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Life on a Leaf: A House and Its Contexts

”Art objects are characteristically 'difficult'. They are difficult to make, difficult to 'think', difficult to transact. They fascinate, compel and entrap, as well as delight the spectator. Their peculiarity, intransigence, and oddness is a key factor in their efficacy as social instruments.”(1)

Jan-Erik Andersson opens his presentation of the project *Life on a Leaf* on his internet homepage with the following question: ”Have you ever wondered why among all these millions of box shaped buildings, you will never see a house shaped like a shoe, a flower or a leaf?”

Well, who has? But perhaps we should start from the question, Why should there be houses shaped like shoes, flowers, or leaves in the first place? Andersson gives his own answer with the *Life on a Leaf* project which forms the main part of his doctoral thesis at the Academy of Fine Arts in Helsinki (2), and I will get back to it in a moment. I will first ponder upon the background: What sort of factors and processes influence, perhaps even determine, the shapes of houses we see in our surroundings?

Houses make up the most substantial part of the human-made artefactual world in which we live. This is such a simple fact that it is easily forgotten. We all have lived in one house or another throughout our lives. On the other hand, none of us was asked what sort of a house we were put into at birth. Even later in life, the range of choices in this regard has been, for most of us, quite limited. Consequently, it is hard not to take the actually existing houses we are surrounded with for granted. But this, exactly, is what Jan-Erik Andersson and his collaborator Erkki Pitkäranta advise us not to do. *Life on a Leaf*, the project for a private house that the duo Andersson and Pitkäranta have been working on for a decade or so and that will be completed in the city of Turku in the summer of 2009, is a tangible invitation to give a second thought to the house.

Jan-Erik Andersson, sculptor and performance artist, and Erkki Pitkäranta, architect, started to collaborate in the mid-1990s in a project of designing new headquarters for the cleaning company SOL; interior designer Jari Inkinen was the third member of the team. The director of SOL, Liisa Joronen, wanted to create a new type of head quarter office for the company. The office was meant to be a part of a complex hosting various types of cultural activities. She had bought a six storey school building located in Töölö, a residential neighbourhood not far from downtown Helsinki. The project was called *SOL World*. The plan in the first stage was to rebuild the interior of four of the floors as office space and space for SOL's collection of naivistic art, and later on to redesign the two lowest floors to offer space for various kinds of cultural events. To create a coherent whole, the designer team composed a fairy tale about what

elements of nature one might come across when climbing from the surface of Earth toward the sky; the protagonist of the tale is a small bird that has fallen on the ground but finds its way back to the nest. Each of the four floors was designed following a particular guiding image, from the ground floor upwards, respectively: ”water and ice”, ”fields and meadows”, ”mountain tops, tree tops” and ”sky, space, clouds”.

The project *SOL World* never happened. What remains as the result of half-a-year's work by the designer team is a scale model of the four floors. (3) The plan met strong opposition within the top levels of the city administration. The officials made use of a formality: a special permission is required for changing the function of a building from a school to a mixed purpose office and cultural centre. The permit was refused on the grounds that the antiquity department of the city of Helsinki gave a statement demanding that the interior of the school building be preserved as cultural heritage. But in reality, the decision was not so innocent as it seems. A group of influential modernist architects were strongly opposed to the project and were actively lobbying against it. One of them, for instance, tried to persuade the neighbourhood association of Töölö not to support the plan – but failed. Ultimately, however, the opponents of the project won.(4)

So, in fact, the story of *SOL World* gives rise to a question which is a preliminary to the question Andersson asks concerning his project *Life on a Leaf*, namely: ”Have you ever wondered why all the thousands of offices each one of us visits in the course of our lives look so anonymous, dull, sterile and oppressive?”

Spaces

The whole title of Andersson's doctoral thesis is *Life on a Leaf. My House as an Iconic Space*. The theoretical text of the thesis consists of two parts. In the first one Andersson reflects upon the role of imagination and ornaments in the history of architecture, drawing particularly upon the tradition of Art Noveau but also its precursors such as the Arts and Crafts movement. The second part describes in detail the plan for his house *Life on a Leaf* as well as the earlier project *SOL World*. In the beginning of the first chapter of the theoretical text, Andersson presents a citation from Gaston Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space*: ”(T)he house is one of the greatest powers of integration for the thoughts, memories and dreams of mankind. The binding principle in this integration is the daydream.”

