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Mattias Kärrholm

Introduction

How can agency be delegated to things as a productive strategy in the context of making? Let us consider two insightful examples: the first one provided by Clarice Lispector, in particular her novels *The Passion According to G.H.* (1964) *A Breath of Life* (posthumous and incomplete); the second comes from Louis Kahn and his work on the *Indian Institute of Management* (IIM) in Ahmedabad (Srivastava 2009). Both examples invite a reflection on anthropomorphism/animism in a relational ontology of material agency, where a certain part of an assemblage is deliberately made into a critical and transformative mediator – a process of *actantialisation*, to use Latour's (1997) concept.

The conceptual borders between animism and anthropomorphism are blurry. Anthropomorphism is Greek and denotes something (non-human) that takes on human characteristic; animism is often used to describe the phenomena of giving souls to non-humans, but depending on what one mean with the concept of soul, this is a definition that almost totally overlaps with the one of anthropomorphism. Recent theories of material agency and posthumanism (taking its cue from philosophers such as De Landa, Latour, Stengers, Bennett, Braidotti) has opened up for a transvaluation of valid methods for knowledge production in science and research. It has also opened up for a retake on one of the oldest and perhaps most well-know (and frowned upon) tradition in architectural theory: the anthopomorphic perspective. Anthropomorphism was strongly criticised during the 20th century, expelled from research and science, and for understandable reasons. Human history is full of negative examples of the opposite: the instrumentalisation of human beings and the transforming humans into objects (Kopytoff 1986). However, the anthropomorphic perspective (through this 'guilt by association') may have been discarded too easily.

The popular process of demystifying things, Bennett (2010) suggests, often just leads to the revealing of something human, other-to-the-object: humans are not reducible to things, but neither are things reducible to human action or intentions. Clarice Lispector also defends her animistic strategy in a similar way: "When I speak of things I'm not reducing life to the material, rather I am humanizing the inert" (Lispector 2012:142).

A similar reasoning has been developed by Isabelle Stengers (2011) following Latour's notion of agency as something distributed among human and non-human actors (Latour 1999; 2005). No one acts alone, in 'splendid isolation', but all actions are produced as relations between several actors. All meaning and agency are produced through relations, thus we are always already in the middle of a crowd, and one needs to trace all kinds of actors that make a difference to the situation, and not just (as is often done) actors with intention or motivation. We exist through our very participation in assemblages. It is only through these that beings are animated at all.

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'I am the night' (Clarice Lispector)

There are perhaps few better examples of someone deliberately using animistic strategies in writing than the Brazilian author Clarice Lispector. For Lispector, the human was never at the centre of the world (Moser 2009:220). Lispector animates the world and makes it her equal. In *The Passion According to G.H.*, Lispector describes the transformation of a woman (G.H.), confronting (and later eating part of) a cockroach in the room of her recently fired housemaid Janair. This starts a transformation process that Braidotti has described as the crossing of "a series of thresholds that are markers of difference, of otherness: social class, ethnicity, gender and species" (Braidotti 2011: 116). At the core of the novel lies a passion for life and an openness of G.H. to both give, receive and transform.

> *Architecture does not only reduce us, it also brings new things onto the table. Architecture animates us*

A Breath of Life is the last and philosophically perhaps also most straight forward books of Lispector. Lispector once said that: "If I had given a title to my life it would be: in search of the thing itself" (Lispector in Moser 2009:267), and in this book she takes the task seriously, explicitly setting up a "Story of things" within the novel itself (Lispector 2012:99). The book is written as a dialogue between the author and Angela Pralini (a Lispector alter ego), whereby Angela declares: "You are my lit candle. I am the night" (Lispector 2012:110). Angela opens up for a symmetry between all beings. When it comes to animals it is stated that Angela's dog is "a person trapped by a cruel condition" (Lispector 2012:51). Later on Angela states that "A thing is a specialized and immobilized animal" (Lispector 2012: 101), and it soon becomes clear that Angela thinks that all beings, whether humans, animals or things have something in common. In the second half of the novel Angela also starts to give more specific remarks about things, explaining that: "Things make the following noise: chpt! chpt! chpt! A thing is a mangled being. There is nothing more alone than a "thing" (Lispector 2012:104). Lispector then goes on to give us specificities about silver boxes, houses, clocks, iron guardrails, cars, trash cans and furniture:

