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Notes for an Archeology of Responsive Environments:
The case of Montreal 1965-1975

Certain kinds of machines and some living organisms [...] modify their patterns of behavior on the basis of past experience so as to achieve specific anti-entropic ends. In these higher forms of communicative organisms the environment, considered as the past experience of the individual, can modify the pattern of behaviors into one which in some sense or other will deal more effectively with the future environment.
Norbert Wiener, The Human Use of Human Beings: Cybernetics and Society, 1950 (1)

In architectural circles we frequently speak of buildings as environmental controls, or the local controlling of energetic patternings of the universal manifold of the high and low frequency events; we have local environmental controls on the land which we call buildings, we have environmental controls on the sea which we call ships; we have environmental controls in the skies which we call airplanes. These are all vessels of preferred pattern regenerations."
R. Buckminster Fuller, Ideas and Integrities, 1963. (2)

We have now become aware of the possibility of arranging the entire human environment as a work of art, as a teaching machine designed to maximize perception [...] Application of this knowledge would be the equivalent of a thermostat controlling room temperature. It would seem only reasonable to extend such controls to all the sensory thresholds of our being.
Marshall McLuhan, The Medium is the Massage, 1967 (3)

Nestled in geodesic domes, the members of the 1960s utopian communities, their minds chemically expanded, surrounded by stroboscopic lights, projections, loud music, and perfumed incense, attempted to counter the modernist project of disciplining and isolating the senses. The word environment became ubiquitous and served to define these new multimedia spaces as forms of art that involved the participation of the audience, as in the famous happenings organized already in the late 1950s by Allan Kaprow (the first to introduce the definition of environmental art).

In a way that echoes, once again, experiences of the Sixties, like the famous one conducted by the EAT group (Experiments in Art and Technology), the last few decades have seen the developing of a new culture (as opposed to a counter-culture), with the exploration of the use of personal digital technologies, prosthetic devices, wearable computing, responsive dynamic

systems, and topological media. Collaborating, very often, with scientific institutions, architects, designers, and artists have appropriated the new advanced technologies to generate ambiances that act as mediating devices, enhancing and questioning our new techno-bodies. They create responsive environments: spaces that interact with the people passing through them, inhabiting them, or using them.

This paper proposes an archeology of today's experiments exploring a particular moment in space and time: the decade 1965-1975 in Montreal.

In a 1970 review published in Québec-Presse, journalist Anne Bergeron commenting on Le Monde Ouvrier, "environmental spectacle" signed by "environmental designers" Maurice Demers and Monique Jarry, complained: "Fashionable expression, the word 'environment,' is becoming more and more hackneyed: today everything is environment."(4) The Canadian journalist was mainly referring to Montreal's art scene, but, in fact, qualified by a multitude of adjectives—total, global, integrated, encompassing, multi-sensual, multi-faceted, multi-dimensional, interactive, participatory, simultaneous, synchronized, psychedelic, interdisciplinary, pop, pervasive, non-institutional, post-didactic, post-disciplinary, and even invisible—the word environment had globally dominated the discourses and practices of North-American artists, architects, social activists, and intellectuals during the previous decade.

During the sixties and seventies, the frenzy for environmental art and action built on an aesthetic quest that found its roots in the nineteenth century's search for the Gesamkunstwerk (total artwork), which had already resurfaced in the early twentieth century within the pedagogy of the Bauhaus, the kinetic art of Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, and in the provocative environmental sculptures of the Dadaist Kurt Schwitters. These early experiments inspired post-war total and participatory environmental explorations, while the existing theoretical corpus was updated and expanded by the incorporation of Norbert Wiener's cybernetics teaching, together with the appropriation of Bucky Fuller's visionary gospel and Marshall McLuhan's understanding of media. Artists, architects, and intellectuals, enthusiastically adopted novel technologies and new materials. In the age of space conquest, computerization, and unheard-of development of mass communication, they envisioned the dawning of a "second industrial revolution" that promised to liberate mankind through the use of information technology.

Enlightened inhabitants of Bucky Fuller's spaceship earth, a living and thinking ecological entity, their minds (quite often) chemically expanded and their perception enhanced by fantastic machines, cultural activists, and artists of various denominations dreamed of a participatory and interactive art. Abandoning galleries and museum, they re-invented old forms of spectacle (ballet, theatre, circus, cinema, poetry reading, and concert), colonized public spaces, and found new venues where happenings took place and multimedia installations were deployed.

