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# NOETICS WITHOUT A MIND

Stavros Kousoulas, Andrej Radman, and Heidi Sohn, editors



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BOOKS

Colophon

Noetics Without a Mind

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Book Abstract

Addressing the intricate socio-techno-environmental dimension of noesis within the current climate of social and urban challenges necessitates a transdisciplinary approach. In pursuit of this objective, NWM incorporates contributions that delve into sense-making processes involved in the individuation of humans, technologies, and their affective environments. These contributions offer diverse perspectives that critically examine the production of sense and its heterogeneous potentials for transindividuation. Key questions include: What transductive relations emerge in the entanglements between technology, affects, and the production of our (offloaded) memories and desires? How do these relations shape the sensible apprehension of our lives and the lives of our milieus? In what ways can they be expressed beyond the conventional, Western, ocularcentric, and annotational fixations of generic sciences? What new senses are required to navigate the complexity of the present? And, collectively and technologically, how do we sense the effects of our actions? Drawing inspiration from Gregory Bateson, how can we cultivate a different sensory perspective to foster a transformative mode of thinking?

NWM provides a platform for thinkers who boldly traverse disciplinary boundaries, encompassing a diverse range of fields. These include, but are not limited to, affect and affordance theories, architecture, art and cultural studies, philosophy and philosophy of technology, (digital) media studies, feminist theories, film theory, social sciences, and literature.

**Keywords:** Architecture, Affordances, Technicities, Philosophy, Pedagogies

Series Abstract

The *Ecologies of Architecture* Book Series promotes a transdisciplinary approach to architectural thinking and doing by extending its interest to topics that bring together the three ecological registers, namely the environment, the social and the individual. Such an approach accounts for what the built environment will come to be, and speculates about who will become alongside it. The series focuses not only on the why, what and how of architecture, but also on the who, who with and for whom.

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# In/Side/Out

Stavros Kousoulas

In the early pages of his seminal *Individuation in Light of Notions of Form and Information*, Gilbert Simondon makes a straightforward but challenging claim: the physical individual has no veritable interiority; only the living individual has an interior.<sup>1</sup> It is this claim that I will expand upon, while attempting (the audacity!) to problematise it by underlining its relativity; in the meantime, a few points that address issues of architectural concern should become apparent.

To unpack Simondon's provocative claim, we need to figure out the difference between what he terms physical and vital individuation. For Simondon, individuation (the genesis of an individual) is played out and expressed on a dimensional level; in other words, there is a certain topology and a certain chronology of individuation; below this level, reality is what Simondon calls pre-individual: an unindividuated field of energetic and informational potentials. For Simondon, individuation appears as an operation of this pre-individual field that can then be termed 1) physical individuation, when the individual can receive information from a single input and amplify it in a non-self-limited (homogeneous) manner or 2) vital, when the individual can simultaneously receive multiple inputs of information and render them compatible in its own self-limited (heterogeneous) individuation.<sup>2</sup> This is an extremely dense definition and needs further examination.

Simondon is explicit when claiming that above information as quantity (data) and information as quality (narrative) there is information as *intensity*.<sup>3</sup> This intensive understanding of information is one that equates it with meaning: information is the intensive difference that can provoke an intensive difference,

which in its own right is meaningful to an individual and can cause it to individuate further. The intensive capacities of information act as a significative potential, producing what is of significance for an individual while simultaneously affirming the individual. Simondon claims that what distinguishes a physical from a vital individual is what occurs right after the informational encounter. If an individual finds and establishes meaningful intensities that are nonetheless meaningful only to its own individuation, then we are dealing with a physical individual; if an individual encounters intensities that catalyse heterogeneity in a manner that is informative – meaningful – for more than its own individuation, then we are dealing with a vital individual, an individual that is *alive*.

The crucial point, if we are to take Simondon's argument to its logical conclusion, is that by such an account of physical and vital individuation we end in an extremely potent and destabilising (pun intended, as we will soon see) definition of life itself. More specifically, I will claim that Simondon, perhaps unwillingly, proposes a definition of life that is based on a radical understanding of the relation between interiority and exteriority, and by doing so – given that interiority and exteriority are not limited to what we traditionally call animate individuals – he proposes an understanding of life beyond life itself. It is crucial to understand here that the main characteristic of a vital individual is that its individuation remains incomplete, as opposed, for example, to the individuation of a crystal, a typical example of a physical individual. A complete individuation would correspond to the absorption of all the energetic and informational potentials of a system, leading to a stable state that no longer has any contact whatsoever with the pre-individual field. On the other hand, an incomplete individuation corresponds to a structuration that is still in contact with the pre-individual, not having absorbed all the energetic and informational potentials of its initial non-structured state; an incomplete individuation leads to a metastable state.<sup>4</sup> Why would one equate stability with physical individuation and metastability with vital individuation? Precisely because a system of stable equilibrium that has absorbed all potentials and therefore reached the highest degree of homogeneity is a system that cannot act, a system that cannot transform, a dead system.<sup>5</sup> To speak of action, we must examine systems that are metastable; systems that remain sensitive to unexhausted energetic and informational potentials, attempting to render them compatible with their own individuation and action, resulting in precisely this effort of compatibilising (to use a peculiar neologism from the English translation of *Individuation*).<sup>6</sup>