> The armchair is mute, it's fat, it's cosy. It greets every backside like any other. It's a mother. On the other hand the edge of a table is a fateful weapon. If you were thrown against it, you'd double over in pain. A round table is sly. But it presents no danger: it's a bit mysterious, it smiles slightly. (Lispector 2012:117)

There has been a debate on whether Lispector is an essentialist or not (essentialist readings seem to be fewer, but see Hedrick 1997). Cixous argues that Lispector "tries to be as essentialist as possible, even if there is no essence" (Cixous in Lispector 1989: xix). According to Castillo, Lispector wants "to exhaust an object or a life by revealing its essential nudity is a death sentence" (in Hedrick 1997:50). This would be very far from Lispector, as she is always looking for life, even in death. She keeps questions open and restrains herself from conclusions. In *The Passion,* the author keeps the interstitial positions of becoming-animal and becoming-human, entangled in an on-going struggle with problems such as the formation of corporality and vision (cf. Goh 2012).

Lispector was a well-known reader of Spinoza (Moser 2009:109 ff). Nietzsche, Bergson and Deleuze have been pointed out as other references (Ballan 2008, Braidotti 2011, Goh 2012, Ittner 2005). Indeed, there is a perspective of immanence and becoming in her writing. In *The Passion* the struggle is not to delimit insides and outsides but to show how the insides and outsides of G. H. and the cockroach are folded into each other in a way that seems to makes it impossible to speak of any absolute boundaries at all. Life or being cannot be grounded or contrasted to some higher transcendent category, rather, it is a pluralism of

equality, or 'pluralism as a monism' (Deleuze & Guattari 1987:20). Divinity for Lispector consists "in the absence of the distinction between my life and the absolutely indifferent, neutral process of life itself" (Ballan 2008: 553).

'The microbe wants to be a microbe' (Louis Kahn)

To jump from Lispector to the architect Louis Kahn might, at first, seem far-fetched. Kahn has often been regarded as a neo-Platonic and, in contrast to Lispector, a true essentialist, advocating architectural form as idea. Besides, Kahn's sensitivity was coupled with a quite dogmatic and traditional view of the architect, where he tended to argue for the architect as the sole interpreter of human space, downplaying the voices of the users. In *Form and Design* (1960; Kahn 2003: 65), he states:

> A school or a specific design is what the institution expects of us. But School, the essence of the existence will, is what the architect should convey in his design.

According to Kahn, the architect sometimes needed to reinvent institutions and out-triumph the client (see Gutman 2010:108 ff). Even though Kahn's statements was often presented in rigid, anagogic and even dogmatic language, they were part of an on-going exploration of architectural elements. Here is where we can see some similarities with the strategy of the late Lispector. Kahn started, much like Angela Pralini, to produce new and quite specific collectives of materials and their new associated allies:

> You should never make a space between columns with partition walls. It is like sleeping with your head in one room and your feet in another. (Kahn in Gutman 2010:100)

Srivastava (2009:214) reports a crucial event in the history of Kahn's professional career. On December 14, 1964, Kahn was working on the *Indian Institute of Management* (IIM). He came to inspect the building site and, disappointed by the result, realized that he, the architect, needed to be *better integrated* in the building process and with the people on site. The *Experimental Arch* was conceived to work with the materiality of the brick. During the process, many things about how the brick was to be used seemed to become clear. A new actor was produced: the *Kahn-brick*. A famous quote from the documentary *My Architect* (2003) says that 'if you ask the brick what it wants to be, then the brick answers that it wants to be an arch'. Kahn's strategy of putting his interventions with the brick into an anagogic language during his later years has been interpreted as an attempt to "communicate the experience of an active and symmetric exchange with materials" (Srivastava 2009:236).

