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NOTHINGNESS IN CREATIVE ACTION

by

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This paper aims at exploring Sartre's ontology of *action* as it relates to his notions of *nothingness* and *freedom,* and extracting the structure of his thinking through readings of his seminal work *Being and Nothingness,* in order to elucidate the problem of *creative action* within the discipline of Architecture. Understanding that any creative action implies a transformation of matter, focusing on architecture – a matter/geometry transformation with strong social and cultural repercussions – will allow us to put forth examples that illustrate how creative action doesn't just imply nothingness but is in fact the driving force of this action. As for Sartre, we will see how in our context the notion of nothingness is also tied to that of freedom; it is through creating with nothingness that one aims to achieve creative freedom.

It was with the reading of *Being and Nothingness* that my first ideas on negation as related to *creative action* began to emerge. Sartre's thoughts inspired the questions being posed in this paper; questions that Sartre himself probably had no particular inclination to pose or even answer. However, his ontology of *action* and linked ideas of nothingness and freedom, have an underlying structure that can be analyzed and reformulated to answer the question: *what drives human creative action*? To support the point of departure for the thesis we will first make a sketch of Sartre's concept and structures of thought on negation, action and freedom. These thoughts will be the basis to prove that it is nothingness - or our appropriated concept of nothingness - which is the motor of all creative action and the end or goal of the action is a continual attempt to achieve creative freedom.

1.1 Sartre on Negation and Nothingness

In *Being and Nothingness* Sartre introduces the concept of negation as an ontological structure rather than a linguistic one. Negation for Sartre is the plane in which a sense of the world reveals itself. To exemplify this idea he introduces the notion of destruction and argues that it is an essentially human thing, even destruction caused by natural catastrophes are for Sartre man-induced through *agencies* such as earthquakes or cyclones.[1] Even though he does not explicitly mention it, Sartre is really referring to the idea of *meaning* or *consciousness* of such an event. This awareness is purely human in that it is humans who project different negative meanings onto acts, which may result in destruction, and that from a neutral non-human perspective destruction is merely a rearrangement of matter. Whether it is creation or destruction, for Sartre action only acquires meaning in a human context, through human consciousness.

Another important factor in the idea of negation for Sartre is the idea of *experience.* When one looks for something and cannot find it, as with the example of looking for Pierre in the café, one experiences the negation of that thing, one experiences that thing as a *lack.*[2] This is a phenomenological understanding of negation, which has to do with *experiencing* a lack; with a perception of the existence of a lack. What is interesting here is Sartre's affirmation of perception as allowing us to fabricate a figure and ground relationship between the objects of our attention, and that depending on how we fix our attention the figure and ground could change completely. Thus this experience of negation is unfixed and un-determined; it is a kind of intuition, which is free to be experienced in any way desired. "…*negation must be like a free discovery, it must tear us away from this wall of positivity which encircles us. Negation is an abrupt break in continuity which cannot result from prior affirmations; it is an original and irreducible event.*"[3]

Sartre also makes a distinction between negation and *nothingness*, saying that they are not interchangeable terms but rather the origin of negation is in nothingness and the origin of nothingness is in our consciousness. For Sartre this consciousness is pre-reflexive and it has to do with self-awareness; it is consciousness of a nothingness or *consciousness of the not*. "*Is Nothingness not in fact simple identity with itself, complete emptiness, absence of determinations*

and of content?"[4] In asking this question, Sartre is underlying the fact that the origin of nothingness is in our consciousness which is empty of determinations and content until we question it or until we attribute a meaning onto that nothingness. However, negation, or nothingness, is not just meaning, not just consciousness, it is, as we will see in discussing the In-itself and For-Itself, both *meaning* and *being* and has to be manifested in a particular human context.

1.2 Sartre on Freedom

We intuit at the beginning of *Being and Nothingness* that this nothingness, which has its origin in consciousness, has something to do with the nature of our freedom. "*What is freedom if through it nothingness comes into the world*?"[5] Although it is not until the discussion on *action* that we can fully understand the structure of Sartre's thinking about freedom, we do get a glimpse into it through his categories of *Being*.

Being-in-itself (*être en soi*) is the world without any moments of nothingness or freedom, it is solid, rigid, immobile, completely determined, fixed and non-conscious. Being-in-itself simply is to *be*, it lacks all potential for any becoming- it simply *is*, it is in itself, and it is what it is. In this case what it is, always has to be constituted by an identity and it is by taking on this identity that being-in-itself is attained, a being that is not in any way free since its essence is fixed and determined.

