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A Creative Ecology of Practice for Thinking Architecture

Hélène Frichot

Abstract

This contribution offers an examination of the positions that have promoted a return to the ontology of objects and “realism” in philosophical thought (Meillassoux, Shaviro, Morton, Harman, Gannon), and their consequences for theories of architecture. Frichot criticizes some collateral effects of such a theoretical shift in the field of architectural theory: in the first place, the risk of wanting to go back to objects, buildings, material effects with excessive ease. As an alternative, and even an antidote, she proposes to reconsider the notion of “ecology of practice” offered by Isabelle Stengers, meant as a continuous “process of learning” and an “act of creative resistance”. This alternative would be fundamentally critical (of the context of action, particularly for architects) and opposed to the “flat ontology” of “speculative realists”. Ecology, for Stengers, is quite simply a question of habitat, the context in which you undertake your labour, and the habits that circumscribe your methodologies. In operating within your “habitat” your practice must feel out its borders, recognises its limits, and also push against them, in order to re-establish them again and again.

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Prelude to a review of architectural thought-practices
On the 8th of September 2010 at 5.22pm I received an email from Anna Rubbo one of the founding editors of the “Australian journal Architectural Theory Review” (ATR). She was inviting me to join the editorial committee. I know this date and time precisely because like a good archivist of the feminist thought-practitioner in process I have kept a record of our email correspondence. I received Anna’s invitation with a sense of honour and great responsibility, and have since come to realise how crucial it is to make a claim for the specific disciplinary domain of architectural theory, which is too often hidden away within architectural history programs, or added on as a supplementary appendage as an elective seminar in schools of architecture. Architectural theory is apt to stir up all manner of anxieties, as it has the capacity to disturb the status quo. Any institutional setting where architectural theory is not supported is one in which you can be sure dogmatic forces and mean-spirited fiefdoms have taken hold. ATR was founded in 1996 by Anna with her colleague Adrian Snodgrass in the Faculty of Architecture, Design and Planning at the University of Sydney, Australia, at a significant distance away from the centres of architectural discursive power in Europe and America. In 2010 Anna was stepping down from her active role as editor to become an advisory member of the editorial committee, and a new generation was stepping up, with a group of three editors Naomi Stead, Lee Stickells and Michael Tawa being assigned the role of leading the journal into the future.

The editorial committee, as I discovered, supports the assigned editors in relation to the peer review of articles, prospective themes, budgetary issues and on going negotiations with Taylor and Francis, who have financed and published the journal since 2008. Right now, or at least while I have been composing this essay, ATR is in search of a new editorial team, a group of architectural researchers who can take up the baton and commit to the hard work of managing the publication of three issues a year. Since the journal emerged in the mid Nineties the whole landscape of the Australian university has substantially transformed, and the institution, once an intellectual refuge for the exploration of critical and creative

projects, could very well be mistaken for a neo-liberal corporate machine where questions of content and open collegial relations have given way to the quantification of impact and research activity scores. The infamous H-Index, for instance, and the metrics by which a researcher is obliged to measure their output and impact in order to maintain their position or achieve a promotion. Now more than ever an intellectually independent and critical zone of enquiry such as ATR is needed, where, as the current aims and scopes stipulate: «critical and even subversive readings of what architectural theory has been, can be and will be» can be supported (ATR, 2016).

In 1996, within the very first issue of ATR, the editors stressed their wish to discuss diversity, regionalism, and a plurality of voices as a counter to threats of conformity in the face of globalisation and the information explosion, forces that have meanwhile overwhelmed us, taking their toll. By now the journal has come of age, and these threats have been felt and have exuded their material impact on our modes of thinking and doing. The founding editors responsible for the first thirteen years of the journal commenced their adventure by generously acknowledging that architectural theory means different things to different people. By this they were neither supporting incommensurable expressions of pluralism, nor extreme relativism. Instead they wanted to insist on their interest in the things that other people were thinking about in relation to the specifically described sites and problems of architecture. In the very first issue of the journal there were articles dedicated to Australian indigenous architecture, and the role of women in the discipline, setting out from the first moment a counter-hegemonic expression of other ways of engaging with architecture.