One might agree or disagree with Kahn's rhetorics, but the idea was never to make the brick mute or to master it by inscribing it with a delegated essence. The point was to acknowledge the brick as an actor that brings something new and irreducible into the situation. Srivastava makes clear that Kahn was producing specific agencies rather than demasking essences (as however Kahn himself seems to claim):

> The Experimental Arch was completed not as an exercise of translating abstract paper drawings onto real but inert material forms but instead as a "continuous happening" resulting from ceaseless and dialogic encounter with the material. (Srivastava 2009:218).

The brick was highlighted in a specific situation, as part of a specific network or assemblage, and it is the problematisation of the brick that I want to give Kahn credit for here, or, as his commentator Twobly (2003:11) summaries, "the point about Kahn is his search".

This search among inert things, I will here call 'the animistic moment'. It might be that the outcome can be described as a hybrid of Kahn and the brick, but the process was not simply hybridization. Neither in the case of Lispector nor of Kahn are we dealing with hybridization. It is not the blending of pre-fixed categories, rather, the dissolution of categories, a much more form-less folding of qualities into each other.

Nontheorizing

Georges Bataille once described how architecture, as "the ideal soul of society", petrified us, reduced us to our bones, and thus he explained the storming of the Bastillie during the

French revolution as an "animosity of the people against the monuments that are their real masters" (Hollier 1995:48). But, architecture does not only reduce us, it also brings new things onto the table. Architecture *animates us*. One cannot become free through isolation and detachment. On the contrary, subjectivity is a process of *territorialisation* enacted through a series of different, sometimes overlapping assemblages (Brighenti 2010). This view of the mutual co-animation of associated actors is, as Stengers (2011: 192) suggested, important for animism. Thus, Kahn's mistake was to reduce the plurality of the network to one isolated actor – the brick. The meaning of the brick is lost without a setting. With one brick alone we remain stuck in the trap of 'the one', like the essential one, the mystic one, etc. Hiding plurality might look like a way towards clarity, but most of all it is a way towards stagnation.

In *Agua Viva*, Lispector "follows movements of the body and enunciation, but it also follows a theme. Rather than a narrative order, there is an organic order" (Cixous 1990: 15). Lispector is "letting her body speak" (Folie 2011:194). One could perhaps even argue that Kahn at one point did the same, even though he then tried to stabilise this procedure into a narrative: what they are working with is what Stengers (2011:191) calls a "nontheoretical (theory: detached contemplation) awareness". Latour has described something similar in his article "Trains of Thought" (1997). In certain situations seemingly obedient and mute things become *salient*. They go through a process of actantialisation, becoming mediating actors (rather than intermediary ones) clearly transforming the situation. Actantialisation is like a train wreck, where black boxed actors, mute and aligned, suddenly become visible and salient: the possibility of detached contemplation is now lost.

One could say that what Lispector and Kahn are investigating is the process of *actantialisation*. It is an experimental association to other networks, aligning the bricks of Ahmedabad with the arch, or a round table with slyness. It is a way of staying put in the question, keeping oneself to 'the backside of objects'. The objects are formless and twisting monster, not yet finally or decisively abstracted and categorised; they can still be abstracted in new and unforeseen ways. G.H. and Angela Pralini surrender themselves to the immediate (cf. Goh 2012:125): it is a constant struggle *in situ* where the virtual is somehow made to sustain in the actual. The Deleuzian notion of *monster* is not a hybrid, a position of becoming, but the opening and actualization of new processes still saturated by indecision and possibilities (see Eriksson 2010:531). Such is the description of an intense situation of life that has yet to find its form, and as it is yet-to-become it can even take on situations and shapes that at a later stage might seem impossible to live or endure (cf. Erikson 2010:529). In a similar way, things are not always (if ever) mute, but can also take on un-thingly dimensions (both at the moment of investigation and in a rear-view).

The animistic moment

Kahn and Lispector were both masters in making the ordinary into extraordinary (cf. Conley 1990: xv). Both found a non-theoretical way of reassembling the material, a reshuffling within the given assemblages and networks through which they acted, experimenting in a process of *seeing without (yet) understanding*. This non-narrative association and rearranging of bodies and materialities, already in the middle of things, works by means of an intentional actantalisation; provoking and investigating the mediating and transformative role of an already entangled thing. Lispector took this much further than Kahn – she was an expert in staying put in the middle of crisis. But I would also invite to read Kahn from a more relativistic perspective – to read Kahn through the work of Lispector.

