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Urban Affective Anthropometry Life stories, building stories, city portraits

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Introduction

Urban affective anthropometry. Why talk about urban affective anthropometry? The ways that have been used to describe the city, even fairly recently, are unsatisfactory. The awareness of the inexhaustibility of the world, the inability to recognise it as a unified and comprehensible whole, force us to deal with metaphysical issues, in particular the issue of infinity. The creation of images, a thousand-year tradition of exorcising death, leads us towards focusing on life as death. The idea of the city – the latin word *civitas* derives from *cives*; the individuals make up the essence of the city – leads us on to the concept of relationship, of the infinite interconnections between people. Propelled by the philosophical distinction between idea and affect, as seen through Deleuze's lens, as well as two of the three kinds of knowledge that Spinoza's geometry triangulates in his *Ethics*, we can set off on a journey towards new languages.

The infinite interconnections between people

The idea – Spinoza tells us – is a way of thinking that represents a thing, a representative mode of thought. Think of a square: the idea of a square is the intellectual form that represents the square. The idea has an objective reality as it represents something, since there is a relationship between the idea and the object it represents. The affect – just think of love, for example: it is a way of thinking that is not just about one precise thing; I'm able to represent the object of my love, but not love as such – the affect instead it's life, the ability to act in various ways, it's a lived scrolling transition from one degree of perfection to another thanks to the force of ideas. This succession of ideas is as continuous and unstoppable as the flow of a stream, like a beating heart. Idea and affect are both modes of thought that differ in nature yet are irreducible one with the other: it's their relationship which implies that where there is an affect, an idea must necessarily be presupposed, no matter how indefinite and confused it may be. Spinoza identifies two poles on which to plot the 'melodic line of continuous variation constituted by the affect': joy–sadness.



They are the fundamental passions: any diminution of the power to act will be called ‘sadness’ and vice versa for ‘joy’, any passion that increases that power.

Affection is the state caused by the action of one body upon another body. If I think of the warm feeling I experience when I feel the sun on my body, that is a condition of the body, in the sense that it is the effect of the sun on me: the affection is the combination of two bodies; one that acts, and the other which is marked by the trace of the first.

Then there are the two definitions that Spinoza ascribes to the body. The kinetic definition states: each body is defined by a relation of movement and rest. The dynamic definition: each body is defined by an assured power of being affected. For Spinoza each individual is made up of a vast number of extensive parts. This infinite set thus corresponds to an infinite possibility of being affected. The possession of an infinite set of extended parts implies an infinite number of affections. Each body is characterised by a specific relationship between the parties, within a degree of complexity yet also with a specific power to be affected.

What can a body do?

The fundamental question that arises in Spinoza's *Ethics* is not what to do, but what can a body do. According to Spinoza, until we know the power of being affected in our body, as long as this knowledge is determined by the randomness of the encounters, we cannot attain wisdom.

The individual is therefore a power and every thing that can be related towards a limit of tension, is a potential. Think of geometry, the concept already present in the Hellenic world of an outer line delimiting a figure: the idea will be a form bounded by a line outside of nature, intelligible, which traces the outline. Henceforth ‘individual’ will connote ‘the form related to its outline’. This notion is very close to the world of optical-tactile painting. As the contour of a tangible item, an outline is strongly linked to touch and so a visible form is unthinkable without some sort of tactile impression.

For Spinoza, however, it might be the concept advanced by the Stoics for whom all things are bodies and thus activated agents. The boundary of a thing is no longer conceived as the frame that surrounds the figure, but the limit in which the thing ceases to be. Think of a forest: its frontier of influence does not have the characteristics of an outline because a definitive border doesn't exist where the forest ends. The edge of the forest tends to a limit. Here Spinoza would counter the limit-frame with a dynamic limit.