I want to reframe the early ambitions of this important journal from the point of view of my current reading of the philosopher of science Isabelle Stengers, and her arguments concerning an ecology of practices in the sciences. In this way I will be able to respond to the call enunciated by this newly emerging Italian journal of architectural theory called “Ardeth”. The call *Ardeth* makes concerns the relationship between subject-author vs the object-project, and the irreducible relationship that appears

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to chain them together in our discipline of architecture, alongside assumptions about the unspeakable impenetrability of the object. The editors rightly state that this assumed relationship risks divorcing the architectural project from a social domain, and other sets of relations that might become independent from the progenitor of a given project. Another way this relationship can be characterised is as the enduring embrace between architectural icons and idols.

The problem that “Ardeth” frames is timely as much ado has been made about “objects” in theoretical and philosophical debates recently, specifically with regard to the successful philosophical branding exercises of so-called Object Oriented Ontology (OOO), and its association with what has come to be called “speculative realism”. These theoretical tendencies challenge what they identify as the problematic “correlation” between subject and object. At first it might be tempting to believe that they share a common project with “Ardeth”, that is, a desire to challenge the relationship that binds subject to object, and vice versa, but this is not the case. I will explain my case below, but stress at once that I can only offer a preliminary argument in this essay.

Speculative how? Speculative what?

Quentin Meillassoux, a proponent of speculative realism, explains «correlationism consists in disqualifying the claim that it is possible to consider the realms of subjectivity and objectivity independently of one another» (Meillassoux, 2010: 5). His project aims to conceive ways in which an object can be situated as “real” without having always to return to the subjective location of the thinker who has accommodated it by way of an intensional thought. What or where is this object that does not depend on a subject to think it? In philosophical terms, at least since Kant, it is called the “in itself”. It is that part of the object that persists in its stubborn reality irrespective of whether a subject bears some (intensional) relation to it or not. How can we (mere temporal and delimited subjects) make claims concerning the object’s existence? One of the problems in an age of global ecological disaster is that we have simply been too caught up about the “I” that thinks, which returns us too often to the anthropocentric privilege of a particular kind of human

subject who is allowed to think, and undertake the labour of thinking that is directed toward objects that are presumed to be outside, distinct, but at the same time within the thinker's control.

Steven Shaviro clearly and helpfully explains what is at stake for the diverse group of thinkers who fall under the rubric "speculative realism". They share a commitment to metaphysical speculation (why is there something rather than nothing), and they hold to a robust ontological realism. This means, according to Shaviro, that they move against the grain set by continental philosophy throughout the 20th century where metaphysics had been "phobically rejected" and an anti-realist stance had been considered *de rigueur*. Both of these claims, it needs to be said immediately, frame assumptions that need to be rigorously challenged because they do not hold in any consistent way across the diverse philosophical projects and practices that are gathered under "continental philosophy", for instance, "continental philosophy" is by no means consistently "idealist". Nevertheless, this is how the argument has come to be habitually framed so that the bias that speculative realism purportedly challenges can be generally summed up with the kantian claim that «phenomena depend on the mind to exist» (Shaviro, 2014: 5). And it is with this that speculative realists want to disagree. Simply, they want to challenge the notion that a mind-independent reality does not exist. Of course the arguments of the protagonists become considerably more complicated, and they disagree with one another, and plot their own projects, and map their own trajectories into the pages of Wikipedia and the blogosphere, moving ever closer toward a "real" object that must, according to their own accounts, refuse them access.

Timothy Morton argues that «everything that has been called subject is only object, and what we have called intersubjectivity is interobjectivity, and all objects are unique, withdrawn inaccessible, we are even inaccessible to ourselves» (2016: 94). Graham Harman, a great inspiration for Morton, explains that objects must prevail because they are the basic building blocks of philosophy; they should neither be reduced to the effects of underlying forces composed of smaller and smaller components (undermined), nor should they be obscured by reference to their quali-

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The architect in response to its call wants to answer: “Yes, of course! I’ve had enough of all this talk of flow and process!” I grapple with objects on a daily basis; lets get back to the thing-in-itself. What is architecture if not a complex object? This is the philosophical framework for me!

