The aggregator as a project. The case of BRUTHER

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About aggregators

The aggregator is one of the defining formats of the World Wide Web. A few lines of code automatically filter out the infinite flow of data that travels through an optical fiber cable at any given time, identifying certain packages of information that are visually transferred to the graphical interface of any internet user. In the first aggregators of the web, devoted to filtering news, the interface transferred headlines and brief extracts of content published in multiple media around specific markers. Whether "war," "economy" or "Christina Aguilera," the markers could be as variable as they were expansive, demonstrating this filtering format's capacity to absorb. These markers were the witnesses of a new form of *light* editing[1] that, rather than outlining the contents, sought to encourage constant updating of it. The aggregator's end goal was to introduce into the market of attention any new information package captured by the web, and to shift to the users the responsibility of assessing its relevance and deciding on its accessibility.[2] Thus, if Google, in its foundation, set out to organize and make available all the information in the world,[3] its first aggregator, Google News [Fig. 01], defined the operations that would serve to do this: the comparison of diverse sources, the repetition of terms, the inventory of headlines, the re-tagging of news and the subtraction of content.[4]

Despite being dressed in the casual and personalistic aesthetics of the blog format, the most visited dissemination platforms in the field of art and architecture, from *e-flux* to *Dezeen*, are aggregators. Their filter, built around a seemingly limited semantic field, also results in unlimited absorption of content: any work – reduced, synthesized and captured in images – can occupy the interface to feed their constant renovation.[5] A few lines of code recently written by Miro Roman bear witness to the totalizing will of these platforms [Fig. 02]: implemented in a tracking program, in just over an afternoon they identify and reproduce all the images published in *Archdaily* to date.[6] More than half a million, although the figure itself is not important – after all, it will be higher tomorrow. What *is* important is that these numbers reveal the system of substitutions that has turned the aggregator into a prime mediator of the vast reserves of digital information. In its domains, identification rises over selection, accumulation replaces hierarchy, and addition displaces composition. Just like a bubble, the aggregator does not propose a structure to the contents but a membrane in which divergent items of information maintain their uniqueness and remain in a state of constant exchange. None is more important than another, and they can all come together.[7]

According to art critic David Joselit, the aggregator is a product of a particular desire and the producer of a specific social, creative and perception form. The desire is to bring "different registers onto the same page, sentence, or space."[8] In other words, to combine different entities, on the assumption that they all hold the same value. The form produced is the multitude, as conceptualized by Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt in their *Empire*.[9] That is, a form of community based on the temporary interaction of different individuals, with dissimilar interests and originating from a variety of contexts, who are exposed to the same conditions or provocations. The essence of the multitude does not lie in the preserving of predetermined principles, but in the collective action against specific situations, which results in variable and dynamic organisms that feed on the energy that is generated when different entities occupy the same space. The multitude, like an aggregator, cannot tell the difference between unity and multiplicity. It is "an irreducible multiplicity; the unique social differences that constitute the multitude must always be expressed and should never be flattened into sameness, unity, identity, indifference."[10]

As a characteristic format of the contemporary media ecology, the aggregator transfers the essence of the multitude to different cultural forms; from social groups to dissemination platforms to artworks and architectural projects. All these forms express the two conditions that Joselit assigns to the aggregator: *asynchrony* and *the common*. The first lies in the necessary divergence of the chronology and genealogy – historical, economical, geographical, formal – of the aggregated entities. The aggregator does not seek to blur these differences, but to display them. As a result, the relationship among the parts is not synthetic and strives to preserve, and not overcome, conflict and contradiction. For its part, the common is the surface that facilitates the meeting of asynchronous entities; a platform that does not propose coherence, but temporal coexistence. It is for this reason that the forms that stem from the aggregator "seems always in danger of falling apart,"[11] since they are in a permanent state of variability.

This is the structural principle of the format. Generating the conditions of the common consequently turns into the creative action proposed by the aggregator.