Louis Kahn has been the subject of some severe critique from Tafuri (1968; see Biraghi 2013). Kahn's search for an absolute order within architecture was, for Tafuri, an anti-historic project, paradoxically an attempt at the end of history realized through the exploiting of history. Kahn tried to recover the mythic aspects of architecture through realizable utopias and

pseudo-monuments (Biraghi 2013: 65).

However, besides Kahn's essentialist claims, we also have his wish for the extraordinary, and the animist moments used as *in situ* architectural strategy. Kahn's own rhetoric was a not particularly good description of his own achievements. What Kahn ultimately produced was not the a-historical order of utopia, but something that nurtured the plurality of architectural forms and the heterogeneity of social institutions. In a way, Kahn used time as an open field, folding history into the future, just as much as he used beings as an open field folding things into humans. In the end, these processes of de-differentiation, this erasing of borders, can be seen as strategy of producing change and new species of space, not as a dethroning of architectural history, nor as a reduction of architecture into a single order, but as a creative reassembling of materialities.

Producing new sorts of not-yet-categorized spaces could be done through hybridization of different sort (like deliberately mixing 'the store' and 'the library', as in the construction of the London idea stores); it could also be done through a starting off with an established spatial sort and then specializing it, making it into a unique example of a kind (*singularisation*) only to desingularise it later on (like the example of Starbuck's starting a special kind of café in Seattle, then spreading it over the world). But Lispector and Kahn open up a third option – the animistic moment as a way forward. It is an actantialisation opening for new associations and lee-ways between actors, potentially producing a new species of space – from the classic anthropomorphical species such as the caryatid and the atlant, to the Kahn-brick, or Lispector's sly round table.

Conclusions

Hybridization, *singularisation* and *animation* are related and sometimes deeply entangled processes, but they can also be distinguished. *Hybridization* is the blending of two (or more) categories, it works along the line of the pure – purification – and the mixed – hybridization (cf. Latour 1993). *Singularisation* works along the line of exchangeability and uniqueness, where singularisation means the process of becoming something unique, something unexchangable, whereas the spreading of this by necessity involves a subsequent process of desingularisation (cf Kopytoff 1986, Kärrholm 2012). Finally, *animation* works along the line of actantialisation, it is about the animation of an actor with a face or a body, an actor 'coming alive', becoming a *topos-kairos* (Latour 1997). By *face*, I mean a face that is possible to dissociate from a specific place on the human body, seeing it as an expressive surface/substance produced on any body (Casey 2007). This process entails the becoming of a living and moving body, a figuration, that also figurates my body or other associated bodies. This might include a certain aspect of danger. As intermediaries become mediators, their transformative powers increase and the process becomes undecided. Indecisiveness can be seen as coupled with a kind of grace, in the sense that you in some way make yourself a spokesperson for something else, while, at the same time, also let that something else be a spokesperson for you. To a certain extent, you put both yourself and the other at stake.

The animistic moment requires an unfolding that, rather than the biographical process of singularizing and writing the specific individual or type, or the blending existing stories through hybridization, must work *through bodies*. It cannot start with the biography of a thing (as Kopytoff would have it), like with the biography of the brick, or even of a specific brick, neither with a dialogue between voices. The animistic moments work with an organic order (the association and alignment of bodies) rather than a biographical, genealogical or dialectical order (the alignment of a narrative logic). It is a pre-contemplative practice of becoming, an in-between that to some extent has lost sight of its former categorical identities as well as of its future. "I am not speaking of the future," G.H. says, "I am speaking of a permanent nowness" (Lispector 1988: 140). It involves the association of events that not-just-yet can be aligned, a pre-actor-network of themed fragments, and a reassembling of the

material from within a situation, a revolt rather than a revolution (Jesi 2014).

Animism must here be a 'face-to-face' moment rather than a macro-perspective, situated rather than general. It is the folding of insides and outsides in a specific experiment, a provocation that through the temporary ignorance of borders actually ends up multiplying them.

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