ties and relations (overmined). This is the Goldilocks refrain at work in Harman’s theory, not too small, not too big, but just right: and that’s where the “real” object is to be found. The problem of critical thinking, Harman insists, is that it debunks objects and denies objects their autonomy, and so instead he argues for a naïve, phenomenological approach. All this talk of “objects” is especially compelling for architects as it seems to draw on common sense, asking us to respond innocently: well of course there are objects out there in the world independent of me (the human observer). I raise these two voices in particular, the first with a professorship in English (Morton) and the second a philosopher (Harman), because their work has been featured recently in the pages of influential journals of architecture, including the New York magazine “Log: Observations on Architecture and the Contemporary City” and the German architectural theory journal “Arch+”, thereby confirming the entry of their speculative concerns into our disciplinary domain (see Gannon, Harman, Ruy, Wiscombe, 2015; Morton, 2016).

Object Oriented Ontology, a sub-set or else a sibling to “speculative realism”, through its evocative branding seems to promise the architect so much. The architect in response to its call wants to answer: «Yes, of course! I’ve had enough of all this talk of flow and process!» (Gannon *et al.*, 2015: 73-74). I grapple with objects on a daily basis; lets get back to the thing-in-itself. What is architecture if not a complex object? This is the philosophical framework for me!

Yet when you witness Harman speak, or read his essays and books, it becomes immediately clear that he is offering no great insight to the so-called object. Instead, the object remains withdrawn, without relations (it does not bear any relation to any other objects), it remains inaccessible to us (humans), and yet we humans are objects too (when we read Morton, at least). Harman goes so far as to claim that «relationism has spread out like a virus and become horribly stale», making everything like everything else (Gannon *et al.*, 2015: 75), and this is what a return to the discrete object must counter. Much of this argument rests on a gross simplification, in particular of the body of work developed by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (amongst the straw figures set up by OOO), and the sub-

text is clearly: we are tired of Deleuzianisms. We have exhausted Deleuze. Let's move onto the next best thing: the object and its anti-relational and flat ontology. The philosopher of science Isabelle Stengers points out that «Certainly the meditative question 'what is a thing?', or the evocation of the 'thingness of things' have an enticing philosophical flavour» (Stengers, 2014: 190). The problem, which Stengers draws attention to, is that the meditative subject is a very specifically male, and unmarked subject, a pure locus that transcends *what matters for us* (191). Speculative realism notably emerges out of a gathering of self-convinced men of much the same generation (Shaviro, 2014; Gage, 2015: 96). The list of associated thinkers that Shaviro enumerates says it all: There is not a single woman amongst them, nor a member of any minority group. They are all white men mostly born in the late Sixties. That is to say, they represent an extremely narrow socio-demographic strata of thinking subjects thinking about objects, and telling us how to think about objects too. There is a great deal more to be said about the emergence of these tendencies in architecture, and how they can be read as symptoms of yet another retreat from social and political concerns; a retreat into the deeply conservative domain where phenomenology meets architecture and waxes poetical over "real" objects about which little can finally be said.

Stengers, whose essays have been included in at least two collections where the project of speculative realism, including OOO is foregrounded, is both guarded and barbed in her critique of the work of speculative realists (Stengers, 2014; 2011a). She obliquely remarks that the philosophers in question frame the problems that they deserve, or the problems that *require* them. What Stengers does is to create a pointed reversal whereby she questions the very problems these philosophers identify as interesting, suggesting that the philosophers in question have not so much defined the problem, but that the problem instead has defined them *and* their practices (2014: 192). The process of thinking and the subject who thinks, for the speculative realist, and the Object Oriented Ontologist, pertains to conservative definitions of thinking, and a staid understanding of a privileged humanist subject respectively. That is to say, thinking is articu-

