

An Agency of Endless Play: Alvar Aalto & Frederick Kiesler

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Stories

In the spring of 2012 the exhibition 'Picasso and Modern British Art', at Tate Gallery in London, offered the opportunity to relate seven British artists to the work of Picasso.¹ In bringing together, and showing off a remarkable number of Picassos from various collections in the UK, as well as intertwining their display with stories of how they impacted on local artists and collectors, the exhibition is impressive. However, it is no surprise that the exercise of hanging works by Picasso adjacent to those of the seven effected to diminish many, if not all, of them. But what becomes equally plain as the spectator walks through the galleries, is that the show's very structure – that is, the narrative that the curators offer us – skews the seven artists' relationship to Picasso, his work, and his aura. Through associating them with Picasso, the display implies a kind of parity. It also suggests that art comes about through emulation, rather than serendipitous and active agency; for instance, Picasso becomes central to the art of Francis Bacon, rather than someone whose work Bacon acknowledged and absorbed, but whose influence was arguably ultimately relatively inconsequential.

As I visited the Tate just prior to this conference 'Alvar Aalto now: New research initiatives', I was predisposed to relate my experiences to Alvar Aalto. Most immediately, Picasso's metamorphic figures reminded me that the biomorphic form we so often attribute to Aalto was already common currency by the late 1920s. But the exhibition also made me think about how we look at Aalto, how our narrative structures frame and potentially distort him, as well as what our motives are for looking at him. At the present moment, whichever emphases we place on it, Aalto's reputation seems assured. But what does a conception of 'Aalto studies' imply, what are we trying to recuperate through association with his work – and what have we actually learnt about how he succeeded in his art? In answering this we might do well to take note of the historian Marc Bloch's unfinished book *The Historian's Craft*:

...in the film which he [(sic) the historian] is examining, only the last picture remains quite clear. In order to reconstruct the faded features of the others, it behoves him first to unwind the spool in the opposite direction from that in which the pictures were taken.²

Over fifty years on, our accounts of Aalto still seem largely beholden to a desire to relate our story to the apparent phenomena of a "wholesome Nordic sanity" or 'Golden Age' of Finnish design and architecture that seems to question, but at the same time, extend the tenets of the Modern Movement.³ Notwithstanding the validity of these interpretations, this has engendered a subsequent sense of loss, a loss that we attempt to recover through metaphors that shuttle back and forth between that time of innocence and our own corrupted world. Over time, these metaphors have become the subject of their own history, an art historical model in which the art under discussion constantly represents or refers, but neither *is*, nor *is made*, and whose synchronic image masks a diachronic nature.

As I have observed, this is not to say these estimations are wrong or uninteresting – the past is a foreign country, and perhaps all places can only be ideas to those who don't live in them. But I do want to suggest that they are only a part of the story. The cultivation of Aalto and his milieu as discrete entities means that we lose the opportunity to ask how Aalto actually engaged with his world, and "the less hold we have on its commonality, on its resonance and echo with the many events and movements in the twentieth century".⁴ This issue of engagement seems to me even more vital now that, in the twenty-first century, we strive to move our developing human ecology on from what we can already look back on as the 'oil interval' of the twentieth-century; an endeavour which necessitates the reassertion of architecture as a *sui generis* discipline, which is to say a discourse and practice with a distinct social and ethical responsibility.

As part of this discipline, our theoretical and critical investigations may not only be satisfied with academic 'meaning-making' or recuperation undertaken after the event. Instead, I suggest we need to emulate the lightness of Aalto's own view of history; epitomised in his 1926 article *Between Doorstep and Living Room* in which he collapsed the chronologies and appearance of Fra Angelico's *Annunciation* (1445) and Le Corbusier's *Pavillon de l'Esprit Nouveau* (1925) to connect with their enduring ambience, or put another way, their wisdom (figs. 1a,b).⁵



Fig 1a: Fra Angelico, *Annunciation* (1445), as reproduced in Alvar Aalto, *Between Doorstep and Living Room*.

