy society. Selfishness is not just the privileging of the self, for there is nothing wrong with that. Just as there is nothing wrong with using things. Selfishness is the privileging of a self that cannot see very far or very well, beyond immediate desires, it doesn't use its environment well. It keeps the manifold out of view. The utilitarian as used in common parlance, is a *technique of self* that is simply not useful to the self-in-society. It is self-destructive. The selfish attitude could only work successfully if it eliminates even the other in the self. Selfishness in society destroys not just society but it turns against the itself-in-society. To broaden the self to include society is important to the self's own survival, especially as society becomes increasingly dense and numerous and the environment increasingly *used up* in a Heideggerian sense. Selfishness is *self-destructive* in every situation wherever the I is related to a you. In order to avoid the problem of narrowing that objectification necessarily entails, and in order to stretch our egotism to include our being-in-the-world and give everyone a place and to find more uses we need generosity. We need *artifice* to broaden the self to become part of the world in use. We need a complex self. To create a better self-machine, a self machine called society of which the individual self is a working part without being absorbed and nullified, an artificial creation, we need generosity.

Now architecture is fundamentally and profoundly a social machine, offering a beginning for every situation. But how would generosity work within the discipline of architecture which configures social space? What is a generous architecture? To reduce something to an object is useful *and* full of risk. The discourse of design would benefit if it were to, somewhat in the spirit of Louis Kahn and Team 10, approach every *thing*, not as an object but as a body-subject. Essentially this entails treating the design task of, say, a house, as the projection of the human beings-in-the-world that use it. In this way a house is approached not as an object but as the centripetal form of the centrifugally behaving body-subject. The boundaries of the complex body do not end at the surface of the skin, but where its relationships with the environment peter out. A house can then, through its many users be asked in Kahn's terms "what it wants to be". And the answer is given by taking account of *all* the users and as many uses as can be summoned. This is what makes architecture so complex and such a political art. Nevertheless it is this humanising of matter

through the users that in fact constitutes the architect's task. And he must forget no-one, especially not his own self in relation to the task.