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WHERE BOUNDARIES ARE DISSOLVED AND THE IMMEDIACY OF A RECIPROCAL RELATION IS EXPERIENCED

Introduction

The reflection on the ways in which organisms interact with their environment, starting from the view of the living as a biological subject, has characterized the bio-theoretic and anthropological debate in the course of the twentieth century, highlighting the process of reciprocal redefinition through which the environment affects the living, by whom, in turn, it is constantly modified. The multi-faceted interaction with reality is mediated by circuits of perception-action through which the features of some aspects of reality become significant for the survival and evolution of the species. And yet the biological subject's attention, as we shall try to show in these pages, is not always dedicated to aspects of the environment, to operational affordances prescribing its actions in a functional mode, but, in some cases the attention dances with, towards, around the environment in its flourishing. Such is the case of the autistic perception that, even in the natural variance implicit in its spectrum, is entertained with the qualitative aspects of an environment which is experienced as an extension of one's body, in an intrinsically relational process in which interiority and exteriority, organism and environment take shape at the same time.

The way in which perception and action imply each other, hiding one another, gives rise to a functional circle or, as we shall see, to a circle of form which dynamically gives rise to new ways of inhabiting space and of perceiving one's own corporeality, in the rhythm of systolic contraction and diastolic expansion that enables the resonance with the environment.

1. The dialectic nature of the organism-environment relation: from the functional circle to the structural circle

In the first half of the twentieth century biologist Jakob von Uexküll (1865-1928) focused the philosophical and biological debate on the necessity of redefining *Umwelt's* notion starting from the

questioning of the anthropological paradox that aims at judging with strictly human sensory-motor modes the most diverse forms of animal and vegetable life, disregarding their specificity. In the attempt of finding an original synthesis between positivist mechanicism and vitalist and organicist theories, Uexküll traces in the action and perception circuits the ways in which organisms establish a balanced relation with the environment. In *Theoretische Biologie* (1937; first published 1928) in fact he describes how some determined objects in the environment can stimulate the perceiving organs of the organism arousing corresponding behaviour, specific performances. These in turn affect the external object and the environment in a circular process (*Funktionskreis*) which revives and modifies itself under the influence of feed-back that can exhaust it or renew it. So species-specific environments correspond to specific *Lebensformen*, according to a functional adequacy (*Funktionsmäßigkeit*), an intrinsic conformity to nature's plans (*Planmäßigkeit*) that is expressed exactly in the effectiveness of the organism's functional cycles. Even space, time and causality, no more objective a priori valid for any species, are structured on the ground of the subjectivities that give them a profound meaning: «We know now that there is not one only space and time, but there are as many spaces and times as there are subjects. In fact every subject is enclosed in its own environment possessing its own space and its own time» (Uexküll 1937; 2015, 269).

Far from being a passive record of data coming from the external world, perception, because it is strictly dependent on the morphological structures determining its functions, is an active apprehension of the subject's salient features informed by the actions apt to manipulate it. The animal, even as a mere spectator, actively collaborates to the construction of its environment, contributing to its shaping through its cycles of action-perception. Thus the functional circuit appears to hold together, in a unitarian and harmonious complex, the inner world of the organism (*Innenwelt*) that blends together the multiple sensory inputs before they are separated again into their relative performances, and its specific environment (*Umwelt*), seen as the whole resulting from the perceptive world (*Merkwelt*) and the effectual world (*Wirkwelt*). This in turn will guarantee the accomplishment of the living being's primary functions such as nurture, protection, finding

a partner; surviving or escaping enemies, tackling obstacles and so on¹.

While Uexküll, investigating the peculiar constitution of the living, puts in the foreground the functional aspect of the interaction between the animal organism and the environment, German doctor and philosopher Viktor von Weizsäcker² gives the foreground to the morphological aspects: «Biology is the science of forms. Those who do not love forms cannot experiment and promote the science of the living nature» (Weizsäcker 1997, 253). He focuses on the ways in which the living, in their everchanging nature, always present themselves as a biological act, continuously setting up the conditions for their existence and opening to the innumerable potentialities for expression that the unstopping stream of events can disclose.

