Christoph Brunner: "Nice-Looking Obstacles: Parkour as Urban Practice for Deterritorialization"
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Excerpt:

Architectural Body – The concept of Landing Sites

Through the practices of movement Parkour yields an architecture as "compositionally quite distinct from the ordered hierarchies of architecture-as-object, architecture-as-drawing, or architecture as idea, it is a rhythmical procedure, continually repeated yet forever new" (Borden 2001, 262).

Architecture as an exercised mode of production continuously deals with the question of how to build and make new forms and structures to achieve particular responses with the environment this structure is part of. In architectural discourse questions about "how to build" predominate the discourse rather than considerations of how does it move, which rhythms does it have and what are the polyrhythmic structures in relation to other bodies. As practice that builds, architecture continuously deals with boundaries and structures that in some way relate to other structures. Hence, movement in architecture is often regarded as an exteriority (except statics and other mathematically imbued techniques to keep structures in *form*). Bodies move along, through and across built structures but they do not move with them. In the case of Parkour one could argue that the Traceur moves across built configurations in ways that have not been primarily anticipated by their initial idea or even transgress their entire function. This would reduce the practice of Parkour to a subversive practice that regards architecture as given structures to move across it in a way that might be challenging to the defined enforcements of boundaries and control through these structures and their conception. One of the major fascinations about Parkour lies in its use of movement to get from one place to another in the most

efficient way. This practice surfaces as the spectacular jumps from rooftops in London (BBC 4 advertisement with David Belle) to extensive writings on proper training and use of movement on numerous websites dedicated to the practice of Parkour. The "means of correct training" that resonate with endless blog-entries on Parkourforums about *efficiency* and training play an important role in the institutionalizing tendencies of a practice that received massive media presence and therefore became part of the dominant discourse. Apart from Parkour's problematic and discursive analysis the relations between different bodies are an integral part of its self-definition and practices. Parkour in its practices but also in its writing develops a particular poetics of movement beyond the signifier and directly

plugs into a continuous flow of relations between bodies: "This world we live in consists of resources that ease the pain of minor inconveniences. Impatience yields rush, rush yields shortcuts and shortcuts yield intricate movement…. Never will the body stop moving."[1]

In their seminal work "Architectural Body" architects and artists Madeline Gins and Arakawa propose an architecture that "ought to be designed for actions it invites" (2002, xxi). Their approach towards architecture aims at a relational concept of bodies, an architectural body - a body as an "organism-person-environment" (2002, 1). In their reasoning they remain on a rather human-centered concept of encounter with architecture and therefore, what I would call, a phenomenological approach. Nonetheless, Gins and Arakawa remain productively ambiguous in their concepts and allow a playful openness to work with their concepts creatively. What they regard as organism is a biomass that enables a process "to person" (ibid.). *Personing* is the forming of a compact, subjective "nexus" out of actions relative to the built environment in which they take place. Gins and Arakawa therefore understand person always as an organism, as a set of conditions born out of action. The organism that persons always coincides with its environment. They become a nexus, an organism-person-environment. The potential of a personing organism depends on how to position its body (ibid.). Without being specific Gins and Arakawa leave the potential for body positionings open towards any kind of body that positions and influences other postionings in relation to it. "Surroundings

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[1] VA-Parkour Timeless. http://ca.youtube.com/watch?v=XWWb4vQH4KU (accessed 20/02/09)

invite, provoke, and entice persons to perform actions, and the enacting motions of these actions not only serve upon alternate vantage points but also inevitably shift sense organs about" (ibid.). While still remaining in the reference frame of the human body and its perceptual cues they simultaneously shift from a psychological model towards the movement that happens between percepts and affects in their relaying through relations or what they call "the air passage through which the body draws in atmospheric wherewithal" (2002,2).

