The animistic moment
Clarice Lispector, Louis Kahn and a reassembling of materialities

Draft paper to the Transvaluation Symposium in Göteborg 21-22 May 2015

Mattias Kärrholm
Department of Architecture and built environment, LTH, Lund University
Lund, Sweden
Mattias.karrholm@arkitektur.lth.se

Abstract
In this paper I want to discuss a couple of anthropomorphic/animistic examples of how agency can be delegated to things as a productive strategy in a context of making. The first example is two texts by Clarice Lispector, The Passion According to G.H (1964) and her posthumous (and incomplete) novel A Breath of Life, and the second is Louis Kahn and his work on the Indian Institute of Management (IIM) in Ahmedabad. The examples are used in order to discuss anthropomorphism/animism as seen from a relational ontology of material agency, where a certain part of an assemblage is deliberately made into a critical and transformative mediator. It is also suggested that such an animistic moment can be seen as particular and sometimes productive strategy for the unfolding and refolding of different spaces into each other. Finally, animism will be discussed, alongside hybridization and singularisation, as a specific strategy of spatial production.

Keywords: animism, Clarice Lispector, Louis Kahn, materiality, architectural theory

Introduction
In this paper I want to discuss a couple of anthropomorphic/animistic examples of how agency can be delegated to things as a productive strategy in a context of making. The first example is two texts by Clarice Lispector, The Passion According to G.H (1964) and her posthumous (and incomplete) novel A Breath of Life, and the second is Louis Kahn and his work on the Indian Institute of Management (IIM) in Ahmedabad (Srivastava 2009). The examples are used in order to discuss anthropomorphism/animism as seen from 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 concept, Latour 1997).

In the text I will use the concepts of animism and anthropomorphism (and anthropomorphism/animism). The borders between the concepts are blurry. Anthropomorphism is Greek and denotes something (non-human) that takes on human characteristic (from stone pillars shaped like human bodies, to the humanization of non-human phenomena like in: “the night was gloomy”). 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. Both concepts will be used here, sometimes together and sometimes apart, as they have slightly different connotations.

Recent theories of material agency and posthumanism (taking its cue from philosophers such as De Landa, Latour, Stengers, Bennett, Braidotti, etc.) 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 anthropomorphic 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. J. Bennett argues:

Maybe it is worth running the risks associated with anthropomorphizing … because it, oddly enough, works against anthropomorphism: a chord is struck between person and thing, and I am no longer above or outside a nonhuman ‘environment’ (Bennett 2010:120).

The popular process of demystifying things, Bennett 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 in her article “Reclaiming Animism” (2011). Stengers follows a Deleuzian-Guattarian line of thinking, suggesting that their view on assemblages as heterogeneous practices connected by rhizomatic structures could be a model to make “the inhabitants of this earth matter, with none being privileged, and any being liable to connect with any other” (Stengers 2011:185). This connects to Latour’s notion of agency as something distributed among several actors, both humans and non-humans (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. It is thus important to acknowledge the even if intentions might be one thing that differ us from things, we do not exist as some independent beings mobilising assemblages at will, rather we exist through our very participation in assemblages. It is only through these that beings (whether humans, animals or things) are animated at all. Stengers here uses the practice of writing as an example of animism. A common experience of writers is to feel that the things created do not come from oneself but from something or somewhere else. This is how Stengers describes the reclaiming of animism:

...for people like me it may start with the realization that my experience of writing is an animist experience, attesting to a more than human world. It is rather a matter of recovering the capacity to honour experience, any experience we care for, as “not ours” but rather as “animating” us, making us witness to what is not us (Stengers 2011: 188f.).

‘I am the night’ (Clarice Lispector)

To me there are 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 (cf. Moser 2009:220), instead she animates world and makes it her equal. This animation is explored through-out her books, and perhaps most clearly so in The Passion According to G.H (A pâixao segundo G.H., 1964) and in the posthumous novel A Breath of Life (Um sopro de vida: pulsações, 1978). 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

---

1 Lispector 2012:110
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, and the novel is primarily constituted by a poetic and philosophical description of this process of depersonalisation, or as Braidotti would have it, a “dissolution of the boundaries of the self” (Braidotti 2011:117).