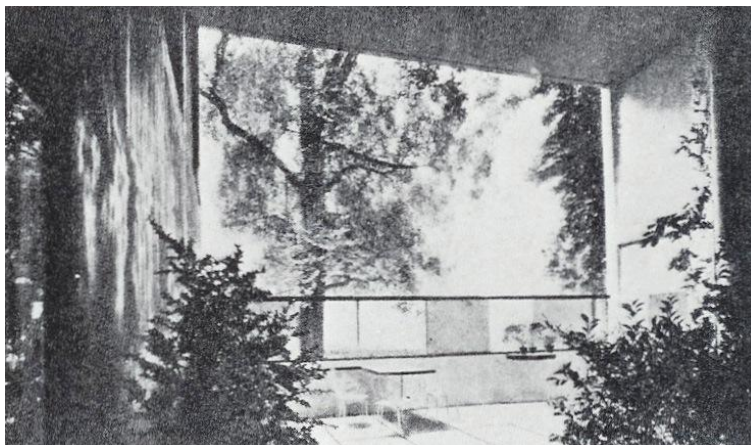


Fig 1b: Le Corbusier, *Pavillon de l'Esprit Nouveau* (1925), as reproduced in Alvar Aalto, *Between Doorstep and Living Room*.

This paper suggests that Aalto's work can be more than associational, and that we might add to his (and our) story through examining his milieu and agency. While wary of Aalto's oft-repeated entreaty to members of his atelier; "we don't need to be so dogmatic", the paper considers his architecture as performance, not as essence, and engages with his works as products of an embodied self, as well as specific material and artistic practices.⁶ The paper refers to 'Aalto' throughout, but it is used as a collective noun that includes his two partners, Aino and Elissa Aalto, as well as the members of his atelier. I also acknowledge much recent scholarship by others, some of who are at this researchers' conference.

Reminiscence

Since I briefly worked in the Aalto atelier in the 1980s, my encounters with Aalto's work has been rooted in my experience of the processes that shaped his work, and observations that have built up over years of using and visiting his architecture in rain and shine – and snow. For instance, one reason I am happy to describe his works in Seinäjoki in this paper is that I have changed trains here more times than I care to think about, and frequently browsed and read in the library (fig 2).⁷ Another reason I feel comfortable considering this environment is that the reminiscences of the architects who helped shape it have grounded my knowledge of it. The oral history of Aalto's times evidently becomes more and more difficult to obtain, but drawing on the memories of those involved in, or witness to, Aalto's work seems to me to be crucial in locating it the contingencies of its constituting environment. It was the wish to speak to the habits, skills and judgements of the Aalto atelier that provoked Vezio Nava and I to converse with members of the atelier; obtaining the reminiscences written down in *Alvar Aalto: the mark of the hand*, and which take us back to 1944 (fig 3).⁸



Fig 2: Seinäjoki Town Hall in 1985. Photo: Harry Charrington.