It is fascinating to note that, most of the events, projects, interventions, and art works designed during this period assumed or suggested, physically or metaphorically, spherical shapes. And it may be relevant to point out that

at least two of the most famous globes of the sixties—Buckminster Fuller's US Pavilion at Expo 67 and François Dallegret's drawings of the environmental bubble illustrating Reyner Banham's article "A home is not a house" (Art in America, 1965)—were built or conceived in Montreal. This almost obsessive absorption with globular forms has not escaped the attention of scholars and recently has been spectacularly and convincingly theorized by the German thinker Peter Sloterdijk in a trilogy dedicated to spheres, globes, and bubbles.(5)

An attempt to explore the possibilities and frontiers of a geometric vitalism, Sloterdijk's three volumes presuppose that life is an affair of form and that the constitutions of spheres and thinking are different expressions designating one and the same thing. According to Sloterdijk, the reference to a spherical geometry of life has meaning only if we acknowledge the existence of a theory that knows about life more than life itself—and that wherever we find human life, sedentary or nomadic, inhabited globes are born, fixed, or itinerant, that, from a certain point of view, are more round than everything we design.

At the beginning of the third volume dedicated to "foam" (Schäume,Sphären III), Sloterdijk states that to comprehend the originality of the twentieth century, three elements should be taken into account: the practice of terrorism, the concept of industrial design and the thinking about the environment. The volume analyses the modern catastrophe of the round world. It describes, in morphological terms, the dawn of an era that can no longer present the shape of the whole in forms—for example the circle of imperial power, or the panopticon of the traveler—which conforms to the law of the sphere. It is not by chance, affirms Sloterdijk, conservative critiques have denounced modernity as loss of the center and rejected it as insurrection against the circle of God.

In this context, Sloterdijk scrutinizes McLuhan's considerations about the electronic simultaneousness of information and its capacity of producing a "vibrant global sphere," the center of which is everywhere and the circumference nowhere. Sloterdijk elucidates how the description of the global village of the great Canadian theorist of media was inspired by the medieval hermetic theosophical tradition. The sphere theorized by McLuhan was close to a sort of electronic Catholicism. With great generosity, McLuhan hypothesized a hybrid sphere, both tribal and global, which would include "everybody" in one "unique universal membrane." Such a sphere would be at the same time round (that is, centralized and Roman), and not round (i.e., decentralized and Canadian). The computer was the tool through which the miracle would be accomplished. According to the neo-Paulinian thinking of McLuhan, the new electronic apparatus would allow humanity's integration in a new kind of "psychic community," with all the characteristics of a super-tribal entity. Perhaps, for the last time in history, what was announced was the unity between the global village and the church.

Of course today such a unity of the sphere cannot be sustained, because spheres have become multi-focal. Life now has the power of installing a series of very diverse worlds, each world with its own environment. Life expresses itself through multiple scenes and simultaneous scenarios, which are imbricated in each other, and which are produced and consumed in various labs and workplaces, connected by networks. Life produces each time and in every occasion, the space in which it appears and in which it thrives. As Sloterdijk explains, now that philosophy's exhaustion has been exposed, what is urgently needed is a "biosophy."(6)

Endnotes

(1) Norbert Wiener, The Human Use of Human Beings: Cybernetics and Society, Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1954 (1st ed. 1950), p. 48.

(2) R. Buckminster Fuller, Ideas and Integrities, (1st ed. 1963), Toronto: The Macmillan Co., Collier – Macmillan, 1969, p. 55.

(3) Marshall McLuhan (with Quentin Fiore), The Medium is the Massage: An Inventory of Effects, produced by Jerome Agel, San Francisco: Hardwired, 1996 (first edition 1967), p. 68.

(4) Annie Bergeron, "Le Monde Ouvrier", Québec-Presse, Montréal, 22 février 1970, reprinted in Yves Robillard editor, Québec underground, 1962-1972, 3 volumes, Montréal Editions Médiart, 1973, Vol 3, p. 74 (the English translation is mine).

(5) Peter Sloterdijk, Sphären I - Blasen, Frankfurt-am-Main, Suhrkamp, 1998; Sphären II - Globen, Frankfurt-am-Main, Suhrkamp, 1999; Sphären III - Schäume, Frankfurt-am-Main, Suhrkamp, 2004; French translations: Sphères I. Bulles. Microsphérologie, traduit de l'allemand par Olivier Mannoni, Paris, Pauvert, 2002 ; Sphères III. Écumes. Sphérologie plurielle, traduit de l'allemand par Olivier Mannoni, Paris, M. Sell, 2005.

(6) This paragraph represents a synthetic paraphrase of Peter Sloterdijk, Sphères III. Écumes: Sphérologie plurielle, pp. 17-19.