Designing and constructing office interiors and houses does not happen in a void. Quite to the contrary, such activities are strongly constrained by a whole range of factors. Taken together, the constraints can be metaphorically viewed as shaping a 'possibility space' for designing and constructing. In the beginning, any novel construction project, whether *SOL World* or *Life on a Leaf*, is an idea gradually taking shape.

Factors influencing the realization of the idea are variables that give shape to the possibility space. If an idea is not realistic at all, a corresponding possibility space does not exist. In the case of a potentially realistic project which comes across constraints and difficulties of various sorts, the spatial metaphor helps to identify the constraints and figure out how different constraints interact, that is, how they either reinforce one another or damp down one another's effect.

What factors shape the possibility space of constructing houses and designing office interiors? One set of constraints can be thought of as arising from practical concerns. On the one hand, boxes are easier to construct than houses with more complicated shapes. On the other hand, box-shaped houses are more conveniently filled with the type of furniture we westerners are accustomed to filling our houses with. However, with a closer thought, these practical concerns are tied to a specific cultural context. There are plenty of houses in the world which do not resemble boxes and which people living in them find functional. (5) Furthermore, new construction materials are taken into use all the time, and the possibilities of giving a house some other shape than a regular box are getting more and more realistic.

A more important set of constraints is due to the historical heritage of architecture. Architecture is tied to a canon that cannot be violated. This is what ultimately sealed the fate of *SOL World*. An office complex designed following the lead of a fairy tale that was written for that particular purpose breaks against some powerful codes. The type of *Gesamtkunstwerk* Andersson and the rest of the team wanted to create gave rise to complete rejection. Now, this sort of a reaction does not really make sense purely in itself. One can surmise that there was something else at the background, perhaps something like a principle of "functional purity" that the opponents felt was threatened by the project.

The functionalism of 20th century western architecture represented a break away from older architectural canons. In this context, however, the existence of a canon and the political dynamics of guarding the canon are more important than what the canon consists of. The fact that there are codes that can be broken is what has to be hidden.

A brief examination of the western architectural canon is fruitful at this point. I take up two important historical stages, using the guidance of historian of architecture Joseph Rykwert. First, the origins. (6) The term *kanōn* was adopted in classical Greece in the fifth century BC or thereabouts. It got a fixed meaning with reference to a rule or standard of excellence in the visual arts and architecture. The ancestry of the term is hoary, but at the background are meanings such as a measuring rod, a mason's level, or the beam of a balance. The proportions of the human body came to define a basic standard of the *kanōn* for the arts; sculptor Polykleitos made a particularly famous model of the canonical proportions of the human body.

The metaphoric similitude between proportions of the building and the human body played a central role in Greek architecture. According to Rykwert, the proportions of the body formed the original model for the Greek 'Orders', that is, the original shapes of the Dorian and Ionian columns. Rykwert's interpretation is grounded in his reading of Vitruvius, Roman architect whose extensive treatise *De architectura* is the only comprehensive classical text on architecture that has survived. Vitruvius composed the treatise sometime around 25 BC and dedicated it to Augustus, the first Roman emperor. Vitruvius was not particularly successful as a practicing architect. His importance lies in the written corpus in which he summarized the Greek legacy as far as it was known to the Romans of his era. But most importantly, Vitruvius gave an authoritative expression to the close intertwining of imperial power with architecture as its external facade. Cultural historian Indra Kagis McEwen has analyzed this part of the Vitruvian legacy; she concludes, "To encase imperium in a stony skin as permanent and impermeable as that of the cuirassed statue of Augustus from Prima Porta: that, ultimately, is the point of assembling and ordering the knowledge Vitruvius calls *architectura* into a complete *corpus*. *De architectura*, the perfect body of empire."(7)

The Greco-Roman model dominated western architecture well into the times of modernization and urbanization from the 18th century on. The Greek Orders, for instance, have a universal presence where-ever western civilization (as it is called) has consolidated the grip of its institutions over extensive lands, as testified by the façades of bank and post offices all across the United States and Australia, or railway stations in Stalin's Soviet Union. One would be hard put to find in the central parts of any western city a view in which the Orders do not have a presence.