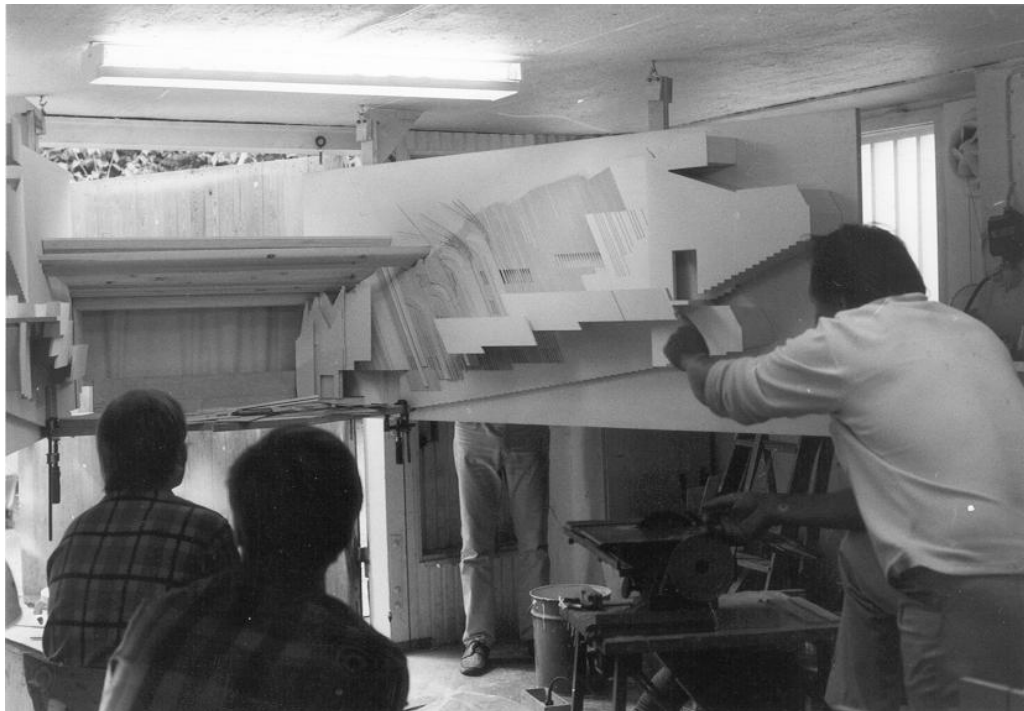


Fig 3: Kaarlo Leppänen and others, model room (garage), Tiilimäki Studio, 1960s (Vezio Nava).

Constellations

Reminiscence also locates Aalto in a vital story with actors, actions – and consequences. It is a paradox that while Aalto's work is venerated for "its sense of place", what constitutes that place is usually based on restricted knowledge and what Roger Connah neatly phrased as an "expediency of inexactitude"; Aalto may be grounded in place, but he is not grounded by place.⁹ An outcome of this is a readiness to connect Aalto to stories we already know – and that we know others know. So it is with Aalto's painting. Paul Cézanne is mentioned, but the friends and associates Aalto socialized and worked with, and who creditably influenced his work, such as the members of the *Septem* and *Marraskuu* groups of artists, as well as Aalto's mentor Sigurd Frosterus, are, by and large, absent. Furthermore, as Aalto is always placed at the centre of his story, others actors in that story recede, and consequently become less real; they exist as ciphers that denote Aalto's well-connected personage, rather than key artistic partners (figs. 4a, b). Yet, from Aalto's painting with Tyko Sallinen, to his designing a project for the Lincoln Center Opera House with Wallace Harrison in New York in October 1956, Aalto's career is full of concepts and designs engendered through the visceral spark and nuance of conversation.¹⁰



Fig 4a: Tyko Sallinen, *Paussunvuori*, 1908 (Private Collection)

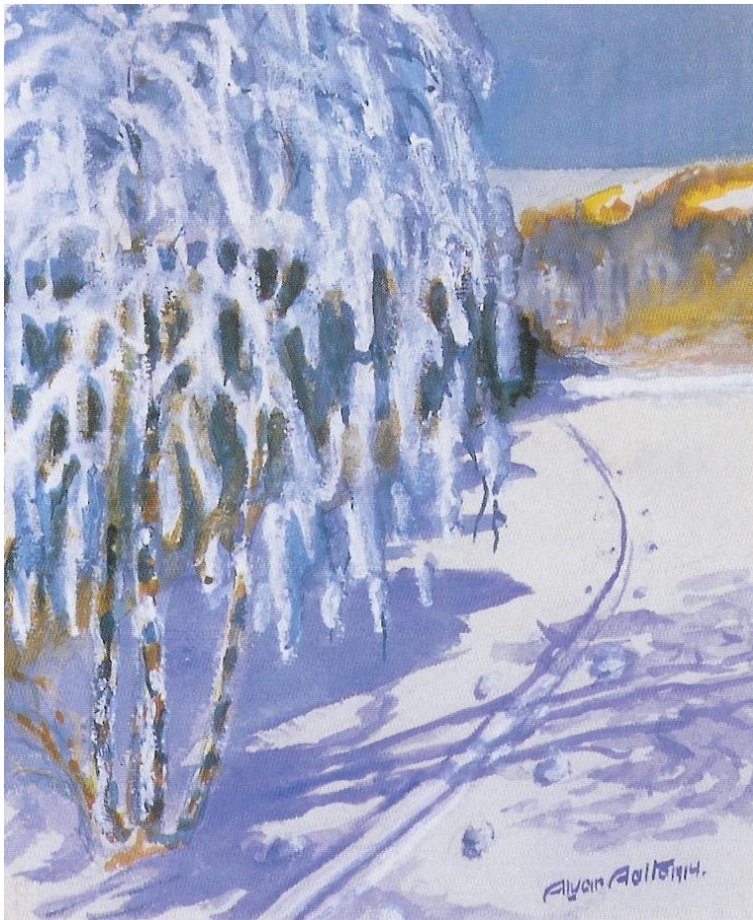


Fig 4b: Alvar Aalto, *Winter Landscape* 1914 (Private Collection)