Starting from the common requirement of introducing the subject in Biology, the father of psychosomatics directs attention to the human being who, free from constructive plans and instinctual obligations that determine their action, is capable of reflectively turning to itself in order to exercise its creative powers of metamorphic reconfiguration. In their relationship of reciprocal intrication (*Verschränkung*) and hiding (*Verborgenheit*), movement and perception exert their transformational force on the subject itself, who finds the stimulus to start its original reconfiguration just in the limits given by the environment. The environment therefore becomes the occasion to search for a new harmony among the motor, cognitive, perceptive, emotional aspects. Just when the livings experience their caducity and vulnerability, they find the opportunity to experiment new forms of being, and in their constant becoming they return to themselves³. To the extent to which it changes, the living being becomes authentically itself,

¹ «The set of stimuli that affect the animal constitute a world in its own. If we consider them in the context of the whole functional circuit, stimuli form specific perceptive characters [*Merkmale*] that, like a helmsman following the route at sea, prompt the animal to drive the steer of its own movement. I will call perceptive world [*Merkwelt*] the sum of all perceptive characters. The animal itself, in the exercise of its power, shapes a world in itself that I will call internal world [*Innenwelt*]. The effects the animal produces on the external world, will shape the third world, that is the effectual world [*Wirkwelt*]. Effectual world and perceptive world form a whole connected in itself that I will define as environment [*Umwelt*]» (Uexküll 1937; 2015, 119).

² Cf. Weizsäcker (1986-1998).

³ Weizsäcker (1990, 183): «[...] the living, at the very moment it mutates it also goes back to itself».

uniting in itself the becoming and the permanence. Such antilogical nature is shown just in the tightening process by which the organic being is increasingly integrated into its environment, putting together at the same time the linearity of its extension forward and the circularity given by its peculiar ability to rotate around itself in order to give new directions to its development. The need to encounter the different, expressed in the centrifugal force driving towards an unlimited and unpredictable opening of possibilities combines with the centripetal force by which the organism reflectively turns to itself to build its own identity, taking the form of a spiral, that proceeds forward by virtue of its ever returning to itself.

The relationship between organism and environment is shown in its intrinsically dialectic and becoming nature: in fact, if on the one hand places and situations affect the organism, on the other hand it is the organism, in its essentially embodied dimension, that, with its living and going through the places, leaves its track, absorbs and emanates atmospheres, until the boundaries dissolve and give way to a presentational immediacy (Whitehead 1927, 42-44)⁴, that is the vivid enjoyment of an immediate sense of experience in which the relations of correspondence come to the fore. In the multidirectional pulsing of the multiple potentialities that open up there resounds the need for being back in itself, for folding back in the intimacy of an identity that takes its shape right from the states of being it goes through. Changeful identities and states, expansion and contraction, opening and closure, interiority and exteriority, immensity and intimacy don't only just oppose each other, they don't stand one against the other as object and subject would, but they highlight each other and take their meaning just from their being in a reciprocal relation. The appearance of well-defined forms, in fact, only happens starting from the acknowledgement of the original primary, pre-reflective, ante-predicamental relation that comes before any distinction, a primeval correspondence that makes the full expression of evolving identities possible.

⁴ As for the notion of presentational immediacy we can refer to Whitehead's theory of perception, which considers the perception of the objects one of the ways in which presentational immediacy and causal effectiveness mix together. Presentational immediacy, seen as the vivid enjoyment of an immediate sense experience, does not consider the qualities of the objects as simply abstractible from them, but promotes an environmental mode in which the organism and the environment, the perceiving and the perceived are fused together.

The functional circle appears then to give way to the structural circle (*Gestaltkreis*), as a unitarian process essentially pathic of a continuous redefinition of the living, who just in their own vulnerability find the energy to experience new ways of adapting to the environment and to elaborate new creative solutions each time the temporary equilibrium falters. The emerging forms are the outcome of the experiential performances of the biological act continuously searching for new configurations in order to respond to the constant mutability of the conditions for existence. In this continuing metamorphosis, starting from the experience of continuous change, the coagulation of identities becomes possible. Those identities can preserve themselves inasmuch they are willing to experience new configurations, obviously capitalizing on the experience that is happening meanwhile⁵. The environmental relationship is not only simply the phenomenological background of the living, but it is the condition of full realization of the biological subject, given that the environment affects the organism as well as the organism affects the environment. One should not actually speak of a functional circle but more significantly of a functional change (*Funktionswandel*), as for instance that constitutional opportunity of the living on one hand to implement different biological functions to execute the same performance, and on the other hand to respond to the same stimulus in different ways. It is just to the extent that it retains a certain autonomy in the choice of how the needs imposed by the environment should be tackled that the living is free. The biological act experiences the limit making it its own and discovering its own non ontic but essentially pathic nature, capable of living with the possibility of self-denial, finding in that the opportunity to re-create a new equilibrium.