An infinite collection of infinitely small bodies

The philosophical debate of the seventeenth century is quite incomprehensible unless you bear in mind a central concept, the notion of topical infinity. Spinoza's sense of actual infinity is neither finite nor indefinite. ‘Finite’ signifies there is a stopping point, when something is analysed we will come to a point where we must stop. However, ‘Indefinite’ means that there is no such stopping point, as we proceed with analysis, the term with which we arrive will itself be able to be further divided and analysed. However, what is the concept of ‘actual infinite’? Terms regarding finiteness, terms of finality, exist but belong to the infinite: the ‘simple bodies’ of which, according to Spinoza, every individual is composed should be thought of in terms of actual infinity. They are so small and faint that the idea of analysing them one-by-one makes no sense at all. Yet what can possess shape and magnitude? An infinite collection of infinitely small bodies. Every individual is an endless collection of simple bodies, each individual is composed of a specific infinite set.

But how would I be able to distinguish between different infinite sets? Is it because an infinite set belongs to me and not to someone else? An infinite set belongs to a given individual to the extent that it has a certain affinity, a specific relation of movement and rest. Spinoza calls this relationship a differential relation. Individuals are composed of a multitude of parts, evanescent and infinitely small. Each individual has these, is composed of these, all functioning in a specific relationship. This relationship is characteristic of an infinite set of differential relations: not a sum of individual relations, but the product of an integration between infinite sets of differential relations. «An individual comes into existence only when, thanks to the intervention of an external cause, an infinite set of extended parts are integrated in a specific

coalition, his own, in other words, his constitutive relations. When his coalition accomplishes compositions it amounts to birth» (Deleuze G., 2007).

Death won't ever be able to annul the eternal truth of the relations. Death strikes the extrinsic parts, but the eternal truth of the relationship remains. The relationship, in so much as it is a relation, has an eternal truth independent of its partial terms. Even the essence of a body, when it comes to the end of its existence, it does not cease to exist. In fact, the essence is in no way an extended quality, but an intensive quality: a degree of power. The pure relationship and pure essence is eternal.

The art of composing relations

At this point we may confront the so-called 'kinds of knowledge' that Spinoza talks about. The first kind of knowledge is constituted by inadequate ideas, the world of signs, equivocal ideas, passions and passive affections. The extended qualities, which constitute each individual, are extrinsic to each other, extend to infinity, connecting to and joining with one another. These simple bodies, which can't possibly have interiority, are determined externally, through clashes and collisions caused by other particles in a process that never ends and plays out indefinitely. The first kind of knowledge is a simple understanding of the effects of action and interaction that occur when extrinsic parts come into contact with each other. The second kind is the knowledge of the specific rule governing each relationship's configuration, whether it be part of me or that of another individual. It's no longer the grasping of the effects of relations, but to understand a rule of composition, that is, the specific manner in which characteristic relationships of any body are composed or decomposed. The second level of knowledge can be compared to 'knowing how to swim'. It's an impressive know-how; you need to feel the rhythm of the water, how to arrange your body with the water, what occurs between the solid body parts and those of liquid – it's the fruit of a certain knowledge. Knowing the constitutive relationship of the body and the water I can compose in a new relationship: swimming. Knowing how to swim is to find the right position in the water, breathe properly, avoid an approaching wave or take advantage of its force, it is a true art: the art of composing relations.

Urban affective anthropometries

When I try to view the essences of bodies as propounded by Spinoza, that there are essences of individuals regardless of their existence, a swirling tangle of friends appears in front of my eyes; authors from the past, fantastic characters, protagonists from stories, the everyday or politically important people that W.G. Sebald encounters in his English pilgrimage *Die Ringe des Saturn*. The words with which this meticulous weaver of stories links an exponential number of glimpses into lives, are intermixed with strange small black and white images that enhance the feeling of walking into an archive that breathes, a sort of infinite collection of simple bodies. In the story that Sebald begins to mentally inscribe within the walls of Norwich Hospital, we engage in rapid succession with his friend Michael Parkinson, the expert Charles-Ferdinand Ramuz, the literary critic Janine Dakyns and her (one could say private) knowledge of Gustave Flaubert, the surgeon Anthony Batty Shaw – a friend of Janine's from The Oxford Society – and the scholar Thomas Browne, who in the seventeenth century had practiced his profession at Norwich Hospital and who's skull is preserved in the hospital's museum to this day.