A wider interest simply leads to a fuller story. Reinvesting Aalto in the milieu of his time in turn encourages happenstance, and the provocation of new connections and contingent knowledge underlying his sense of a 'contemporary mandate'. It therefore behoves us to research those geographical, historical and political locations that framed Aalto's artistic performance, and entrust him to those larger social 'constellations' that, while he may only have played a slight part in them, nevertheless helped shape and tested his work. Embedded in the precise milieu he worked in, we begin to see Aalto's practice as part of a continuous dialogue with particular people, disciplines and situations, and his agency as opportunist and optimistic in its readiness to deal with the world as found. In such an active story no-one is innocent, and Kristian Gullichsen rightly evaluates Aalto's capacity for acting as being a fundamental part of his greatness.¹¹ Indeed, I think it is reasonable to view Aalto's public face in terms of Denis Diderot's 'Paradox of Acting', in which an adopted gesture establishes a public character able to converse about what is at stake, and not become ensnared in issues of dogma or personality (fig. 5).¹²



Fig 5: Aino Aalto, *Piazza Vecchia, Bergamo Alta, 1947*. Photo: Alvar Aalto Museum.

Play

As colleagues such as Leonardo Mosso have recalled, it was those places in which people might locate their commonality that attracted Alvar Aalto's greatest interest. He was also determined that spaces in which socially beneficial patterns of behaviour are encouraged to happen, or are represented and thereby legitimized, could be manifest within the conditions of modernity.¹³ A resolution which he expressed through citing August Strindberg's 1902 dramatic poem *Trinity Sunday Night*:

Gold powder in an iron deposit

copper snake under a silver linden

this is the wood nymph's riddle.

*This is yours and mine.*¹⁴

What enabled him to achieve this aim, as well as to take advantage of the possibilities of modernism's compositional freedom, was his identification that, as with his comparison of Fra Angelico's *Annunciation* and Le Corbusier's *Pavillon de l'Esprit Nouveau* our relation to the environment is primarily empathetic, not visual. To quote Aldo Rossi, a colleague of one of Aalto's most important mentors, Ernesto Rogers, "In order to be significant, architecture must be forgotten, or must present only an image for reverence which subsequently becomes confounded with memories".¹⁵

In his most famous essay *Architettura e arte concreta* (Architecture and Concrete Art, 1947) Aalto reaffirms his friend Yrjö Hirn's conception of how art is a bodily, not a solely cognitive, experience in which form takes on the role of a gesture to which a socially expressive response is a fundamental impulse.¹⁶ Hirn added to this in his book *Barnlek* (1916), stating such an impulse is not solely a cerebral activity, but that it engages our entire body. He cites the instance of flying a kite, where the physical connection of holding the string extends the psychological fascination with flying into the physiological experience of the kite-flyer. By example, there is the horsehair fabric covering to many of Aalto's auditorium doors from Jyväskylä University onwards, where, combined with the heft of the doors themselves, the discreet surface sways our experience as we move from congregation to performance.¹⁷

By exploring the empathetic and intuitive response of design to the relationship of inhabitant and experience, and stressing the experience of spatial strata over the interplay of solid objects, Aalto's practice possessed a formal, if stylish, ambiguity that allowed him to engage with almost any circumstance. *Architettura e arte concreta* describes a process Aalto aptly calls "child-like" in which he was free to play with all causalities without *a priori* conceptions, assembling "a maze of possibilities" into a cohesive design (fig. 6). Play was that synthesising moment whereby design achieved an informed instinct; to use Hirn's terms again, Aalto's designing was as intuitive as the performance of a trapeze artist – where rationalising the act would be fatal.¹⁸



Fig 6: Alvar Aalto, Seinäjoki Church sketches 1951. Drawings Collection / Alvar Aalto Museum.