2. Expansion and contraction of the form

It is in fact by virtue of its form, open and closed at the same time, and of its eccentric position, as Plessner maintains in *Die Stufen des*

⁵ In *Gestalt und Zeit* (1942) Weizsäcker speaks of the perceptive forms as of an anamnestic-proleptic actualization of one's own object, or else as the result of an experiential process keeping together the already formed material on one hand and the animating tension implicit in movement on the other hand. Sedimented knowledge and incoming action so give rise to a rhythm developing in time, which, in the unity of psyche and soma, subject and object, expression and motricity allows the arising of the form. Cf. Weizsäcker (1942, 65-72).

Organischen und der Mensch (1928), that the human being, in that it is capable of self-awareness, can disentangle itself from a species-specific environment and give shape to a world (*Welt*), adjusting to the most diverse conditions of life. Even in such a case, therefore, it is not a rigid rectilinear progress, but a spiral-like progress allowing humankind to combine the typically linear development of the life process with the circularity deriving from the ability to rotate around itself in order to consciously reflect upon one's own condition and find original forms of expression. Thence the human being can derive its ability to configure new functionalities, to find in situations of disadvantage and inadequacy those creative opportunities to express unprecedented potentialities.

The openness of the human world environment is such as one must always research and recreate the historical conditions of one's own realization, in an indefiniteness relating both to the availability of potentially meaningful objects to establish a relation with, and to the multiplicity of meanings that are not given once and for all but must always be reformulated.⁶ This constitutes, for De Carolis, the anthropological paradox of man being torn apart by two antithetical but inseparable instances,

the exposure to the infinite contingency our biological constitution is heir to – with the possible exploitation of its extraordinary creative potentiality – and, vice-versa, the need to be protected from the uncertainty and danger connected to such an unlimited contingency, carving out a place for those symbolic laws and values, a sort of a cultural niche markedly distinct from the rest of the world and opposed to the indefinite multiplication of possibilities. (De Carolis 2008, 8)

If on one hand man's environment extends well beyond man's limits, enormously widening the horizon of habitability and becoming world, on the other hand such a bewildering extension endangers the very identity of man. In order not to get lost, man finds for himself niches to seek refuge in, re-establishing some

⁶ Uexküll uses the example of an oak to show how different parts of the same object can function as distinct habitats for heterogeneous species though at the same time offering usability and operability margins for the human beings. In this last sense, in fact, a log can either represent the work of a feller, or a precious instrument of recognition for a botanical expert, or a weapon for a dangerous stranger sneaking into people's homes in the middle of the night, or the source of inspiration for a sculptor, or the stimulus for the imagination of a child who wants to build his hut on the tree.

order and setting rules that can give stability to chaos, though at the price of enormously restricting his potential and of shying away from the encounter with other subjectivities. So explains De Haan in *Enactive Psychiatry*:

An eccentric position implies not only the expansion of freedom, but also the possibility of not feeling at home in the world. Because we do not coincide with our present status, being able to take a stance on ourselves and on our situation it then becomes possible to feel estranged, fundamentally disconnected from our body, from the others and from the world itself. An eccentric position implies an existential vulnerability: the possibility of alienation and of anguish that run deeper than fears. (De Haan 2020, 140)

Through an eccentric position, the world (*Welt*) becomes essentially shared (*Mitwelt*), to the extent to which the development of the ability of taking a stand and making a choice derives from belonging to a sociocultural community adopting specific practices, giving meanings, and recognising the existential and experiential, physiologic and cultural value of the living.

In fact, according to an ecologic perspective, the construction of meanings refers both to basic or metabolic values (that is the values of specific affordances in the environment which allow the recognition of fundamental aspects like prey, food, shelter, partner, through forms of direct interaction with the environment finalised to survival, conservation and continuation of the species), and to purely existential meanings. This is achieved through a mediated and conscious relation with one's own experiences, reflecting on what happens, on how to face the situations in life and on what becomes a priority to each one⁷.

But what happens when the ability to grasp the significance of objects, experiences and interpersonal relations is undermined? When the ever-dynamic intertwining between the psycho-physical subject and the world seems to falter for the simultaneous presence of multiple meanings one excluding the other or else for the desolating and poignant loss of any meaning?

Some people with autistic spectrum disorders can perceive the world as a kaleidoscopic swarming of often contradictory stimuli, without a chance to grasp the perceptive salient character of objects or to distinguish between a figure and its background, as described by Joliffe:

⁷ Cf. De Haan (2020, 156-159).