The aggregator presents its own genealogy. First, it is heir to the mosaic form of Marshall McLuhan and, just like it, proposes the participation in process and the coexistence of different elements.[12] Unlike the mosaic, however, the geometric model of the aggregator does not foresee the fitting of the pieces, but allows variable margins, disjunctions and exchanges. This increases the dynamism of its forms, but also its entropy. The result is an aesthetic that is not based on stable principles, sections or declared categories, but on principles that vary according to the unique properties of the assembled elements. The visuality that stems from the aggregator is closer to the dynamic juxtaposition of windows in a web browser than to the coordinated grid of a journal.[13]

Secondly, the aggregator is a descendant of the atlas and, as such, remains in a state of projection of "new correspondences and analogies."[14] Like the atlas, the aggregator is boundless and generative, and proposes a framework to perception that invites problematizing, and not stabilizing, knowledge. In other words, the aggregator does not seek to exhaust a field of study, but to open several lines of interpretation to transform its materials into new intellectual proposals. However, unlike the atlas, the aggregator responds to its digital condition and, as a result, essentially depends on the intervention of the platforms that mediate the flows of information in the digital realm. This implies a certain distancing in the process of selecting the materials, the relationship of which is ultimately based on automated mechanisms of identification, synthesis and management.[15] In this scenario, the randomness of the encounters between the different materials increases by the same proportion that decreases the value assigned to its selection. Unlike its predecessors, the aggregator is irrelevant as an object and as an archive. Its relevance lies entirely in its ability to operate as a format that shapes creativity through the sustained renewal of references and imaginary materials.

The transfer of the aggregator's logics to the field of architecture is marked by the particularity of its geometric model and by its digital condition. Thus, while atlas and mosaic propose a design approach that strengthens the value of the selected references,[16] the aggregator's automation reduces the value of the found materials as much as it increases their editable condition. As a result, the relevance of the projects that stem from these logics shifts towards the specific actions that result from the spontaneous encounter of distinct references. As a design mechanism, the aggregator operates as a platform that does not fix the selected materials, but squeezes them in order to feed the creative process.

Three spatial platforms

On a grid of absent edges, which will later be identified as the spatial generatrix of Archizoom's infinite architectures, a field of architectural elements unfolds [Fig. 03]. Three dwellings from a Musgum village in Cameroon face the inhabited columns of Toyo Ito's Mediatheque in Sendai. Alongside them, several columns from the Farnsworth House by Mies van der Rohe meet a Dogon fireplace and one of the individual studios that define Paul Nelson's suspended house. A little further, in other quadrants of the grid, one of the Herculean columns of St. Peter's Basilica faces one of the metal arches that support

John Lautner's Chemosphere house. The connections drawn by the fragments scattered in this field of architectural references are first and foremost visual, and despite linking notably heterogeneous elements, or precisely for this reason, they create a space. Specifically, the space of a house that, as recognized by the authors of the drawing, protects the identity of Stéphanie Bru and Alexandre Theriot, or BRUTHER.[17]

The house stands on the pages of a recent issue of *Cartha* magazine, along with six other houses designed by six emerging offices that, together, build a kind of small narrative town.[18] Their design addresses the task of creating a domestic environment, or producing an identity,[19] from reference materials of personal value, and it is not difficult to discover in each of the houses the intuitions that support the design mechanisms and discursive approaches of each office. The conflation of Alison and Peter Smithson's House of the Future and Skara Brae, a Neolithic settlement dated the third millennium BC, reveals for Sam Jacob the hidden continuity of the most innovative British domesticity; the translucent palimpsest of five transparent houses of late modernism, designed by Philip Johnson, Mies, Paul Rudolph, Pierre Koenig and Charles Moore, anticipates the synthetic and iterative logics of MUOTO's work; the meticulous weaving of seven postmodern houses, including Toyo Ito's White U and Moore's own house, manifests the ability of recombination and ambiguity to produce new coherences in the work of Monadnock.

Unlike these designs, characterized by the resolution in different degrees of the encounters generated in the juxtaposition of heterogeneous drawings, the house designed by BRUTHER does not propose a direct contact to the references, which unfold without friction throughout the abstract grid. Nor does the house have limits: it is expansive, boundless, for it could grow in all directions. Moreover, the field could always accept new elements and, as a consequence, vary the spectrum of possible interferences among the fragments. Paradoxically, the radical isotropy of the grid is enough to sustain two confronting properties: on one hand, it allows the coexistence of remarkably different elements, while, on the other, it produces its equality, since they all demand the same attention, the same importance, the same hierarchy. The Miesean pillar, the enlarged column of the Mediatheque, even the primitive African chimney indiscriminately becomes the focus of a house that never seems to be complete. Because in reality, the house is not. It is not even a house; it is a "spatial gallery"[20] that regulates the identity of BRUTHER. A platform for the comparison of singular and differentiated materials, for the sustained production of interferences, unexpected encounters and, ultimately, for the mobilization of architectural imagination.