The pathway from the temples of Augustan Rome to the western city façade has not been straight, however. Another important stage in the consolidation of the architectural canon was the origin of modern architecture in the 18th century. (8) France occupies a central position in Rykwert's story. It is impossible to summarize his rich arguments in this context, but I take up one point which has echoes in the controversies aroused by the interventions of the duo Andersson & Pitkäranta into the contemporary architectural scene. Physician and architect Claude Perrault (1613-88) redefined the terms of discussion by formulating an argument that there are two beauties in architecture: The first is a positive, an *a priori* beauty which is inherent in harmonious proportions and is evident to everyone. This view of Perrault was very much inspired by the ancients: among other achievements, he "made Vitruvius speak French" through a translation of *De architectura* in the 1670s. On the other hand, as Rykwert writes, "the secondary – or arbitraty – beauty in architecture is produced and appreciated by the irrational faculty of taste, compounded by the most corruptible parts of human nature." The task of the architect, therefore, was to cultivate taste, guide it against corruptibility and waywardness.

A similar dichotomy is detectable behind the controversies of today. At stake is what is harmonious *a priori* and what, in contrast, is "irrational" and stems from "corruptible parts of human nature" (although few of the discussants would use quite these phrases). Where the boundary between primary and secondary beauty is drawn, and who does the drawing, has obviously an important effect on the shape of the possibility space of designing houses.

The experience of *SOL World* had a formative influence on the work of Andersson and Pitkäranta. As a follow-up, they established an artist–architect team called *Rosegarden Art & Architecture* which has become well known for its imaginative house and interior designs. Their guiding principle is to take into account the needs of the customers as comprehensively as possible. One of the first of Rosegarden's projects was the cowshed *Kumina* ("cumin") designed for an ecological dairy farm (completed in 1997). The duo describes the project as follows: (9) "The interior of the house is designed so as to please the cows. We talked with the farmers and they gave a lot of detailed information of how the cows live, their habits and what they like. Since they like to be in the forest, we made the supporting construction of a bunch of old telephone poles. ... The cows can also have eye contact with each other, as well as with the calves, who are placed inside an oval fence in the centre of the building, around which the cows stand. And if they look up, they can see the stars at night, through a transparent plastic cover made of recycled greenhouse plastic in a part of the roof."

Another project which Andersson takes up in his theoretical text as a preparatory project for *Life on a Leaf* is the design for an extension building of a gardening high-school; the building was called *Gerbera* (completed in 1998). The design utilizes the shape of *Gerbera* flower as its model. The central part of the "flower" serves as a winter garden and a space for leisure time, and the "petals", arranged radially around the central space, host classrooms and the teachers' common room.

Ornaments have a central role in the interiors designed by *Rosegarden*. In this, the duo builds upon Andersson's previous work as a sculptor. They deliberately take a stand in favour of "secondary values" of architecture, to once more refer to the dichotomy articulated by Claude Perrault. The ouvre of *Rosegarden* is thus an intervention into the field of evaluating architectural forms. Natural forms, particularly but not exclusively shapes of plants provide important inspiration for the ornamental patterns they use. The guiding ideas often derive from wishes of the customers. For instance, the classrooms of *Gerbera* were given their individual character by ornamental patterns depicting different tree species, according to a wish of the teachers of the school.

Worlds

Nothing less is at issue with the project *Life on a Leaf* than the creation of a new world. Houses not only provide space for inhabitants, they also create inhabitants. This is what Gaston Bachelard hinted at with the word "daydream" in the sentence Andersson cites in his theoretical text. So, against this background we are ready to formulate Andersson's answer to why there should be houses of the most imaginative shapes: Let people have a choice as to what kind of worlds they want their houses to give rise to.

On his homepage, Andersson describes the overall style of *Life on a Leaf* as follows: "The aesthetics of the house is departing from the Art Noveau concept about the house as a shelter for an individual soul, opposed to the modernist concept of the house as a machine for living."

"A machine for living" is a powerful formulation of what Andersson stands in opposition to. In the real world, machines never are solely "for" something, as if neutral tools that can be exploited at will. Machines shape people – whoever doubts this had better watch Chaplin's *Modern Times* one more time. A house designed as a machine for living gives shape to people who are obedient to the logic of the machine. In his ethos of opposing such a vision, Andersson gets backing from Malvina Reynold's song *Little Boxes* (10) which begins with the following verse:

Little boxes on the hillside,

Little boxes made of ticky tacky,

Little boxes on the hillside,

Little boxes all the same.