For an autistic person, reality is an interacting mass of events, people, places, sounds and images creating a great confusion. Nothing has apparently any set boundaries, order or meaning. I spend the great part of my time simply trying to understand what is the logic behind things. Pre-ordered routines, precise timetables and particular paths and rituals are all things that help me in finding order in an intolerably chaotic life. (Joliffe, in Grandin, 1995, 84)

Instead of removing from a background the affordance of objects (Entrainment) one experiences the intensity of an emerging multiplicity (more than), through a vivid enjoyment of the immediate sensory experience, on this side of any distinction between subject and object, figure and background, man and environment (Entertainment). Thus the boundary between the internal and the external seems to dissolve and the relational dimension becomes prior and even more fundamental with respect to the emerging of more discreet entities. Such a condition, as we shall see further, opens up perceptive and experiential potentialities that allow the enjoyment of an intensification of everyday life in the metamorphic intertwining uniting the perceiving and the perceived so that the features of the objects can significantly affect the environment in which the subject perceives oneself and, on the other hand, those features can be seen differently if observed in a different state of mind:

Those lamps were yellow with a hint of pink, but in a state of euphoria they were an inebriating, changing yellow-pink. My mind plunged ever deeply into the colour, trying to feel its nature and to become that colour, while I was progressively losing the feeling of myself in its overwhelming presence. Each of those colours resounded different sensations inside me and it was as if they were playing in a chord, whereas other colours sounded one at a time.

It had been that way since when I had been aware of myself [...] some things had not changed [...] since when I had been a newborn baby overwhelmed by the perception of swirling particles in the air, a little girl lost in the repetitions of a sound pattern, or an adolescent staring at coloured billiard balls for hours, trying to grasp the experience of that particular colour I was climbing on. (Williams 1999, 19)

In other instances the perception of continuity between the self and what is other than the self makes one act on one's own body in order to affect the external reality, as Temple Grandin reports about Donna Williams' fragmented perception involving at the same time both the external reality and her own body to such an extent as to

make her auto-stimulate herself in order to mark the boundaries:

She experienced such a fragmentation even when she observed the surrounding environment. She could only look at an object a small part at a time. Donna tapped herself rhythmically, sometimes slapped herself, to detect her own physical boundaries. When her senses were overloaded with painful stimuli she bit herself without realizing she was biting her own body. (Grandin 1995, 73)

Resuming the notion of *entrainment* used by Albert Michotte (cf. Michotte 1991, 149-215) to indicate the carry-over effect with reference to the immediate perception of the causal relation, Erin Manning e Brian Massumi in *Thought in the Act: Passages in the Ecology of the Experience* (2014) explain how in the case of people with neurodiversity a corresponding participation is established (Entertainment) which allows to experience the relationality of the field, of the process of *Gestaltung* (shaping) through which one can experience the dynamic form of objects, even before the grounded and well-established usage values. One explores the fields of experience more than the functions, while entertaining with the qualitative aspects of the environment. Thus Mukhopadhyay maintains that the perception of a door as a passage to be overcome is not given immediately as such, but it is the end of a process in which the object's shape gradually defines itself and slowly emerges from the dynamic and relational shape: «The color comes and then the shape and then the size, the whole thing needs time to get integrated. To be described as a door, there is position, the open or closed» (Mukhopadhyay, in Iversen 2006, 237). In the Entertainment the qualities of the object are perceived through an immersive environmental awareness which is on this side of the distinction and opposition between a knowing subject and a known object, «Happiness to me was the immediateness of the environment» (Mukhopadhyay, in Iversen 2006, 104).

A first rate role is played by the relationality intrinsic to the field of forces that pervade the gradual and changeable shaping, where the human being is only a player among others to be involved in the metamorphic process of transformation, emersion and coagulation of singularities. Relationality takes the shape of an inter-bodily resonance translating in an exponential increase of experience of life, in becoming other-than-self one can experience other parts of the self: «I could resound with the cat and I spent hours lying beside him, with no physical contact. I could resound with the tree in the park and I could feel myself in fusion with its

dimensions, its stability, its calm, its flux» (Williams 1998, 44). In such cases, in fact, rather than being directed to things, the attention dances with the environment, it is entertained in it and with it, letting in new ways of living in and of experiencing the fabric of the world, of grasping and letting oneself be surrounded by atmospheres, grasped in the relation sooner than in the emerging of distinct objects (Manning-Massumi 2014, 3-22).