Play enabled Aalto to build well, and, at the same time, reflexively and prolifically. Like a child playing in an unfamiliar room, an idea is not thwarted by a perceived lack of something, but is brought into being through whatever is at hand; hence, despite his hubristic denial, Aalto's readiness to collaborate with others. Through availing itself of the play impulse, and the values and freedom of play itself, Aalto's agency permitted the contingencies and fortuities of circumstance to participate in what Hirn termed "the slow construction of the narrative"; for, as Kaarlo Leppänen later stated: "Strong architecture tolerates changes along the way, which is why it is strong in the first place".¹⁹

New York to Seinäjoki

In this praxis of action and reflection, Aalto synthesized a number of impressions, events and techniques. These included the mediations of distant sources in relation to his oft-stated belief in the wider value of art and the artist, afore-mentioned intimate associations and collaborations, and a considered and remarkably economical *techné* of sketching, painting, drawing and making, combined together with the iterative habits and judgments of his atelier.²⁰ To give a single instance from Aalto's biography, I will engage with the moment Aalto disembarked in New York for the first time in 1938, when Aalto sought out, among others, Frederick Kiesler (1890–1965), with whom he would maintain a relationship throughout the 1940s.²¹

At this time Kiesler was head of the Laboratory for Design-Correlation at Columbia University, however, previously he had been a member of de Stijl, and had worked for Adolf Loos in Vienna, as well as with Fernand Léger in Paris. It was presumably Aalto's friend Léger, who was in New York at this time, who introduced the two to each other. Kiesler criticised modernism as pseudo-functionalism undermined by its self-conscious aestheticism, which he believed rendered it incapable of responding to those very changing modes of modernity it claimed to be addressing (fig. 7).²² In its place he promoted an iterative design process. He made use of dynamic diagrams and images to re-examine standard tools and building techniques, as well as to examine the 'correalism' of concepts, objects, people and space that inform each other and evolve into constantly evolving types and responsive design solutions.

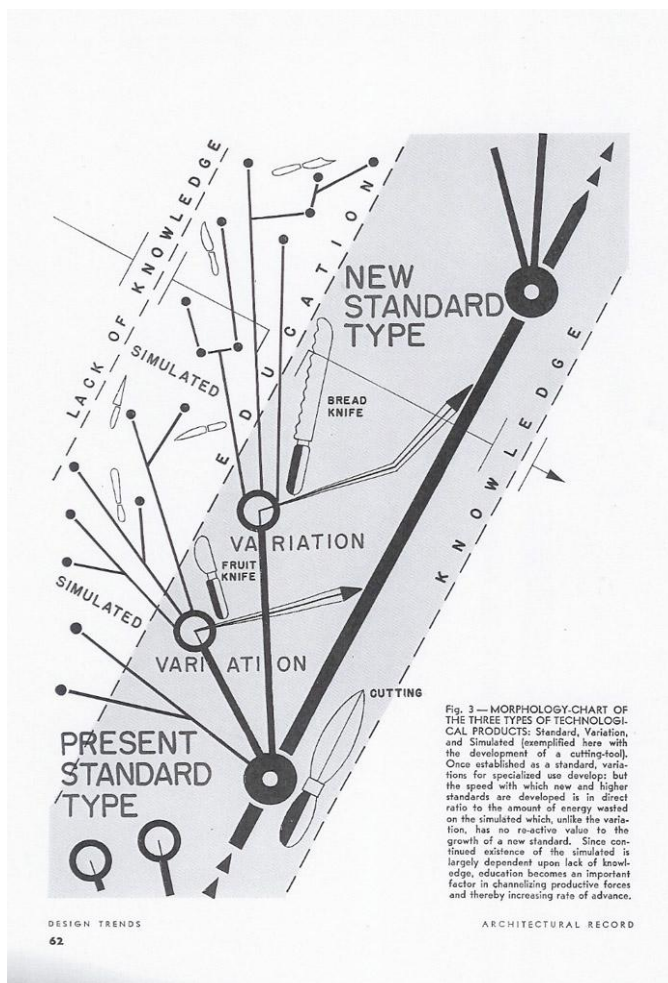


Fig 7: Frederick Kiesler, Morphology-Chart, Architectural Record, June 1939

Kiesler also sought an architecture of free-flowing spaces, structured as a continuum, as in his earlier 'City in Space' installation at the Paris Exposition of 1925. Informed by film-making and installations, this would ultimately culminate in his Endless House, exhibited at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in 1959–60, and which "embraces man and his environment as a globalizing system consisting of complex reciprocal relationships".²³ Like Aalto's friend László Moholy-Nagy's "force-fields" of constant fluctuation – a fragmentary space of form, illumination, colour and contour in which a cubist form made "subject-matter" a side issue – Kiesler created a kinetic space centred around the individual.