There's a green one and a pink one

And a blue one and a yellow one,

And they're all made out of ticky tacky

And they all look just the same.

Houses as "machines for living" support the maintenance of social order. A house is a 'microcosm.' This is an old dictum among anthropologists. French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, who began his career as a social anthropologist in Algeria, for instance, described the Kabyl house as follows: "The house, a microcosm organized by the same oppositions and homologies that order the universe, stands in a relation of homology to the rest of the universe."(11) There is certainly a long distance from the Kabyl house to the "little boxes on the hillside" in California Malvina Reynold sang about, but the principle is not that different. In the modern world, neutral boxes support a neutralized, consumerist mentality.

Quite a few of Rosegarden's projects are also social experiments in the same sense that, for instance, social psychologist Stanley Milgram made experiments: Perform something totally unexpected and observe how people respond. (12) Both *SOL World* and *Life on a Leaf* can be viewed as social experiments. Architects did not pass the test particularly well in either case: the story of *Sol World* is familiar by now, and as to *Life on a Leaf*, one of the original supervisors of Andersson's doctoral project at the Academy of Fine Arts was an architect who, however, resigned after having acquainted himself with the project, on the grounds that architecture is not about "living in a picture". (13)

Primarily, however, the social experiments of *SOL World* and *Life on a Leaf* put bureaucracies to test. The city of Helsinki failed the test, but the city of Turku adopted a different posture. As Andersson tells in his diary, administrators of Turku concluded that the project is important for the city and gave city officials the task of finding a suitable site for the building. The officials succeeded remarkably well: the house is located close to the harbour of the city, opposite to Turku Castle (14) across the river Aurajoki which flows through the city. The site has interesting historical connections: among other things, Per Kalm's botanical gardens were situated in the vicinity in the 18th century. (15)

As a performance artist, Andersson has made social interventions which resemble Milgram's "experiments". In his *Teoriboken, Del 2* he tells about his long-term fascination with the shapes of tables. In his art projects, he has made experiments with different kinds of tables: through its shape and size, a table modifies the "possiblity space" of social interactions among people who sit around it. Andersson wants to add another, sculptural dimension to a table as a functional artefact. His functionalism is ingrained in a much more ambitious understanding of "function" than is ordinarily the case. Functionalism in its accustomed guise is oblivious to the social context in which a particular "function" is enacted; instead, it is assumed that "functions" have an *a priori* essence. No wonder that such purified, contex-free functionalism found a soul mate in the early 20th century positivism. (16)

Nature has had a formative role for the project *Life on a Leaf* all along. In his *Teoriboken, Del 1* Andersson ponders upon the relationship between the interior of a house and nature outside. He rejects the model offered by a paradigmatic modernist house such as Mies van der Rohe's *Farnsworth House*, in which nature is an outsider, visible through the large glass walls. Instead, he wants to bring similes of natural elements inside the house, in the shape of wall supports resembling tree trunks, and ornaments using natural forms. The windows of *Life on a Leaf* all have different shapes; there is a "dropwindow", "heartwindow", "leafwindow", "lipwindow" and "Melnikov-window" (the last one modeled after the windows of the house of architect Konstantin Melnikov in Moscow).

Play is another element that has had a formative role for *Life on a Leaf*. As usual, Andersson has written a set of stories that offer background for various features of the project. For instance, the location of the

house is backed by a story about the Swedish King Eric XIV and his Finnish wife of humble origin, Kaarina Maununtytär who was the Queen of Sweden for a short while before her husband was dethroned. Eric was kept as a prisoner in Turku Castle in the early 1570s while Kaarina was living with their children in a cottage on the other side of the river. In Andersson's story, Eric is dreaming about his wife in the room where he is kept in the tower of the castle, and he kisses the glass window facing the river. A leaf attached on the other side of the window gets loose and is flown by wind across the river, and the leaf lands on a small meadow close to the shoreline, surrounded by woods and cliffs.