There are 104 elements in the house drawn by Bru and Theriot in the pages of *Cartha*. And there are 99 notes in the manifesto written by Bru and Theriot in the issue of the journal

2G dedicated to the French office. Just like in the analytical language of John Wilkins, a note can mean many things: "a sentence, a drawing, a poem, a list, a dialog, an article from a newspaper or magazine, a sketch, a visiting card, a collage, a definition, a cliché, a photograph, a text, a postcard, a scanned object"[21] In reality, a note can be anything that "makes sense;"[22] any fragment that generates thought, that produces meaning regardless of its origin or format. To do this, difference and uniqueness become essential traits in order to generate interferences and produce new intuitions, ephemeral links and fleeting connections among the fragments.[23] The contiguity of the notes leads to comparison and assemblage,[24] in such a way that the vernacular and the technological turn into "the technological vernacular," the building and the machine are fused in "the machine building," and difference and coexistence result in the "coexistence of differences."[25]

Bru and Theriot refer to these notes as "an infinitely versatile pocket-sized museum,"[26] a definition which questions its own association with a museum. In their manifesto, the notes do not respond to stable principles, nor to categories that refer to a higher order. Moreover, the collection varies, depending on which note is considered first; they all beg the same attention, the same hierarchy. There is no underlying theme in this gallery of memory; just the potential to generate curiosities and mobilize ideas that lies in the coexistence of the different materials. The notes propose an active and changing space: an architectural machine. According to the 20th note of the manifesto, "the architectural machine replaces caesurae by links"; "recreates a world within itself"; "reconciles different utilizations"; and "leaves options open."[27]

The architectural machine is an assemblage of singularities. As are the 99 notes; as is the New Generation Research Center in Caen, which in fact is similar to the house of 104 objects. It is the same project in a different format. The materials of this building are also "preformed":[28] Concrete panels, standardized steel supports, and curtain wall sections that come together from different places, but only after a mock-up confirms it is feasible for them to coexist, or possible for them to work together.[29] In the documents that present the building in multiple media, each and every one of the materials gets the same attention. Also, in the plan for the project [Fig. 03], which presents four different elements that come in contact to support a space stripped of predefined uses or activities. In the section [Fig. 04], a sixth element joins the machine; a sculpted dome that caps off the building. However, its identity competes with many other elements that have settled on this document; beams, horizontal bracings, people... all drawn with the same degree of definition; all asking for the same attention when they turn into the pixels of the photographs of the Research Center. [Fig. 05].

Here, again, contiguity results in comparison and assemblage. Although gravity forces an apparent agreement between the parts, there is no completion or totality in the

project, but the will to provide a platform that changes with each new object, occupant and programmatic designation. In the diagrams that represent possible functional configurations of the building [Fig. 06], all lines have the same intensity; it does not matter whether they represent a table, a precast concrete wall or the traces of a court. In reality, they all have the same importance on the stage that is activated at that moment. Because it is their singularity that produces a common action, a momentary coherence. For BRUTHER, architectural design consists in arranging the common surface where these singular entities, present and future, static or dynamic, may come into contact.

In the second-to-last note of their manifesto, Bru and Theriot compare their design approach with archival work. But not archiving as a task that seeks to exhaust a particular subject or field. This is an archive with "no subject, no problematic or corpus,"[30] a definition that questions its very essence as such. For the French duo, the act of collecting divergent notes, elements and materials is not a goal in itself, but the fire that fuels their design intuitions. As with the house that shelters their identity, their work does not respect the integrity of the collected elements. On the contrary, it automatically fragments, synthesizes and transforms them to maximize their potential associations. Because it is not the elements in themselves that are of interest, but the interferences they draw in order to nourish "a thought process that is established day by day."[31]

In this sense, and despite the fact that the terms that permeate their discourse denote analogical referents, Bru and Theriot treat information in a way that resonates with the logics and mechanisms of the aggregator, by which the collected content undergoes an outsourcing process that reduces its intrinsic value in order to increase its editable condition. These logics and mechanisms support a project that thrives on the spontaneous collection of references of diverse origin and of level importance that, in their temporal coexistence, feed the permanent generation of curiosities, intuitions and spatial scenarios.