These conceptions and formal attributes are strikingly close to Aalto's "elastic standardization" and the distorted spatial continuities of many of Aalto's later works, including the Seinäjoki Library (1959–65).²⁴ Like Kiesler, Aalto's experimental approach evolved around playing with a single purposive intention; as Jaakko Suihkonen, one of the job architects for the library has noted, "Aalto never made alternative designs or sketches out of which the best would have been chosen. Instead he used the one design which was then developed".²⁵

Conclusion

Nevertheless, in illustrating Kiesler's and Aalto's complementarity, I do not seek to suggest any teleological link; as a product of exchange, while they are similar, they are not the same. To continue with the Seinäjoki Library, it is possible to see how it is Aalto's active synthesis of any number of factors, intentional and unintentional, that have brought it to its present state (fig. 8). Its vaulting equally refers to the Baroque as reconceived through the mediations of late 19th century empathy theorists, as to anything more modern. Its flowing spaces and deformed, illuminated surfaces embody the Aalto atelier's dramatic increase in large-scale model-making following its move to the Tiilimäki studio with its dedicated model-shop, as well as the input of the atelier's long-term collaboration with the engineer Lauri Mehto, and in this instance, Aarne Hollmén.

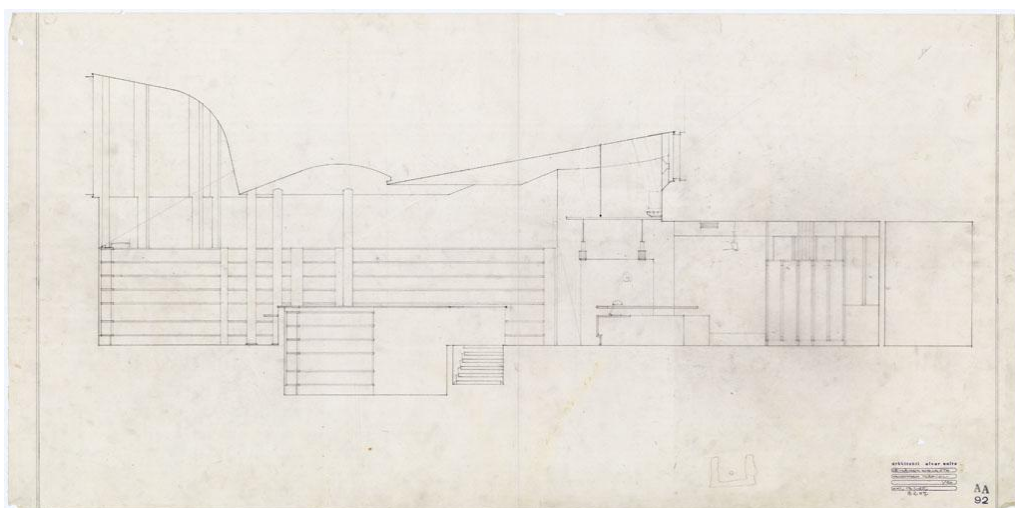


Fig 8: Alvar Aalto, 1:50 section, Seinäjoki Library, 1965. Drawings Collection / Alvar Aalto Museum.

The library's overall figuration stems from an idea about reading that began with the Viipuri Library (1928–35), and which was played out in numerous subsequent iterations of a public lending library, culminating in what Tide Huesser calls the *parti* of a 'table and flowers', first established at Seinäjoki and later recast in Rovaniemi and Oregon.²⁶ Its immaculately standardized and custom details came from the sustained application of only two job architects, Leif Englund and Jaakko Suihkonen, over a two-year period. While the great *louvres* of the reading room are an adaptation necessitated by a confusion among the architects about the building's orientation; and the concrete vault is painted and not plastered as originally specified because Aalto, on seeing the exquisite impression left by the beautifully wrought formwork crafted by its boat-builder carpenters, chose to expose it.²⁷ There is much other artistry as well.