_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 really takes this 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). Angela says: “You are my lit candle. I am the night” (Lispector 2012:110), and one could argue that Angela becomes both the tool and the object of Lispector’s investigation.

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 and 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: cht! cht! cht! A thing is a mangled being. There is nothing more alone than a “thing”. (Lispector 2012:104), and 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). Sometimes, as in Angela’s dream the end of _A Breath of Life_ she might seem essentialist: “We are all participants in this theatre: in truth we never shall die when death happens. We only die as actors. Could that be eternity?” (Lispector 2012:158). Angela dreams of something remaining over, even after death, but Lispector herself, I would say seems far from essentialistic. Cixous says that Lispector “tries to be as essentialist as possible, even if there is no essence (Cixous in Lispector 1989: xix). Castillo has observed, in her comments on Lispector, that “to exhaust an object or a life by revealing its essential nudity is a death sentence” (Castillo 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 all conclusions. In _The Passion According to G.H._ she keeps the interstitial positions of becoming-animal and becoming-human ongoing, all the time entangled in an ongoing and immediate struggle with different problems, such as the formation of corporality and vision (cf. Goh 2012).

Lispector was a well-known reader of Spinoza (Moser 2009:109 ff), and, for example Nietzsche Bergson and Deleuze has been pointed out as valid associates (Ballan 2008, Braidotti 2011, Goh 2012, Ittner 2005). I would agree with this. There is a perspective of immanence and becoming in her writing. In _The Passion According to G.H._ 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, a pluralism of equality, or pluralism as a monism (Deleuze & Guattari
1987:20). Divinity for Lispector thus consists, as Ballan has pointed out “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’² (Louis Kahn)

To jump from Lispector to an architect like Louis Kahn, might at first seem rather farfetched. Kahn has often been regarded as a neo-platonic idealist and, in contrast to Lispector, a true essentialist advocating an architectural form that expresses the idea of its purpose. Kahn’s architectural 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 his essay “Form and Design” from 1960, 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. (Kahn 2003: 65)

Indeed, according to Kahn, the architect sometimes needed to reinvent institutions, and thus the architect out-triumph the client, a critique that has been well formulated by Robert Gutman (Gutman 2010:108 ff). Even though Kahn’s statements often was presented in rigid, anagogic and even dogmatic language, they were part of an on-going exploration of architectural elements, and here is also where we perhaps can start to 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).

In his interesting thesis Encountering materials in Architectural production, The Case of Kahn and a brick at IIM, (2009) Srivastava has written about a crucial and well known event in the history of Kahn’s professional career, and perhaps even in the history of brick itself. It was December 14th 1964 when Kahn, working on the Indian Institute of Management (IIM), came to inspect the building site and disappointed by the result realized that he (as an architect) needed to be better integrated in the building process and with the persons on site (Srivastava 2009:214), Kahn constructed the Experimental Arch in order to work with the materiality of the brick in the context of both Ahmedabad and architectural history. During the process a lot of things about how the brick was to be used in the institute seemed to have become clear, and a new actor was produced: the Kahn-brick (for a longer description of this process see Srivastava 2009: 210-220). The Kahn brick is perhaps best expressed in the famous quote from the documentary My Architect (2003) where Kahn describes the incident, and says that if you ask the brick what it wants to be, then the brick answers that it wants to be an arch. The new associations were, however, somewhat richer than that as they also, for example, can be said to include a new ways of interacting with the brick, and the rejection of a certain brick bond detail, etc. (Srivastava 2009:217 f.).