1. Jeffrey Inaba, "Introduction," *Volume* 17 (October 2008): 2-3.

2. Geert Lovink, *Zero Comments: Blogging and Critical Internet Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2008), XXIII-XXV.

3. "Our mission is to organize the world's information and make it universally accessible and useful." See: "About," Google, accessed 18 February 2020, https://about.google/

4. Inaba, "Introduction," 3.

5. It is enough to compare the world's foundational mission of Google with Archdaily's to confirm the alignment of their projects. In their own words, "ArchDaily was founded in March 2008 with the one mission of delivering the most complete information to architects around the world; every week, every day, every hour, every moment: as soon as it is happening." "About," Archdaily, 27 June 2009, accessed 5 May 2019 through The Internet Archive, https://web.archive.org/web/20090627000010/http://www.archdaily.com:80/about

6. Miro Roman "Voids, Brands, Characters, and How to Deal with Lots," in *Ghosts of Transparency: Shadow casts and shadows cast out*, ed. Michael R. Doyle, Selena Savic and Vera Bühlmann (Basel: Birkhäuser, 2019), 63-79.

7. Alexandra Lange, "DIY Magazines," *Domus*, 961 (September 2012): 92-99.

8. David Joselit, "On Aggregators," *October* 146 (Fall 2013): 15-17.

9. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 43-66.

10. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (New York: Penguin Press, 2004), 105.

11. Joselit, "On Aggregators," 14.

12. According to McLuhan, the mosaic form, typical in the press and journals, is based on the parallel display of several pieces of content. See Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964), 203-16.

13. J. David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1999), 31.

14. Georges Didi-Huberman, *Atlas, Or the Anxious Gay Science* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2018), 5-7. Original Edition : Georges Didi-Huberman, *Atlas ou Le Gai Savoir Inquiet* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 2011).

15. Geert Lovink, *Networks Without a Cause: A Critique of Social Media* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011), 146-156.

16. It is worth highlighting some of the disciplinary references that are inscribed in the logics of horizontality, contradiction, instability and relational flexibility typical of these forms, such as Robert Venturi's foundational essay, the first exhibition of Alison and Peter Smithson, *Parallel of Life and Art*, or the work by Cedric Price related to the theory of cybernetic systems. The subsequent production of these architects would form part of the genealogy of the design mechanisms that we relate in the article to the aggregator. See: Robert Venturi, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1966); Alison Margaret Smithson and Peter Smithson, *The Charged Void: Architecture* (New York: Monacelli Press, 2001), 178-87; Gordon Pask, "The architectural relevance of cybernetics," *Architectural Design*, 6, vol. 7 (1969): 494-496.

17. BRUTHER, "How Are You?" *Cartha* 05 (2018): 20-25.

18. The issue is devoted to the idea of identity and its relation to references, and includes works by Made In, Sam Jacob, Monadnock, BRUTHER, Bureau Spectacular, Conen Sigl and Muoto. The digital version can be consulted in : http://www.carthamagazine.com/issue/3-5/

19. "Editorial," *Cartha* 05 (2018): 3-4.

20. BRUTHER, "How Are You?" 20.

21. BRUTHER, "99 notes," *2G* 76 (2017): 142

22. BRUTHER, "99 notes," 142

23. Sylvia Lavin, "Today We Collect Everything," *Perspecta* 48 (August 2015): 188.

24. Andrew Kovacs, "Archive of Affinities," *Perspecta* 48 (August 2015): 166-169.

25. BRUTHER, "99 notes," 143-144, 146.

26. BRUTHER, "99 notes," 142.

27. BRUTHER, "99 notes," 144.

28. BRUTHER, "New Generation Research Center, Caen," *2G* 76 (2017): 44.

29. BRUTHER, "Framing the Disorder," *2G* 76 (2017): 157-159.

30. BRUTHER, "99 notes," 152.

31. BRUTHER, "99 notes," 152.

Aggregator
BRUTHER
Multitude
Architectural design
Atlas