The close relation between movement, the body and the environment foreground what Parkour develops through its engagement with obstacles and presumably fixed structures. Both, Parkour and Gins and Arakawa emphasize the flows (the air passage) between organism-body-environment

to propose an alternative technique to understand relations between different bodies. As Gins and Arakawa point out, "a taking shape of surrounds and bodies and organisms and persons occurs intermixedly. Logic would want to get in there with a knife and cut them apart" (2002, 4). What Parkour does then is to emphasize the intermixedly character of its practices that interweaves in its action different bodies (surrounds, organisms, persons) and therefore deterritorialize the former "territorialized" complex of abuilt structure and discursive formations.

The concepts of territorialization and deterritorialization derive from Deleuze and Guattari's various concepts about the relations between actual composites and their virtual potential (Deleuze and Guattari 2004, 3-29, 165-185, 300-316). In a generalized abbreviation of their meandering argument, territorializing forces anchor percepts and affects in an actual experience that becomes palpable. Deterritorializations are the forces that yield beyond the territory and in their very yielding also provide the potential for re-territorialization (2004, 11). One could regard the practice of Parkour as a foregrounding of the deterritorializing potential through its different modes of moving across territories (territories in Deleuze and Guattari are never only physical entities but can also be territories of thought). Thus, Parkour enables a deterritorialization and reterritorialization that consist of difference through movement. If we regard these continuous shifting relations between territories as processes of deterritorialization and re-territorialization we can further develop concepts that highlight the relations between different territorial

parts and their assemblages through the movement-experience-nexus. Parkour's encounter with obstacles has a very different quality for the Traceur than for the normal pedestrian. Traceurs do not regard obstacles as something merely to surpass but seek the obstacles' potential for different movements to take place. An obstacle in its material presence inhabits a double position, on the one hand something to be surpassed and on the other hand something that unfolds the potential of a different movement to take place[2]. The obstacle functions as a fragile "landing site" that relates to other bodies in various ways to enable movement to take place and to deterritorialize territories. Gins and Arakawa use their concept of landing site to address the interaction between processes of perception and imagination as part of the body and their relations to the organism-person-environment (2002, 5-22). They commence with the notion of something "being apportioned out" to enable a world to be formed (2002, 5). Even though their argument is based on a human-centered and phenomenological encounter, the concept of landing sites enhances a further understanding of how bodies relate to each other and what a body can do. The real strength of their concepts reveals itself in the notion of *site* and the process of being sited. "Organism-person-environment" consists of sites and would-be sites. An organism-person, a sited body, lives as one site that is composed of many sites" (ibid.). Gins and Arakawa delve into the emergence of a "person architectonics" through the shifting processes of landing of sites. The body is always in a certain way territorial, it keeps a certain form, but at the same time it is the product of continuously intersecting and dissolving landing sites. A landing site is the part and parcel of an actual percept in relation to its environment and at the same time the force of deterritorialization which opens towards affects and their virtual potential. In other words, if we address Parkour as a process of landing of different sites to compose larger sites, such as the body, we have to regard the affective force that hides in the material ground (i.e. an obstacle) out of which Parkour develops movement. Movement is not so much a choreographic result of conscious decisions but rather a plugging into different rhythmicalities and the production of new rhythms in relation with the built environment.

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[2] As Samir Mesbah, a Montréal-based Traceur, points out, on the one hand you try to "beat the obstacle" and on the other hand it is the obstacle that catches your attention and shifts your perception of architecture and urban fabric entirely (private conversation 01/03/2009).