In its playfulness, Aalto's practices can seem disarmingly straightforward, and in many ways it is. Like a child's play, it is at its best an open-ended process underpinned by continuous iteration, a practice in which ideas emerge through the process itself, and possessing a suggestiveness and sophistication that cannot be overestimated.²⁸ It is this that I believe we most critically need to reinvest Aalto's story with, a generous agency grounded in exposure, engagement, and experimentation; to quote Samuel Beckett: "Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better." Empathetic observation is not enough, if – in the manner of Aalto's appreciation of the work of Frank Lloyd Wright – we are not to cut things apart, but put them together.²⁹

¹ 'Picasso and Modern British Art', Tate Britain, London, 15 February – 15 July 2012.

² Marc Bloch: *The Historian's Craft*, trans. from French by Peter Putnam (Manchester UP, 1992) p. 38-9. The phrase "wealth of general studies" is taken from the conference theme.

³ Richard Weston: *Alvar Aalto* (Phaidon, London, 1995), p.227. Weston notes the phrase's first use by Philip Morton-Shand in his 1930 review of the Stockholm Exhibition.

For the construction of the 'Golden Age', see among others, Claudia & Eduard Neuenschwander's: *Alvar Aalto & Finnish Architecture* Architectural Press, London 1954; Nils-Erik Wickberg: *Suomen Rakennustaide* (Finnish Architecture) Otava, Helsinki 1959. Kyösti Ålander: *Suomen Teollisuuden Arkkitehtuuria* (Finnish Industrial Architecture) SAFA, Helsinki 1952.

⁴ Roger Connah: *Aaltomania* (Helsinki, 2000), p.19. The power of the myth of a 'Golden Age' also means that there is far less discussion of Aalto's work after its supposed end, and the more complex and ambiguous work of the late-1950s, 1960s and 1970s are seen as either a fall from grace, or simply ignored.

⁵ See Harry Charrington: 'A persuasive topology: Alvar Aalto and the ambience of history' in P. Emmons, J. Hendrix and J. Lomholt (eds). *The Cultural Role of Architecture*. Routledge, London 2012. Also Renja Suominen-Kokkonen: 'From Alberti to Aalto: the trinity of domicile, family and architecture' in *Songs of Ossian: festschrift in honour of professor Bo Ossian Lindberg* Taidehistoriallisia tutkimuksia 27, Helsinki 2003 pp.107–122.

⁶ See Harry Charrington & Vezio Nava (eds): *Alvar Aalto: the mark of the hand*, 'Conversation 11, Eric Adlercreutz', Rakennustieto, Helsinki 2011, pp.230–41.

⁷ For an extended study of the Seinäjoki Centre see Harry Charrington: *The Makings of a Surrounding World, the Public Spaces of the Aalto atelier* unpublished PhD, London School of Economics, 2008.

Alvar Aalto once described Seinäjoki as "One of the most despised railway junctions in our country" Alvar Aalto: 'The International Status of Finnish Art' (1962), reproduced in Göran Schildt, ed. (1997): *Alvar Aalto, In his Own Words* Otava, Helsinki 1997, p.279.

⁸ Harry Charrington & Vezio Nava (eds): *Alvar Aalto: the mark of the hand*. It is a particular shame that no one spoke to Georg (Henrik) von Wright (1916–2003) about his relationship with Aalto.

⁹ Roger Connah: *Aaltomania*, p.13. See also Thomas Kaufmann: *Towards a geography of Art* cited in Eeva-Liisa Pelkonen: *Alvar Aalto: Architecture, Modernity, and Geopolitics* Yale UP, 2009 p.3.

¹⁰ A design that would be a model for the Essen Opera House (1959-88) and the Finlandia Hall (1962-70).