«Janine (...) had tried – elaborating on all her interests – to analyse Flaubert's scruples, saying that his fear of stating falsity as a writer would sometimes confined him to his couch for weeks or months on end. According to Janine, Flaubert's scruples could be traced to the relentless rise of stupidity, which he found everywhere and that now, he thought, might affect his own head. It is rather like sinking into sand, that's how he once supposedly put it. Janine surmised that this was probably the reason why sand had such significance in all of Flaubert's works. Sand overcomes all. Flaubert's dreams, said Janine, were by day and by night covered by persistent boundless dust clouds, lifted and twirling above the arid plains of the African continent, drifting north, beyond the Mediterranean and across the Iberian peninsula, until sooner or later it fell as ash on Jardin des Tuileries, a Rouen suburb or a small town in Normandy, and it infiltrated the tiniest crevices. According to Janine, Flaubert saw the whole Sahara in the one grain of sand which remained in the hem of Emma Bovary's winter dress, and for him every speck of dust weighed as much as the Atlas mountains» (Sebald W.G., 2010, p. 18).

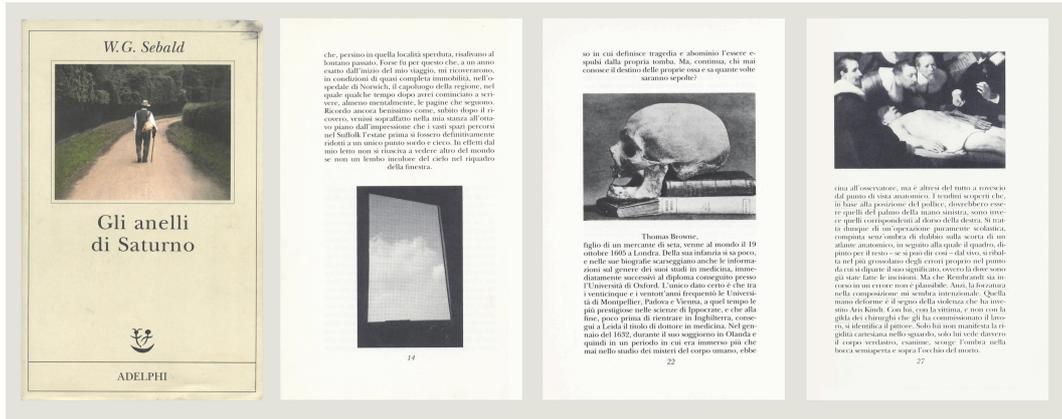


Figure 1: W.G. Sebald, Cover and images from *Die Ringe des Saturn* (Italian edition).

With the same lens through which Janine Dakyns analyses the ‘grains of sand’ that transmigrate from one body to another, W.G. Sebald saw objects, words, and individuals that encounter the being of Thomas Browne, even unexpectedly placing him in relation to Rembrandt’s famous painting *The Anatomy Lesson*, then continuing along a trail which extends over time and is compressed by space.

Working on slow-motion, on unexpected juxtapositions, focus upon details – through vision rather than words – Yervant Gianikian and Angela Ricci Lucchi create films through research, selection and renovation about quintessential bodies. These two indefatigable copyists of film stock, through the process of unraveling look for traces of humanity in every single frame and wonder whether it is possible to understand humankind by watching archaic movie reels, flammable and often forgotten. As Walter Benjamin discovers in his *Passages*, the energy in the discarded, of ‘aged’ items and giving them back their worth by recycling. Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi, with their analytic viewfinder, perform a sort of revitalisation of a worn out body.