In short, information is produced by actions that attempt to render compatible what Simondon would call disparate potentials. Information is the meaning that will emerge when a continuing line of individuation would discover – or, better,

would invent – the dimension according to which two disparates can become compatible.<sup>7</sup> Transduction, a beloved term of Simondon's, describes precisely this compatibilising action. In an intuitive state, an individual encounters disparates that can potentially be meaningful to it. In bringing them together through action, matter and energy relate otherwise, therefore introducing new information. Transduction is literally the discovery of dimensions that make disparates communicate, so that each disparate can eventually become organised in new emergent dimensions but without any reduction or loss;<sup>8</sup> in that sense, transduction is a truly intensive approach to information, miles ahead of mere quantitative or qualitative accounts of it. Much like dialectics, transduction integrates opposites (disparates) but unlike dialectics, transduction does not suppose any a priori temporal framework in which ontogenesis occurs. Crucially, time is produced by individuating action, and does not pre-exist that action as a framing device; transduction then, as the manner in which the compatibilising action is expressed, intensifies the temporal constraints that individuation produces. Becoming, a term easier to digest than individuation, is *transduction on the present*.<sup>9</sup> As Simondon writes in a rare lyrical outburst, from the infinity of before to the one after, from the indeterminacy of before to the one after, from the first to the last dust, an operation is carried out that does not itself break into dust, making life *be* in its resolution, in its present and not in what remains of it.<sup>10</sup>

How then does this life-evoking transductive compatibilising action occur? Perhaps it's better to slightly rephrase: where does this compatibilising action occur? Simondon is once again straightforward and challenging to equal degrees: it happens on the limit, on the membrane, on the *side*. The individual, the being in the present of the disparate-resolving-individuating action is the active relation and exchange between the interior and the exterior; it individuates and is individuated before and despite any a posteriori distinction of interiority and exteriority. Moreover, the environment – or in Simondonian terms, the associated milieu – is not merely the place *in* which individuation unfolds. This would simply reintroduce a binary understanding of interiority and exteriority, as the very act of placing individuation *in* an environment-container implies. On the contrary, the milieu is the constituted active field of the relation between the interior and the exterior, the reality of the relation between two orders that communicate across a singularity – the individual.<sup>11</sup>

In this sense, individuation is the process where a metastable system encounters energetic and informational potentials – what Simondon abbreviates in the use of the single term *germ* – that disrupt it and force it to invent new dimensions that would compatibilise the newly relevant disparates. However, Simondon underlines, the relative nature of interiority and exteriority is

continuously modified in the germinal encounters themselves. As he claims, using the example of crystallisation, at the moment when a crystal is not yet constituted, the germinal conditions that energised its individuation can be considered exterior to the crystal, while when the crystal grows, it has incorporated, it has interiorised certain amounts of energy and information that constituted the basis of the initial encounter.<sup>12</sup> A germ is only provisionally exterior and provisionally interior, the individual constituting itself precisely on the way in which this provisional relation between interiority and exteriority is regulated. The germ – the energy and information that initially disrupted metastability – is not distinct from the individual; it remains included in the individual, who becomes an extensive germ: the *soma* is coextensive with the *germen*, and the *germen* is coextensive with the *soma*, the one becoming the other on the limit of the developing individual.<sup>13</sup>

That membranous limit is the present of the individual, the limit that expresses the ontogenetic dynamism, or what one could call the radically immanent identity of a being: the manner in which it is able to change with consistency and without dissolving. The individual is therefore a limited being in the sense that it is a polarising being, possessing an indeterminate dynamism in its individuation, only to be determined through resolving disparate potentials and in doing so, constituting itself and its milieu.<sup>14</sup> The degree of indeterminacy is precisely what distinguishes between a physical and a vital individual, since it determines the amount of heterogeneity that an individuation can both *interiorise* and *exteriorise*, implicate and explicate. The field of this complicating (and compatibilising) action is the limit, no longer the material boundary of an individual, but that which produces the individual itself.<sup>15</sup> An individual is determined by the energetic and informational intensity that the limit complicates, since as Simondon claims, it is the energetic and informational speed in relation to the duration of the act or event to which this energy and information are relative that define divergent degrees of individuality.<sup>16</sup> In other words, the individual is the expression of the synaptic energetic and informational complications that it itself as a limit is capable of. The membranous limit, what Simondon calls the heterogeneously continuous, will also eventually determine whether individuation remains physical – and therefore, self-referential – or vital: able to complicate matter and energy in a manner that introduces new information that can potentially be transduced.<sup>17</sup> Crucially, the membrane of a vital individual is selective, since it establishes such a transductive relation between interiorities and exteriorities, going from an absolute interiority to an absolute exteriority through different gradations of relative interiorities and exteriorities.<sup>18</sup>