When environmental awareness does resurface, it is without fully bloomed objects and overshadowing subjects, as autistics describe. But there is still a degree of difference between this and other modes of existence on the wider spectrum of neurodiversity. Because entrainment reigns as an immediate tendency in neurotypicals, even when they are immersed in a self-entertaining relational field, affordances already agitate, but are not yet objectified. For the neurotypical standing in a grassy farmer's field painting a flower, the flowering of experience may immediately present itself for artistic rendering, as it does for autistics. But there will likely also be an equally immediate sense of how the flower stands in relation to grass and trees, including a tacit cartography of how to get from road to field to flower and back, and what that trajectory might afford. This efficacious orienting occurs directly as a field-effect, on the level of the objectile, not on the level of constituted objects as such. (Manning-Massumi 2014, 14)

3. Living in the emerging relationality

Such a readiness to be fascinated and to resound with the more-than-human, to let the attention dance with the surrounding ecologies, disregarding any discrimination and hierarchy, is the very character of the autistic perception, as Amanda Baggs maintains:

I mean that when I am around a group of people, their voices may turn into the sound of water, their movements may all sort of blend together, but in their movements I see pattern not only of individuals but of the people interacting within a group, and the individual's place within the group, and their effect on the group and the group's effect on them, and on each other. I see this particularly well when not trying to understand what they're saying to each other. (Baggs 2010)

Even in the variance characterizing the spectrum, activity and passivity, subject and object, mind and world, human and non-human intertwine in a decidedly pre-dualistic and ante-predicative form that lets surface a diffused relationality more wary of the process than of analysing the singularities. Such a more attentional

than intentional modality of perception, free from predefined purposes because it is busy in diffusely corresponding to the qualitative aspects atmospherically diffused in the environment (cf. Böhme 2016; Griffero 2017) is defined as 'aptic':

The relational and procedural paradigm of the aesthetic experience as experience-with, on the contrary, is a multiple and multidirectional approach, not retinoic but aptic, spreading its attention not on a single content but along the process. The aesthetic qualities are perceptive correspondences on the route. [...] The aptic is a mode of the continuous, a 'dance of the attention' in which experience is not guided by the *ego's* intentional agency but by the unfolding of the pathic act along the relational process. (Manning-Massumi 2014, 14)⁸

The neurodiverse mind shows a readiness to perceive fields of possibility rather than discrete actualities, an openness and willingness to correspond to the fascination of the organic and inorganic components of the world without any hierarchy, moving-with the world, participating in the interplay of relational processes through which everything becomes: «I attend to everything the same way with no discrimination, so that the caw of the crow in the tree is as clear and important as the voice of the person I'm walking with. Everything [is] somewhat alive to me» (Krumins, in Miller 2003, 86). The attitude of catching the plot of the real is, again, what characterizes the aesthetic attitude to what establishes a relation rather than to what distinguishes and separates, towards the shaping of events which is possible through contact, encounters, the making of affective correspondences, the care-giving. Thus Perullo highlights the relational and processing nature of Aesthetics:

Aisthanomai, the Greek verb from which the word aisthesis, sensation, derives is in the middle diathesis: not active nor passive, to sense is medium. Not me nor you, not we nor you, but a sensing: it, a process. The soul is not a substance but a correspondence, specifically it recalls the undifferentiated-cum before the separation. (Perullo 2022, 18)

In this sense the aesthetic experience allows not only the intensification of the perceptive, sensory and affective dimension, but also a multi-perspective and multi-angular opening through

⁸ Cf. Perullo (2022, 163).

which an over-individual consciousness is gradually shaped, in which the human builds its identity by being responsible for what is non-human. It is therefore essential, in order to cultivate a new 'ecology of the perceiving', to let oneself go along the flow of the becoming, stopping at the relational knots that tangle in the ongoing contact with differences unamenable to assimilation processes. It is necessary to abandon the primacy of the visual that keeps at a distance and objectifies in order to comprehend, possess and manipulate. Only after that, one can let oneself go to an affective attunement with what surrounds, crosses and permeates man, free from any anthropocentric claims (Perullo 2022, 61-62).

Thus the deep affinity becomes clear between the aesthetic experience and the autistic aptic mode of entering a resonance with processes in which active and passive intertwine:

The aesthetic presents itself in this aptic openness, as a conscious and attentive correspondence. To perceive relations without subjects or objects is a constant exercise of attention and relaxation: medium sensing, affection without the attachment to result (either emotional or cognitive) and typical of the reduction of the making in operation and object. (Perullo 2022, 145)

Hence the word 'correspondence' taken from Tim Ingold⁹, to define the relation with the flowing of the world, the willingness to follow the light filtering from the gaps, to open to potentialities yet to come, where the boundary between reality and imagination fades, a *correspondence in-between* (Ingold 2020, 247), where one resounds with what was always there, with no set of given values, no hierarchy.

If in the interaction we actively open to the other, in the correspondence we respond and are responsible for a summoning that becomes experience of the aesthetic field, of that perceptive intimately procedural and relational multiplicity ¹⁰, of that

⁹ «To practise such a method does not mean to describe the world or to represent it, but to open our perception to what happens in front of us, so as to respond to that in our turn. It means to establish a relation with the world to which from now on I shall refer to with the word 'correspondence'» (Ingold 2019, 23).