The significance allocated to imagination and play in Andersson's projects resonates with how Joseph Rykwert praises the necessity of play in the constitution of human culture, including architecture. Rykwert writes about his interest in the architecture of classical Greek as follows: "The reader may have noticed that I have not considered aesthetic issues here in any case, because my concern is not primarily with *aisthēsis* – the way things are seen and perceived – but with p*oiēsis*, the way they are made."(17) This might be taken as a motto for the project *Life on a Leaf*.

Agency

"Difficult to make, difficult to think, difficult to transact" – these attributes of art objects, formulated by anthropologist Alfred Gell (see the epigram) seem apt for describing *Life on a Leaf* as a *Gesamtkunstwerk*.

Houses are usually not regarded as works of art. This is a misperception that is largely due to Kantian aesthetics which drew a sharp distinction between works of art which are devoid of function and artefacts which serve a useful function. Such a distinction excludes houses at the outset: it is impossible to think of a house that is devoid of practical aims. But as Alfred Gell reminds us, this distinction would exclude from the realm of the arts basically everything other cultures than the modern West have produced. This, of course, is a grave misperception. Aesthetics as a philosophical worry about the essence of beauty is a modern invention, but all human cultures have always appreciated their own types of artefacts as works of art. (18)

Whether houses are artworks or not, they have had a central role in the constitution of human societies. Anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss coined the term 'house societies' to describe the role of the house in keeping together the social fabric of human cultures. His primary data came from the Northwest Coast Indian cultures of North America, but he mentioned the feudal noble house of Europe, the *io* house of Japan, and the house institutions of the cultures of island southeast Asia as analogues. (19) According to the argument of Lévi-Strauss, the house represented historically a transition from kin systems to systems of property in the development of complex societies. This argument is not so "developmentalist" as it may

provided a jumping-off point ”towards a more holistic anthropology of architecture which might take its theoretical place alongside the anthropology of the body.”

The idea has other implications which carry it even further toward the present riddles of what a house is. Roxana Waterson argues that ”the 'house' concept is open to ideological exploitation in a great range of social formations.” The role of the house opened up the possiblity of ”appropriation of cosmology by the ruling elite, as they attempted to make their own houses a more and more elaborate microcosm.” (20)

These commentaries on Lévi-Strauss's ideas about the house have an uncanny echo with what Joseph Rykwert concludes about the Classical order in architecture, and this is not a mere coincidence. It is against such a background that the project *Life on a Leaf* inspires us to raise questions about the anthropology of art and house *in the current world*. A major point is that a house has agency, a house does things. Alfred Gell speaks about the agency of art works which arises through their effect on both the producers and the viewers. Works of art have agency because ”objectification in artefact form is how social agency manifests and realizes itself, via the proliferation of fragments of 'primary' intentional agents in their 'secondary' artefactual forms.” (21) Humans who make artefacts are 'primary' intentional agents, but the actual 'secondary' effects that the artefacts have later on are never completely under the control of the primary agents. This is particularly true of works of art which invite interpretation and response but are never amenable to being interpreted once and for all.

Furthermore, as Gell writes, ”artworks are never just singular entities, they are members of categories of artworks, and their significance is crucially affected by the relations which exist between them, as individuals, and other members of the same category of artworks, and the relationship that exists between this category and other categories of artworks within a stylistic whole – a culturally or historically specific art-production system.” (22)

Andersson's artist friends whom he invited to prepare ornaments and separate artworks in and around the house *Life on a Leaf* have had a crucial role in giving the final shape to the project. They include Shawn Decker, who participates with a sound installation inside the house; Trudi Entwist – an environmental artwork in the surroundings of the house; Frank Brümmel – the tiling of the pavement outside the house; Susanna Peijari – a footprint sculpture on a ceiling inside the house; Karin Andersen – a laminated image on the kitchen table; Pierre St-Jacques – a video work installed in a hole in the floor inside the house; Leah Oates – photographs fastened on structures inside the house; Amy Youngs & Ken Rinaldo – a lamp installation inside the house; Jan-Kenneth Weckman – a relief-image on the hearth of the house; Ismo Kajander – the frame of a sandpit shaped like a pea-pod on the yard; Yuichiro Nishizawa – an installation inside the house.