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lated as a conservative practice, and not an expansive one, and the subject who thinks, limited within their correlationist circle, is likewise a very staid and circumscribed subject whom the speculative realists take as their target: a straw man. In a recent essay, Cecilia Åberg, Kathrin Thiele and Iris van der Tuin point out that what has been overlooked by these popular “speculative” tendencies, which they want to question in a “friendly” way, is a long term feminist project wherein the formation of the masculinist, humanist subject has already been substantially challenged, and thinking and practicing as articulated by feminist materialists has already been re-established as an immanent engagement from within a situation as it unfolds. They claim, «we need to rethink everything, *even thinking itself*» (Åberg *et al.*, 2015: 152). How? By acknowledging, not further obviating, our embedded, embodied situation and context, by becoming even more orientated around objects as those things with which we co-habit amidst myriad latticeworks of relationality (and non relation too). They further argue that «Feminism can pride itself on a canon in which the speculative thought on the one hand, and the methodology of speculation on the other, are presented as intertwined» (156), and they go on to offer a series of examples to establish their point of view, drawing on such “thought-practitioners” as Donna Haraway and Elizabeth Grosz, to demonstrate alternative genealogies to those traced out by the speculative realists and the Object Oriented Ontologists.

A creative ecology of practice for architectural theory
This is where Stengers argument for an ecology of practices becomes valuable. She is necessarily wary, because she wants to acknowledge different styles of practices and their respective requirements and obligations in relation to their stipulated projects. This too is where I suggest Stenger’s call for a cosmopolitical project can be seen at work in the early ambitions of a journal project like Architectural Theory Review, which originally aimed to create a shared location where diverse ideas and practices could cluster and jostle alongside each other.

What is this ecology of practices that Stengers forwards, and why might it be a valuable approach within the thinking and practice of architecture? Or better still, what can an ecology of practices do for you, *in situ*? «We do not know what a practice is able to become; what we know instead is that the very way we define, or address, a practice is part of the surroundings which produces its ethos» (Stengers, 2005: 195). The challenge of partaking in an ecology of practices depends on a «creative act of problematization» (Stengers, 2014: 193), and the problems you choose, or frame, and even invent, do not exist independently of you, but also determine your mode of practice and impact upon your location or environment, the habitat in which you are undertaking your work. Ecology, for Stengers, is quite simply a question of habitat, the context in which you undertake your labour, and the habits that circumscribe your methodologies. In operating within your “habitat” your practice must feel out its borders, recognise its limits, and also push against them, re-establish them again and again (Stengers, 2005: 184). Crucially, these limits or borders should not only be used as a line of defence, but rather a generous threshold of exploration, a reaching out, an experimental groping. While habit enables practice in relation to habitat, habit must also be resisted where it begins to stultify thinking. The relevant tools for thinking, Stengers explains, are the ones that actualise and address the power of a situation. By power here, the idea of capacity, specifically the capacity of a practitioner is raised.

What can you do from amidst your situation, your practical “habitat”? What can you do that requires you to push beyond mere habit, even to establish new habits for thinking and practice? What does the situation demand of you, and how can you think with others, with your affiliated practitioners? Furthermore, and again as pertaining to habits, an ecology of practices does something more than simply describe what you are already doing anyway. It pushes further, aiming to forge «new practical identities» (Stengers, 2005: 186) for practices, new connections, new possibilities, and this very often requires an adventurous and speculative leap, but not of the kind that is stipulated by the speculative realists. An adequate ecology of practices is not only adequate to a situation, or

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a problematic field where it proposes a “solution”, it is a “learning process”, one that resists a present, especially where that present has become oppressive (Stengers, 2011b: 407). That is to say, an ecology of practices is performed as an on-going struggle, as an act of creative resistance, pushing and pulling at constraints. Where speculative realism risks setting up, yet again, «its very own transcendence» (Åberg *et al.*, 2015: 148), an ecology of practices responds immanently to what is at hand, to the context of practical action. This then re-orientates the subject in process in relation to the object in question in relation to the field of immanence upon which both are entangled, and upon which both perform. Similar challenges will no doubt face this new adventure upon which the journal “Ardeth” is launching forth, that is to say, a respect for diverse practices and theories, and a sensitivity to what is at stake for different thought-practices in light of their specific situations. The community of thought-practitioners in architecture who still believe that explorative approaches to architectural theory as a specific discipline, with its requirements and obligations, has something to offer architecture will hopefully be able to benefit from this newly created forum.

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