¹⁰ To Berleant the aesthetic perception: «is like the primitive or childlike perception. Heinz Werner called it 'magic mode', in which the phenomena that appear clear and discrete to a critical mind, are instead fused together in a diffused whole. But instead of surpassing the separation of phenomena and the

«transactional relation in which perceiver and perceived are functionally inseparable, each becoming what it is on the basis of its intimate dependence on the other» (Berleant 2020, 203). The autistic perception then, rather than mere deviation from normality is an attitude that can be cultivated and can suggest other ways to inhabit the world and to experience time and space, placing correspondences in the foreground with the ability of resounding-with rather than to use. As Manning maintains in *The Minor Gesture* (2016):

Autistic perception is the opening, in perception, to the uncategorized, to the unclassified. This opening, which is how many autistics describe their experience of the world, makes it initially difficult to parse the field of experience, rather than seeing the parts abstracted from the whole, autistic perception is alive with tendencies that create ecologies before the coalesce into form. There is here as yet no hierarchical differentiation, for instance, between color, sound, light, between human and nonhuman, between what connects to the body and what connects to the world. When we engage in practice, when we are subsumed by process, we often seek this kind of perception, and it is available to us all: autistic perception does not belong exclusively to autistics. The difference is that, except in extreme circumstances, most of us parse experience before having a direct experience of the field in its complexity. The autistic, on the other hand, directly perceives the complexity before (and between) the parsings. (Manning 2016: 13-14)

We can then recognize that Aesthetics brings in itself the ethic imperative to recognize different ways of perceiving and interacting with the environment, ways to face the complexity of a world which does not let itself be reduced to normo-typical canons. Accepting neurodiversity means to plunge into an aptic mode of perceiving-with the world letting attention dance with the environment, while a new equilibrium emerges and other forms of existence coalesce. So there discloses a profoundly ecologic and relational dimension of aesthetics as aesthesiology, that does not shy away from lingering in the gaps, experiencing the fabric of the world, the gradual emergence of an environmental awareness from which, and in which only, take shape identities directed to a full realization of their own potentialities can arise.

division of the world into what is objective or subjective, this unity of the aesthetic experience precedes such division. As a matter of fact this is the best proof of the artificiality of the dualism between mind and body, subject and object, that has affected the aesthetic thought» (Berleant 2020, 190).

4. *Towards the realization of the nature we ourselves are*

In its Baumgartenian meaning, aesthetics as the general theory of sensitive knowledge invites us to reassess the sensitive and affective dimension, to appreciate the other than reason, to express the way one feels when experiencing the atmospheric relation in which subject and object are undistinguishable to the extent that they reciprocally condition one another, they tune up, resound one into the other, as Gernot Böhme maintains in *Atmosphäre: Essays zur neuen Ästhetik* (1995): «The perceiving subject really exists in the participation in the presence of things, the perceived object really exists in the perceiving presence of the subject» (Böhme 1995, 177).

Not to be indifferent to the pathic and experiential aspects of perception, even more so if autistic, in the course of which subject and object are co-present, means to go beyond perception as a mere transmission and reception of signals in view of the formulation of judgements or the attribution of meanings and values, in order to grasp the affective dimension emanating from the environment and arousing corresponding own-bodily attitudes (love-hate, tension-relaxation, assault-flight, breath frequency, quality of sleep) in those who, more than everybody else, are affected by such atmospheres. For Böhme, in fact it is just through the inter-affective tuning with the environment and the participation in the metamorphic process starting from the relation with nature, that man, while developing a growing ecological sensitivity and taking care of what is other than oneself, better understands himself, the nature that he himself is, that is «man as a natural being, sensitively and affectively involved in the surrounding world» (Böhme 1989, 45).

While experiencing the other than the self, man better understands the other about himself to the point of recognising and transforming pathology or deviance from standard norms into a «chance thanks to which one can recognise oneself in one's own giving to oneself, in one's own pathic existence which ultimately inevitably belongs to the human being» (Böhme 2009, 155). So in the environmental relation and in the perception of atmospheres as emanations of co-operations, of correspondences between the individual and the environment, between exteriority and interiority, one can experience an intensifying and an increasing of one's vital sentiment in the attuning with something immensely

great or in the contraction and recoiling into an inner sphere¹¹. It happens in the case of the fascination towards some stimuli such as sound vibrations, textures, glittering sparkles, thermic sensations, which lead the subject into a solipsistic vortex of mesmerizing feelings seemingly obliterating any other stimuli (Grandin 2013, 101). The attraction to the material component becomes even stronger just because it can affect the affective dimension of the subject¹², it can embody in the own-bodily essence of the perceiver, who can in its turn, just because it is a living body, sentient, active, but also essentially pathic, identify with the properties of the object: «My world is organized around texture. [...] All emotions, perceptions, my whole world [...] has been influenced by textures» (Krumins, in Miller 2003, 87).