Getting together such a collective is a great achievement in its own right. Andersson's work, as individualistic as it may seem, is embedded in a strong social consciousness. There is a strong programmatic element in Jan-Erik Andersson's work: he makes a deliberate effort to widen the possibility space of designing houses. Supported by Erkki Pitkäranta, he wants to create cracks in the confines of established architecture as they have been defined by professional gate keepers. He wants *Life of a Leaf* to serve this purpose, among all the other purposes it is meant to serve.

Andersson ends the theoretical text of his thesis with the following thoughts: "(O)rnaments, art, and details are what gives a building its soul ... It is through developing this dimension further by one more step, not shying away from using figurative elements, sound, and fantasy or from developing cooperation between architects and artists that we can provide tools for creating living environments good for the future. An environment in which people live well is also an ecologically good environment."

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(1) Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency, An Anthropological Theory* (Oxford University Press, 1998), 23.

(2) Jan-Erik Andersson defended his thesis in October 2008. The thesis includes a substantial theoretical text (*Life on a Leaf, Teoriboken, Del 1 & 2*) and a diary in which Andersson has documented the stages of the project since its start in 1999 (*Life on a Leaf, Dagboken*); both are available on Andersson's homepage www.anderssonart.com/ (in Swedish; an English translation is under preparation).

(3) The model is permanently on show in SOL's current head quarters in Helsinki; pictures can be viewed on Andersson's homepage.

(4) Andersson tells the story of *SOL World* in his doctoral thesis.

(5) Paul Olivier's *Dwellings. The Vernacular House World Wide* (Phaidon, 2003) presents a comprehensive overview.

(6) Joseph Rywert, *The Dancing Column. On Order in Architecture* (MIT Press, 1996).

(7) Indra Kagis McEwen, *Vitruvius. Writing the Body of Architecture* (MIT Press, 2003); the citation is on p. 298.

(8) Joseph Rykwert, *The First Moderns. The Architects of the Eighteenth Century*(MIT Press, 1980); the citation is on p. 468.

(9) On the homepage.

(10) Written in 1962. *Little Boxes* got a Finnish second cousin in 1967, in the guise of a cabaret song called *A Song of One Thousand One-Room Flats*, written by Marja-Leena Mikkola.

(11) Pierre Bourdieu, "The Kabyle House or the World Reversed"; an appendix to his *The Logic of Practice* (Polity Press, 1990).

(12) Stanley Milgram (1933-84) became famous (notoriously, as is sometimes thought) for his experiments on blind obedience conducted at the University of Yale in the early 1960s. He was also intensely interested in contemporary arts, and some of his "experiments" could actually be viewed as performances; such as: creating a crowd by standing at a street corner and pointing toward the sky at nothing at all; or, standing outside an art gallery applauding people as they pass by, thus inviting visitors to the gallery; and so on (for an accessible appreciation of Milgram's career, see Ian Parker: "Obedience", *Granta* 71 (2000), pp. 99-125.

(14) Turku Castle was founded around 1280 and rebuilt in stone in the early 14th century. It was the main administrative centre of Swedish rulers in the early modern era; the castle was modernized in renaissance-style during the reign of Gustavus Vasa in the 16th century.

(15) Per Kalm (1716-79) was a prominent Finnish student of Carl Linneus (later known as Carl von Linné). Kalm made a famous trip to North America (1748-51), bringing back many plant species that were successfully acclimatized.

(16) Historian of science Peter Galison analyzes the close intellectual ties between classical positivism and the utopian functionalism of the early 20th century in his article "Aufbau / Bauhaus: Logical Positivism and Architectural Modernism" (*Critical Inquiry*, 16(4), 709-752; 1990).

(17) *The Dancing Column*, p. 384.

(18) Alfred Gell, *The Art of Anthropology. Essays and Diagrams*, edited by Eric Hirsch (Berg, 1999).

(19) Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Way of the Masks* (The University of Washington Press, 1982). A useful collection elaborating upon the idea is *About the House. Lévi-Strauss and Beyond*, Janet Carsten & Stephen Hugh-Jones, eds. (Cambridge University Press, 1995).

(20) Roxana Waterson, "Houses and Hierarchies in Island Southeast Asia", in *About the House*; citations on p. 53 and p. 60.

(21) *Art and Agency*, p. 21.

(22) *Art and Agency*, p. 153.