For Gins and Arakawa an organism-person-environment "fields" its surroundings as a sequence of sitings (2002, 7). The relational bonds between different landing sites gives birth to the fielding process to take place. They base their theory on three categories of landing sites: perceptual landing sites, imaging landing sites, and dimensionalizing landing sites. "Through landing-site configurations, organism-person-environment takes hold and holds forth" (2002, 9). In the eyes of Gins and Arakawa landing sites, their fielding and singling-out "bring the world into existence in all its features" (2002, 11). The organism-body-environment takes *notice* of landing sites in a perceptual and imaging manner. In other words, they do not ascribe perception as mere bodily practice but acknowledge the circumstance of something being noticed. "All points or areas of focus, that is, all designated areas of specified activity, count as perceptual landing sites (visual, aural, tactile, olfactory, porprioceptively, kinesthetic somaesthetic [pain])" (2002, 10). These perceptual landing sites are never entirely reducible to a particular shape but different perceptual landing sites overlap and transform into each other. A smaller perceptual landing site such as the armrest of my chair defines a perceptual landing site on its own but is at the same time part of the larger landing site, the chair. For Gins and Arakawa the existence of perceptual landing sites suffices to get a first hold on things in the environment, they enable a "fielding" but are not entirely fixed. Fielding is the process of a set of relations from the organism-person-environment to come into presence. Imaging landing sites describe the amorphous compartment of noticing, a fielding that always depends on perceptual and imaging landing sites. They are "amorphous accordings of more information than is directly supplied" (2002, 12). While locating the imaging landing site in their concept of a person that underlies cognitive processing including memory and recognition, imaging landing sites not exclusively serve as a representation of actual perceptual landing sites. They rather transgress the general state of registration of the fielding of a perceptual landing site and enable processes of imagination that reach beyond perception. Fielding becomes possible through the relations and interaction between perceptual and imagining landing sites.

Perceptual and imaging landing sites in their relational interchanges bring forth

dimensionalizing landing sites. "A dimensionalizing landing site registers location and position relative to the body" (2002, 21). With their theory, Gins and Arakawa deem to establish an "on –the-spot data management system" that provides through landing sites "a neutral zone of emphasis … [which] simply bypasses subject-object distinctions" (2002, 22). In an attempt to approach Parkour as practice of different movements between bodies Gins and Arakawa's approach might appear deeply human-centered. Hence, their open concept of landing sites regards on the one hand the body as potential person but includes the varying forces which move with that body becoming a person (i.e. the movement of other bodies). The body itself becomes the platform for different forces to intersect and bring the organism-person-environment to the fore. We arrive at a concept of the body that notices and moves but always in relation to other bodies and their movement. Awareness of landing sites is not just a matter of human sense perception but a relaying process between different landing sites and their configurations intersecting in a tangible percept. Imaging landing sites then add the affective force that yields always beyond the perceptual and injects forces of movement that seek deterritorialization where territories have been formed before.

Parkour works on the level of an embodied encounter as person with obstacles but at the same time its practice would not introduce the novelty it has without its deterritorializing concepts of the obstacle. The architectural configuration as obstacle embodies the transformative potential of deterritorialization through movement. The body is not a human-centered concept, but matter that moves between motion and rest, always in relation always changing its assemblages. These assemblages are assemblages of different landing sites, of different forces that produce territorializations (percepts) and deterritorializations (affects). Thus it is understandable why Deleuze and Guattari ask "How Do You Make Yourself a Body Without Organs" because the body already reaches beyond what a body is defined as and reaches towards what a body can do (2004, 165-184). In Parkour practices, training (the other 90 percent which are not available on videos on youtube) exactly deals with the potential of a body and what it can do. Extending the body beyond its capacity defines one of the major goals and attractions of Parkour. Longing for pure extension, landing sites open up and need to be continuously addressed throughout the movements from one obstacle to another. The body in Parkour

never exists apart from its fielding and the landing sites which make movement possible. The obstacle becomes the bearer of the potential movement-nexus between bodies and their relations. According to Bergson the relations between movement and space are inextricably tied into his concept of duration as the major difference between entities or in his words composites. Duration in relation to the shifting formations of space and place becomes the necessary compartment that moves with the re-territorializing forces of a body's action. For Bergson, differences in kind (as the only proper form of difference) are based on duration and not on degree. If we define the differences in kind between bodies according to their duration instead of their degrees, the passing of movement becomes the force to shift these durations and therefore to introduce difference and novelty (Deleuze 1988, 32). Parkour as pure movement becomes a rhythmical force of deterritorialization that creates relations to form bodies and sites along their durations. The concept of duration and bodies that are always in excess of themselves radically transgress fixed concepts of space and matter as inert and passive. Processes of siting, fielding and landing could not happen without a collective becoming between different bodies, their substances, and their durations.

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