Srivastava uses the theories of Latour to describe the Experimental arch as a vital moment in the production of the Kahn-brick, a hybrid and a new actor (Srivastava 2009: 214 ff). Kahn’s strategy of putting his interventions with the brick into an anagogic language during his later years has also by Srivastava 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. Rather to allure agency from the brick, to acknowledge it as an actor that brings something new and irreducible into the situation (ibid. 218). Through

² From Kahn’s text “White light, black shadow” (Kahn, 1998:25).
Srivastava’s interpretation it thus becomes clear that Kahn is producing specific agencies, rather than demasking essences (as Kahn himself seems to claim). Here, however, I would not like to highlight the Kahn-brick as an actor or a hybrid (as Srivastava) or the brick-in-itself as Kahn, but the experiment as a process of animation. Srivastava writes that:

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).

In the end the Experimental Arch had, according to Srivastava a crucial role:

The seemingly rudimentary construction exercise, which most authors dismiss as an instruction in bricklaying techniques, was a crucial event that not only affected the development of the project itself but also helped trigger a transformation of the entire construction industry of Ahmedabad. (Srivastava 2009:233)

The Experimental arch gathered a lot of actors, not just Kahn and the brick. 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 summaries it: “The point about Kahn is his search” (Twobly 2003:11). 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 at least I would like to stress that the process was not of hybridization. Neither in the case of Lispector or Kahn are we dealing with hybridization, it is not the blending of pre-fixed categories, rather it is 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” (Hollier 1995: 47), petrified us, reduced us to our bones, and thus he explained the storming of the Bastille during the French revolution as an “animosity of the people against the monuments that are their real masters” (Hollier 1995:48). The disciple of Hegel, Max Stirner, who Deleuze called the most extreme of all dialectic thinkers, advocated the freedom of the subject from absolutely everything that imprisoned it. At the same time, through this extreme position, he revealed the problem of dialectical thinking in itself as it leads into the negation of everything. If the I is the last resort of any conquering then the freeing from everything comes at the price of becoming nothing, and the I becomes a mere phantom. This shows, according to Deleuze, that the true consequence of dialectical thinking is nihilism, and in the end Stirner showed nothing but the impossibility of a subject stripped bare and naked, and thus of dialecticism itself (Deleuze 2006: 159 ff.). The posthuman tradition, whether read through Stengers, Bennett or Latour would suggest the opposite of both Bataille and Stirner in this regard. Architecture does not reduce us, it brings (for better and for worse) new things to the table. Architecture animates us. Neither do the I become free through isolation and detachment. On the contrary the subject could be seen as produced through a process of territorialisation enacted through a series of different (but sometimes overlapping) assemblages. In his book *Speculative Grace*, Miller remarks that “Fishing after their own nature, subjects find themselves only by losing themselves” (Miller 2013:148) Why? Because it sets a temporal halt to the belief in the one, in order lie bare some of the pluralities that constitute the world and us – we are always folded into our environment. This view of the mutual co-animation of associated actors is, as Stengers have suggested, important for animism (Stengers 2011: 192). 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.
Instead we are 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.

Cixous observes Lispector non-narrative approach in Lispector’s book *Agua Viva*: “The text 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 as Sabine Folie puts it “letting her body speak” (Folie 2011:194). One could perhaps even argue that Kahn at one point did the same, even though he tried to stabilise this procedure into a narrative later on. What they are working with is what Stengers calls a “nontheoretical (theory: detached contemplation) awareness” (Stengers 2011:191). 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 a certain situation. Latour describes the process of actantialisation through a train wreck example, 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 to slyness. It is a way of staying put in the question, keeping oneself to ‘the backside of objects’, the objects as formless and twisting monster not yet finally or decisively abstracted and categorised, but still possible to abstract in new and unforeseen ways. G.H. and Angela Pralini always abandon themselves for the immediate (cf. Goh 2012:125), it is a constantly ongoing struggle in situ, where the virtual somehow is made to sustain in the actual. In this way it resembles the Deleuzian notion of monster as interpreted by Eriksson (cf Eriksson 2010:531). Eriksson makes clear that the monster understood in this way is not the monster as a hybrid, (like, for example the manticore or the chimera), the monster is better described as a situation and a position of becoming, the opening and actualization of new processes still saturated by indecision and possibilities. The monster can in line with Deleuze and Erikssen thus be described as ”the determination of a durable indefiniteness” (my transl. of “det obestämdas beständighet i bestämningen”, Eriksson 2010:495). It 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). Lispector describes in *The Passion according to G.H* how human life also: “amounts to an affirmation of immanence, of a deep affinity with and participation in this uncanny, neutral, inhuman dimension of life” (Ballan 2008:552). 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**