The atmosphere mediates between acting and enduring, between giving and receiving and it spreads in the intermediate layer between subject and object, in the background before any emerging; it is not, in fact, the projection of something internal to the subject into the surrounding space, nor is it the introjection of some of the object's properties into the own-bodily essence of the subject, but it is the outcome of the co-operation between subject and object, of their coming together entering a relation even before the process of individuation may start, because «to the receptiveness on the part of the subject there corresponds an opening up on the part of the nature, a coming out of themselves by the things of the nature» (Böhme 1995, 170).

The immediate experience of a pre-dimensional background preceding the definition of a subjective pole separated from an objective one is particularly evident in people with ASD who perceive themselves immersed into the environment to the point they resent even the smallest change¹³ and they continuously tune

¹¹ «The intensity of the energy in the room was very strong. I felt like a small raft floating in the middle. The energy bounced around from one part of the room to the other, all around the walls, the pictures reflected it and the tables diverted it to the ceiling [...]. I really could see the paths of the energy waves, that bounced everywhere at great speed» (Mukhopadhyay 2008, 196).

¹² «We feel the matter in the extent to which the atmosphere radiating from the matters enters our affective situation» (Böhme 1995, 54).

¹³ «From time to time I lost any sense of perspective. A thing may seem enormously big if it moved rapidly in my direction or if I was unprepared. Someone who abruptly leaned over me could scare me off completely. I felt something was falling over me and I would be left smashed» (Gerland 1997, 35).

themselves up with what surrounds them (ingressive atmospheres), or, on the other hand they remain deranged and upset when the affective and expressive tonalities of the environment are perceived as contrasting one's own state of mind (divergent or discrepant atmospheres). The bodily own-bodily boundary vanishes¹⁴ in favour of a relation of correspondence between the environment and the subject who perceives itself in continuity with what surrounds it¹⁵, who cannot distinguish the figure from the background, the part from the whole: «Maybe I don't have to try too hard in order to be the wind or a raincloud. I feel a great sense of extreme connection with a stone or maybe a pen on a table or a tree... there is no separation» (Mukhopadhyay, in Savarese 2019, 91). Its attention dances with the world, while its own-bodily essence becomes a sounding board for atmospherically tuned¹⁶ situations that are perceived mostly in a synesthetic mode «I attend to everything the same way with no discriminations, so that the caw of the crow in the tree is as clear and important as the voice of the person I'm walking with. Everything [is] somewhat alive to me» (Krumins, in Miller 2003, 86).

On one hand giving the same intensity and the same value to all the stimuli and paying the same attention to every detail in an undifferentiated manner can lead to a distorted and fragmentary perception of reality, both because of the a-typical mode of reception (as in the forms of floating perception, resistance to change or tunnel-like perception), and for the emerging of uncommon associations that define new attributions of meaning: «I have always known the world was fragmented. My mother was a perfume, my father a sound and my big brother something that

¹⁴ «My body and what surrounded me dissolved into the sound generated by my high cries. Once it had taken control, I knew no-one could stop it. Not even me» (Mukhopadhyay 2008, 41).

¹⁵ «Because my language is not about designing words or even visual symbols for people to interpret, it is about being in a constant conversation with every aspect of my environment. Reacting physically to all parts of my surroundings. [...] Far from being purposeless, the way that I move is an ongoing response to what is around me. [...] It is not enough to look and listen and taste and smell and feel, I have to do those to the right things» (Baggs 2010).

¹⁶ So, if on one hand «While we feel we understand where we are. Feeling our own presence, we feel at the same time the space we are present in» (Böhme 2006, 110), on the other hand feeling oneself «means on one hand to be in a space and on the other hand to be feeling in such and such a way, to be emotionally attuned in this or that way» (Williams 1998, 122).

moved» (Williams 1999, 11). On the other hand the experience of such a resonance with the environment makes it possible to go beyond an anthropocentric vision in order to develop a greater environmental awareness that can cope with a Body-World making a resource of the difference. An ecologic aesthetics is concerned about nature and the ways in which one can attune with the atmospheric qualities radiating from it and generating corresponding own-bodily attitudes¹⁷.