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- ¹¹ 'Conversation 6, Kristian Gullichsen and Mauno Kitunen' in Harry Charrington & Vezio Nava (eds): *Alvar Aalto: the mark of the hand*, pp. 162–3.
- ¹² See Richard Sennett: *The Fall of Public Man* (London, 1986) pp. 64–122.
- ¹³ See Leonardo Mosso: 'Alvar Aallon työn ymmärtäminen tänään / Present-day understanding of Alvar Aalto's work', *Tiili* 1/1973 pp.24–34. This interest developed, particularly through the mediations of Ernesto Rogers into a conception analogous to what Henri Lefebvre would later call "social space". See Harry Charrington: 'Coordinating method and art: Alvar Aalto at play' in *Architectural History, Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* Vol 54, 2011, pp. 309–345.
- ¹⁴ August Strindberg: *Trefaldighetsnatten*, quoted in Alvar Aalto, 'Art and Technology' in *Alvar Aalto In His Own Words*, p.174:
Guldpudra vid järnkällan
kopparorm under silverlind
det är huldrans gåta
Det är din och min
- ¹⁵ Aldo Rossi: *A Scientific Autobiography* (Cambridge MA, 1981), p.45. For more on this, see Harry Charrington: 'A persuasive topology: Alvar Aalto and the ambience of history'.
- ¹⁶ Alvar Aalto: 'Architettura e arte concreta', *Domus* October–December 1947 pp.103–115. This is usually reproduced as 'The Trout & the Stream' from its subsequent Finnish title *Taimen ja tunturipuro*. Yrjö Hirn, *The Origins of Art* (London, 1904), pp. 13, 25
- ¹⁷ Yrjö Hirn: *Barnlek några kapitel om visor, danser och små teatrar* (Helsinki, 1916), p. 52. Translated into Finnish as *Leikkiä ja taidetta muutamia lukuja lasten leluista, lauluista, tansseista, ja pikku teatterista* (Play, art and other figures from children's games, songs, dances and little theatres). Aalto was most likely introduced to Hirn by his tutor Carolus Lindberg, who had collaborated with Hirn while Aalto was his student.
The fabric comes from the last horsehair fabric factory in Europe, John Boyd textiles in Castle Cary.
- ¹⁸ Alvar Aalto: 'Architettura e arte concreta' pp. 103–15. Yrjö Hirn: *The Origins of Art*, p. 270. See also Friedrich Schiller: *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* (New York, 2004).
- ¹⁹ Yrjö Hirn: *The Origins of Art*, p.145. 'Conversation 18, Kalle Leppänen' in *Alvar Aalto: the mark of the hand* pp. 341–42.
- ²⁰ Sources include Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and Friedrich Schiller, as well as theorists such as Alois Riegl and Gottfried Semper; associations Erik Bryggman, Sigurd Frosterus, Otto Korhonen, Lauri Mehto, László Moholy-Nagy, Ernesto Rogers, and Pekka Tynell, as well as Yrjö Hirn.
- ²¹ Steffi Kiesler's (Frederick Kiesler's first wife) calendar diaries between late 1938 and early 1946 record a number of meetings with Aalto. Gerd Zillner, Kiesler Foundation Vienna, private correspondence with author, 9 January 2012.
- ²² Frederick Kiesler: 'Pseudo-Functionalism in Modern Architecture' in *Partisan Review*, July 1939. The Aaltos' library contains copies of this.
- ²³ Dieter Bogner & Peter Noever (eds): *Frederick J. Kiesler Endless Space* Hatje Cantz, Berlin.
- ²⁴ In drawing together "points of contact between ethics and poetics" in his work, it is perhaps no surprise that Kiesler is such an important figure to Alberto Perez-Gomez. Alberto Pérez-Gómez: 'Built upon Love: Architectural Longing after Ethics and Aesthetics', conference paper *The Cultural Role of Architecture*, University of Lincoln, EMMTEC 23–25 June, 2010.
- ²⁵ Harry Charrington & Vezio Nava (eds): *Alvar Aalto: the mark of the hand* 'Conversation 20, Heikki Hyytiäinen and Mariikka Rimaaja' p. 365.
- ²⁶ The term "table and flowers" comes from Tide Huesser, one of the job architects of the Seinäjoki Theatre (1959–88). Private conversation with author, 1986.
- ²⁷ Harry Charrington & Vezio Nava (eds): *Alvar Aalto: the mark of the hand* 'Conversation 12, Leif Englund and Jaakko Suhkonen' pp.244, 246.
- ²⁸ See Harry Charrington: 'Coordinating method and art: Alvar Aalto at play'.
According to the Alvar Aalto foundation's archivist, Arne Hästeskö, the Alvar Aalto atelier carried out approximately 500 projects in Finland and a further 90 abroad, as well as building over 2,000 A Type houses; private conversation with author, Helsinki, April 2003.
- ²⁹ Samuel Beckett: 'Worstward Ho!' (1983). Alvar Aalto: 'Frank Lloyd Wright' (s.a.) in *Alvar Aalto In His Own Words*, p. 248. I am also thinking of Aristotle and 'spontaneous generation', an enduring theory which, while based on acute observation, was effortlessly refuted by Francesco Redi's experimentation with fish and gauze.

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