It is at this point that Simondon's radical approach to a life beyond the animate appears. The whole mass of 'living' matter in the interior space is *actively*

present to the exterior world at the limit of the 'living' being, since all the products of past individuation are expressed immediately and without any distance whatsoever. Belonging to the interior milieu does not signify 'being inside' in the Euclidean sense, but being on the interior side of the limit without any delay in functional efficacy, without isolation, without inertia.<sup>19</sup> The vital individual does not interiorise by simply assimilating; it rather condenses and expresses everything that has been elaborated in its individuation: there is a particular topology and chronology in vital individuation, distinct from both Euclidean space and metric time.<sup>20</sup> However, and this is where Simondon can be further problematised, there is perhaps a single term that brings together space and time in a radically non-Euclidean manner: experience. Experience is the only thing that survives any reductionist abstraction, since it eliminates any distinction between space and time. Therefore, and for the remainder of this short text, I propose that we understand interiority and exteriority as purely experiential terms. Experience that has informed the vital individual belongs within the interior of the selective polarised membrane, in the condensed past; experience that can be informative belongs to the milieu of exteriority and it can come forth, potentially be assimilated, breach, harm or amplify the metastable living system: it belongs to the future. Interiorised experience and exteriorised futural experience confront each other at the polarised limit, producing the present of the living being, formed by both the synaptic passages and obstructions between past information and information yet to come. Put succinctly, the exterior is exterior, and the interior is interior relative to this mutual activity of presence;<sup>21</sup> in experiencing, time and space both as interiority and exteriority are produced.

When a predator hunts its prey, when a child eats an apple, when an author types on a keyboard, when the moon rotates around the earth, a heterogeneously continuous experience that now constitutes an all-encompassing membrane is produced: predator-prey, child-apple, fingers-keyboard, earth-moon, all these are relative interiorities and exteriorities that introduce novel metastable vital individuals as *being-in-relation*. The predator-prey is a living system, composed of two vital individuals that in the experiential action of their heterogeneous presents, simultaneously try to resist or provoke the reversal of their respective experiential interiority and exteriority; the moon-rotating-around-the-earth is a living metastable system composed of two physical individuals that similarly try to resist or provoke the reversal of their respective experiential interiority and exteriority, each from the disparate present of its heterogeneous activity. In other words, if being-in-relation is the simplest definition of a vital individual, then life is not merely the result of relationality but rather life *is* relationality; and, counterintuitive as it may seem, if the simplest definition of architecture could be



that of introducing new manners in which matter and energy can relate by allowing distinct presents to seduce one another – a window in a wall, a staircase on a floor, a division where there was none – then architecture not only produces, sustains or opposes the informational potential for novel vital individuations. Architecture, and this should not come as a surprise, is very much alive itself.

## Notes

- 1 Gilbert Simondon, *Individuation in Light of Notions of Form and Information*, trans. Taylor Adkins (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 2020), 8.
- 2 *Ibid.*, 163.
- 3 *Ibid.*, 267.
- 4 *Ibid.*, 71.
- 5 *Ibid.*, 235.
- 6 *Ibid.*, 160.
- 7 *Ibid.*, 11.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 15.
- 9 *Ibid.*, 363.
- 10 *Ibid.*, 237.
- 11 *Ibid.*, 50.
- 12 *Ibid.*, 80.
- 13 *Ibid.*, 84.
- 14 *Ibid.*, 88.
- 15 *Ibid.*, 132.
- 16 *Ibid.*, 211.
- 17 *Ibid.*, 225.
- 18 *Ibid.*, 252.
- 19 *Ibid.*, 254.
- 20 *Ibid.*
- 21 *Ibid.*

Noesis should not be mistakenly identified with cognition. It is essential to steer clear of conflating cognition with re-cognition, which involves a stagnant affirmation of sameness or a repetitive process lacking in heterogeneity. In contrast, noetics shares a common root with noema, translating literally as 'meaning' or, in a broader sense, as 'sense.' However, it is important to note that sense is not pre-existing; its production is inherently embodied, embedded, enactive, extended, and affective (4EA). The transdisciplinary volume 'Noetics without a Mind' (NWM) expands on the 4EA approach of noesis by introducing a crucial technological dimension.

A NWM perspective on generalised noetics delves into sense-making processes shaped by the organisation of bodies, assemblages, and material environments. This includes the involvement of more-than-human entities and technical objects, onto which thought, memory, and desires are increasingly offloaded. The individuation processes, both psychic (personal) and social (collective), are intricately linked with technical evolution. By incorporating the concept of technicity, NWM posits a reciprocal relationship in the individuation of humans, technology, and their affective surroundings. The simultaneous process of transindividuation nurtures an ecological understanding that transcends a purely logo-centric or inter-individual perspective. This evolution, occurring 'by means other than life,' prompts speculations on non-apodictic pedagogies, emphasising sensibility and its potential for significant pre-individual affective amplifications. The volume thus explores both a knowledge of the sensible and a sensible form of knowledge.

NWM provides a platform for thinkers who boldly traverse disciplinary boundaries, encompassing a diverse range of fields. These include, but are not limited to, affect and affordance theories, architecture, art and cultural studies, philosophy and philosophy of technology, (digital) media studies, feminist theories, film theory, social sciences, and literature.



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