Georges Perec often talked about the difficulties of even seeing the habits and mundane practices of everyday life (Perec 1997), Blanchot described the everyday as “the hardest thing to uncover” (Blanchot in Sheringham 2006:16). Kahn and Lispector were both (in their own separate ways) masters in making the ordinary into the extraordinary (cf. Conley 1990: xv). Both find a non-theoretical way of reassembling the material (cf Latour 2005), a reshuffling within the given assemblages and networks through which they act, experimenting in a process of seeing without (yet) understanding (as G.H. struggling to understand the world through the eyes of a cockroach). This non-narrative association and rearranging of bodies and materialities, already in the middle of things, works by means of an intentional actantialisation; provoking and investigating the mediating and transformative role of an already entangled thing. I admit that Lispector took this much further than Kahn, she was an expert in staying put within a crisis, but
one of the points in this article is to try and 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, especially in Tafuri’s *Theories and History of Architecture*, first published in 1968. Biraghi summarizes Tafuri’s critique in the chapter “Kahn as a destroyer” in his book about Tafuri, *Project of Crisis* (2013). Tafuri notes that Kahn’s search for an absolute order within architecture (which is an anti-historic project that aligns Kahn with the traditional avant-garde), is paradoxically produced through ”his hermetic dive into [what] the materials history has to offer in order to excessively dehistoricize architectural design” (Tafuri in Biraghi 2013:57), that is an attempt at the end of history but realized through the exploiting of history. Kahn thus tries to recover the mythic aspects of architecture through realizable utopias and pseudo-monuments (Biraghi 2013: 65 f.). However, besides Kahn’s will to new institutions and his rhetoric about an essentialist architecture, we also have his will of the extraordinary, and the animist moments used as an architectural strategy in situ. The rhetoric of Kahn can, from a relativistic perspective, be seen as ‘just’ rhetoric - not as innocent or unproductive rhetoric, of course, but basically as a not particularly good description of his achievements, perhaps doing a good job at selling in a universal viewpoint or at heroisizing Kahn’s endeavors, but not at describing the practices and outcomes of his architectural work. What Kahn produced was not a new ahistorical order or an utopian world. His architecture did never threaten the role of historical architecture, the plurality of architectural forms or the heterogeneity of social institutions (as he perhaps might have wanted, at least if we subscribe to Tafuri’s reading), on the contrary, he added to them all. 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 spaces (not-yet-categorized) 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). Lispector and Kahn opens up for 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, Lispector’s sly round table, or why not to one of Latour’s favorite examples ‘the sleeping policeman’.

Hybridization, singularisation and animation are related and sometimes deeply entangled processes, but they can also be distinguished from each other. 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 rather 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). Animation, finally 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). With face, I here mean a face that is possible to dissociate from a specific place on the human body, and to see it as an expressive surface/substance produced on any body or thing (cf. Casey 2007). This process thus 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 thus by necessity involve an indecisiveness. This 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 letting that something else be a spokesperson for you. To a certain extent you then 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 “brick” or even of a specific brick, neither with a dialogue of 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” as 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 (Stengers 2011: 192), 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.

**Literature**


Goh, I. (2012). Blinnedness and Animality, or Learning How to Live Finally in Clarice Lispector’s The Passion according to GH. *differences*, 23(2), 113-135.


