

“Quasi-Objects: From the Stadium to the Soccer Ball”

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Stretching from Kenzo Tange’s Tokyo Bay project and the Metabolist Manifesto of 1960 to today’s use of the term metabolism is going to be, well, a stretch, but I would like to draw out the following observations from the architectural pedigree of metabolism and bring them to bear on the discussion of the crisis of the object today:

- 1) that the Japanese movement embraced the growth and transformation of cities as inevitable and good attributes rather than as negative ones. While it may have ignored the negative attributes of metabolism per se, that things could go wrong even metabolically, it pushed the idea that urban and architectural form needs to constantly change.
- 2) that the city is not made of distinct and isolated objects had and that the city as a set of planned but finite networks was not working. Neither the urbanist nor the architect could produce objects anymore. They had to produce open structures, loose systems. If they produced discreet entities, these had to be plugged into a larger system and their performance was measured in terms of their contribution to the metabolism of the whole system.
- 3) That the distinction between the private realm and the public realm was not working either. The clearly determined boundaries had to be re-explored through broader collaborative methods that introduced a wealth of shared ideas and resources.

The city as a flexible system, that connected everything to everything else, produced a hyper-connectivity that was at once holistic and paranoid. Yet curiously, in the metabolic tradition, the architectural object never went away. The object as an aesthetic proposition always slipped back, whether in forms that lent themselves to the image of metabolism, at that time a machinic metabolism, or as aggregations, or as systems. Whether small or big, monumental or populist, (One could even argue that the Media Lab building at MIT by Fumihiko Maki still carries several metabolist traits), the metabolist movement ultimately converged on the specific proposition of megastructures. It provided the theoretical and aesthetic grounds for the design of very large urban projects. The

epitome of such structures is perhaps represented in the Yoyagi Stadium in Tokyo designed by Tange himself for the Tokyo Olympics of 1964.

Fast forward, to the present resurgence of metabolism in urban and architectural discourse. The discourse is primarily based on an idea that the separation between the natural and the man-made has produced conceptual misunderstandings in our modernist heritage, idealizations of both reason and nature beyond repair, and when it comes to our inhabited world, this separation has produced both natural and social disasters. We need to think of the social and the natural as one system. In This is no doubt arising from the sustainability perspective, from the perspective of growing interest in being able to measure the performativity of buildings and cities, and from a general interest in biological sciences as the source of inspiration of the creative fields. What is surprising is that the idea of mega-structure itself has also returned even if disguised in biologically inspired aesthetics. Yet perhaps, one of the most inspiring ways of addressing the convergence of the natural and the social, or the object and the subject, and one most pertinent to our discussion today, comes from Michel Serres, a philosopher who has written about this dilemma extensively. In his proposal for the “quasi-object”

The best argument for the persistence of the object in the reverse context of *“A ball is not an ordinary object, for it is what it is only if a subject holds it. Over there, on the ground, it is nothing; it is stupid; it has no meaning, no function, and no value. Ball isn’t played alone. Those who do, those who hog the ball, are bad players and are soon excluded from the game. They are said to be selfish. The collective game doesn’t need persons, people out for themselves. Let us consider the one who holds it. If he makes it move around him, he is awkward, a bad player. The ball isn’t therefore the body; the exact contrary is true: the body is the object of the ball; the subject moves around this sun. Skill with the ball is recognized in the player who follows the ball and serves it instead of making it follow him and using it. It is the subject of the body, subject of bodies, and like a subject of subjects. Playing is nothing else but making oneself the attribute of the ball as a substance. The laws are written for it, defined relative to it, and we bend to these laws. Skill with the ball supposes a Ptolemaic revolution of which few theoreticians are capable, since they are accustomed to being subjects in a Copernican world where objects are slaves.”*¹

In my own work, I aspire to come close to thinking of the architectural object as constituted through geographic systems and intersections, but that retains its gestalt, distorts just enough to point to its outside, but persists in producing its own internal, even if connected worlds.

The object’s autonomous presence may not be possible anymore, especially if the object is acknowledged to be as complex and messy as the city or as nature or as both, but its ability to emanate meaning, to attract attention and connect to networks remains necessary. The object is our therapy, our anchor, our moment

¹ Michel Serres, *The Parasite* (Minneapolis-St Paul: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 225-226

of reprieve in a world that is metabolically determined, metabolically beyond recognition. The object is dead, the metabolists have declared again and again, but it has somehow been resurrected as quasi-object, pseudo-object, maybe knotty object. Long live the object.