«It’s a work of manic theft, of a miniaturist, an Egyptian copyist, an archaeologist. I will not dwell on the ‘story’ or the goings-on, but on what interests me: the face of things, the appearance of objects and environments and what normally vanishes away. Revisiting periods, genres and situations of a part of film history that sometimes gets lost. Resubmitting archives of other memory fragments in a film that is not a copy of those from which it derives, but is a sum of variants, obtained by highlighting certain elements of the image, of movement, with diverse technical modes of analysis. When mounting the combination of different events, objects, places, times, all evoke the illusion of continuity, even if spatially absolutely impossible, not only in nature but in the original films themselves» (Gianikian Y., 1987, pp. 102-103).

The 347,600 frames taken by the two artists to create *From the Pole to the Equator* – a film edited with footage shot in the first two decades of the twentieth century by filmmaker Luca Comerio – selecting,



Figure 2: A. Ricci Lucchi, Y. Gianikian, still frames from *Dal Polo all'Equatore*.

cropping, recomposing, slowing down, mirroring images of one another, arranging relationships, all through the film medium, a glance back in time (Censi R., 2010).

Even Runa Islam, in her work *Scale (1/16 Inch = 1 Foot)*, returns to the theme of doubling and repetition, already in the form that it is displayed: a screen suspended in the centre of a room with a large projection wall in the background. To view it the visitor is forced to move and to stand sideways to the screen. A multi-storey car park in Gateshead, only partially built in 1962 by Owen Luder – the project never saw the completion of its rooftop restaurant, but achieved a certain notoriety thanks to the film *Get Carter* (1971) with Michael Caine – the building is the protagonist of the two-screen film installation by Islam, filmed shortly prior to the destruction of this Brutalist landmark.



Figure 3: R. Islam, still frames from *Scale (1/16 Inch = 1 Foot)*.

«With a kind of humanistic intent, Islam speaks of the building as though it were a human being and remind us the words of Thomas Struth who described the facades of the houses he photographed years ago in faded black and white as though they were human faces (...) The larger screen shows the unfolding of a ritual that take places in the restaurant, reconstructed for the occasion. Here two waiters lay the table for two elderly guests, two people who were engaged to take part in the film as extras. The film-derived imagery (either defined in advance or, in a certain sense, induced) produces unexpected connections and determines the structure of the work's form creating correspondences or dissonances between the linguistic construction and the production of sense.

Divided into two sequences, the video also shows different and moving viewpoints on the architecture, and occasionally compares the real building with its maquette. So, as Islam says, there is the intervention of various levels of reality constructed around emotional centre created by the artist: “There is the building as it is, as empirically real; as it was meant to be, an imaginary real or hypothesis/fiction and a maquette, an empirically real which is a mock-up of the imaginary”, a scheme that reminds us of the relational structure between the imaginary, the symbolic, and the real» (Junge-Stevnsborg K., Lidman E., 2005, p.74).

If Runa Islam humanises the architecture, Pathosformel (Daniel Blanga Gubbay and Paola Villani, a duo working in experimental theatre) reflect the form of the body by staging a sort of landscape in motion. In *La Timidezza delle Ossa (The Shyness of Bones)* what appear to be human remains or relics of a buried civilisation are seen surfacing behind a white surface. They seem to blossom from a raw milky material to create a bas-relief in constant motion. Initially the fragments appear individually, but they subsequently begin to reconstruct the familiar image of a human body. Like foetuses that establish their anatomy during the months of gestation, bodies model themselves gradually and experience the volume of the uterus pressing blindly against the walls a pallid womb; building a body, apparently devoid of gravitational limitations, able to show itself along the whole surface.

Nasal septum, femur, knuckles and shoulder blades are broken down and exposed through a skin so thin that it's unable to hide anything: they are impressions that favour the hard edges of bones while compressing the form of the flesh, changing the perception of the body in order to create a type of radiographic dance. From the human body there merely remains the supporting structure and all physiognomy disappears, all the distinguishing traits and tissue. In a slow progression the body is

separated from matter, an autonomy is imposed and it embarks on a struggle against the membrane, in a perpetually unsuccessful attempt to fix your own image or emerge over this insurmountable constraint. For me these are some examples of affective anthropometry. Can't we think of them as new forms of urban languages?



Figure 4: *Pathosformel*, image from performance *The Shyness of Bones*.

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