There is therefore an urgency to progress towards one's own integral humanity, to become responsible for one's being-nature and being-body that have never been given permanently once and for all, but whose full deployment can be approached devising good practices for the design of living environments that take into account the different ways of perceiving and of moving into space. This kind of designing practices can establish how the qualities of living environments are perceived by the body, appreciate slowness, diversity, create the conditions for the expression of everybody's talents, not only in spite of but also thanks to one's own vulnerabilities. Such is the case for example with Shusaku Arakawa's and Madeline Gins's architectures, designed as a second skin to be put on, considering each one's specific requirements, with the aim of adapting to bodies but also to challenge them, to provide stimuli for their potentialities, to direct them beyond their own limits¹⁸.

The sloping and wrinkled surfaces of the soil, the unevenness and concavity, the vibrant colours, the diversity of the materials, the encounter with unexpected structures giving rise to astonishment and curiosity, unsettle and encourage to experience new ways of living in space in a conscious way. It is the case with the Reversible Destiny Lofts built in Mitaka in 2005, where «juggling, jumbling, and reshuffling the body with its fund of landing sites introduces a person to the process that constitutes being a person. [...] The world and everything in it will have to be transformed into a site of reversible destiny» (Arakawa, Gins, Govan 1997, 32). Multisensorial rooms challenge well-established patterns, inviting their inhabitants to actively search for new harmonies and to

¹⁷ Cf. Böhme (2001, 64).

¹⁸ «The best way to get a handle on how a person is situated in the world is actually to construct one, a handle expressly made for the purpose» (Arakawa, Site of Reversible Destiny-Yoro Park in Gifu, Japan).

discover one's own potentialities: «architecture ought to be designed for the actions it invites».

So the buildings lend themselves to different uses, being moulded on the requirements of the bodies and suggesting atmospheric relations with the colour effects, the lights, the surfaces, with the diffused sensations of openness or restriction, rather than with familiar objects provided for pre-ordained uses, as in Corwin's case, who so describes his way of grasping the relational and qualitative aspects of the environment:

I would probably walk into the room and see 'check patterns' before even being able to identify the door as a door and the tablecloth as a tablecloth! [...] The process of 'resolving patterns and shapes and forms into familiar objects' is actually a semi-conscious one for me. [...] I often tend to sit on floors and on other surfaces even if furniture is available, because it's a lot easier to identify 'flat surface a person can sit on' than it is to sort the environment into chunks like 'couch', 'chair', 'floor' and 'coffee table'. There is much more. There is always more. (Corwin, in Manning-Massumi 2014, 14)

Rooms suggest a continuity between the exterior and the interior; they evolve symbiotically with the bodies that inhabit them, adapting to their everchanging nature (Architectural Body), while every movement becomes an element in a dynamic architecture as in the Bioscleave House built in 2008 in East Hampton, New York. The open plan elicits an increase in self-consciousness and proprioception, just as it discloses open spaces, free from doors or parting walls, giving a broader perspective and immersive atmospheres encouraging the sharing of spaces. The precariousness and the uncertainty characterizing such spaces are emblematic of the way people with ASD continuously recreate their balance with a world that, starting from the breach, the experience of a crisis and scission, finds the opportunity to re-establish a dynamic composure that can keep together the built environment and the moving body so that the one constantly determines the evolution of the other. In such a case the corresponding feeling precedes the distinction between subject and object, organism and environment, letting the attention dance and the body adhere to its immediate proximity, keeping an intercourse with the inorganic, beyond any hierarchical distinction.

A dance of attention is not attentiveness of the human *to* the environment but attentiveness *of* the environment to its own flowering, at the very limit where experience and imagination,

immediacy and cross-checking, overlap. The making-felt of a co-compositional force that does not yet seek to distinguish between human and nonhuman, subject and object, emphasizing instead an immediacy of mutual action, an associated milieu of their emergent relation.

This co-compositional engagement with the associated milieu of emergent relation is an *environmental mode of awareness*. It is a mode of existence integral, for autistics, to all aspects of experience. (Manning-Massumi 2014, 9)

Such a vivid enjoyment of the immediate aspects of experience suggests, in conclusion, other ways of resounding with the immediately near space. It results in an intrinsically relational way of taking care of the body-world, going beyond the anthropocentric normo-typical logic. It generates, even in a condition of vulnerability, the opportunity of finding a new equilibrium and to fully realize one's own potential. Placing oneself in the proximity of those who have different modes of perception, we can increase our bodily self-awareness and experience new configurations of the way perception and movement intertwine and resound in order to give rise to new forms of environmental relations and develop a greater ecologic consciousness, to correspond to the texture of the world and fully realize one's own potential, in a never-ending process.

It is just when the equilibrium between organism and environment fails that the occasion arises to creatively search for and establish a new balance: «life is not a pure flow but a tackling with oppositions, a tenuous balance achieved from time to time in spite of irritations» (Böhme, Akashe-Böhme 2005, 11).

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