Being-for-itself (*être pour soi*) is forever incomplete, fluid and lacking in determined structure. It corresponds to the Being of human consciousness and is thus free from all forms of determination both internal or external to it. With being-for-itself one is able to create one's own identity, one's own essence, which at any moment, through consciousness, has the capacity to change completely. It is with the For-itself that Sartre introduces the notion of negation, or the origin of nothingness, which allows us to be conscious of negative realities (i.e. I am aware Pierre is not in the café); it allows our consciousness to be aware of absence. *Being-for-itself* is the nihilation of being-in-itself as it makes one aware, conscious, of a *lack*. It has a certain distance from Being which allows the For-itself to judge other beings by knowing what it is not. For-itself is the nihilation of a particular aspect of Being through human engagement of independent *action*.

Being-for-others (*être pour autrui*) implies a Being that presupposes the existence of the consciousness of others. According to Sartre, consciousness takes on the structure of *being-for-others*, it becomes an object in the world, when it is subjected to the *look* of the *other*. In experiencing the look of the other one establishes a new relation to oneself, often with an attitude of shame as to how one appears to the other. The *look* of the *other* reduces one's Being to an object; to B*eing-in-itself*. *Being-for-others* implies a confrontation with the other, each seeking to dominate the other's freedom. Thus the essence of the relationship with others is always conflictive. As famously put by Sartre in one of his short plays: "*hell is other people*"[6].

1.3 Sartre on Action

In *Being and Nothingness* Sartre offers us a broad and complex account of existence. As we have seen, being-in-itself is the being of objects that simply *are*, being-for-itself is that which introduces negation and human engagement in independent action, and being-for-others introduces objectification through *the look* of the other.

Although this concept of action is only developed at a later stage in the book, one can already intuit that actually Sartre's notion of action is even more primal than that of being. For him the different states of being are essentially reflected in one's actions; we are what we *do* rather than we are what we are or what we represent to be. "*...to act is to modify the shape of the world; it is to arrange means in view of an end*"[7] In order for an action to take place there must be some kind of intentionality, whether voluntary or not, the action must have a goal, an end. For Sartre the world gets transformed through action, and this action has a kind of meaning. This differs from nature where, according to Sartre, things occur and actions take place without any particular kind of meaning. We will see later that this could be argued, but for now we will focus on human action. In Satrean terms, the structure of action opens possibilities for something to take place that is different than the present, it opens up the possibility of nihilation of the present- of nothingness. *"Action, in fact, is to be considered simultaneously on the plane of the for-itself and that of the in-itself..."*[8]

In the analysis of fear and anguish, Sartre alludes to the idea of *action* being in some way tied to the structure of freedom through nothingness. With the example of walking on a precipice, one can intuit how it is through the capacity to take any particular decision- leading to a particular action- that anguish arises out of the fear of what that action might ultimately be. " *I am afraid not of falling over the precipice, but of throwing myself over.*"[9] By realizing one possibility through acting on it, one also negates other possibilities by not acting on them, thus introducing the idea of nothingness. Thus, this freedom of action always implies nothingness. Could one state, then, that this is reciprocal, and that in turn nothingness always implies freedom of action? It is the purpose of this paper to elaborate an affirmative answer to this question by taking a close look at what drives human creative action. Interestingly, it is only at the end of the book when Sartre puts forth his claim that human existence is freedom and that *freedom is the structure of action.*

Another important insight into Sartrean thinking which will support our thesis, is his claim on matter and its relation to action. Although the link between action and matter is not explicitly elaborated in *Being and Nothingness*, there are some allusions to it. "...owing to the repercussions of an act in the world,...,is neither pure exteriority nor immanence but which refers us to the notion of Gestalt *form.*"[10] However, it is in The *Critique of Dialectical Reason* where Sartre places particular emphasis on *action* as being essentially a transformation of matter, linking human subjectivity to the human capacity of transforming matter. In the context of this publication Sartre is specifically referring to action as human capacity to *labor,* and it is through labor that transformation of matter occurs. However for the purpose of our analogy, what is particularly significant is the emphasis on *action as transformation of matter*.

2.1 Sartre's Concepts as Abstract Machine

Following the interconnectedness of Sartre's analysis of nothingness, action and freedom, the aim here is to explore the notion of *creative action*, or artistic moment of creation, as having its origin in nothingness, or negation, and in its being rooted in an attempt to attain true freedom. In going to such a specific realm of action, in a sense deviating from a Sartrean notion of action, there will necessarily be certain appropriations and/ or transformations of his concepts.

It becomes necessary to treat Sartre's structure of thought visited above, almost as if it were a Deleuzian a*bstract machine,* and allow ourselves to have his concepts migrate to new contents, albeit initially unformed and unsubstantiated. "*The diagrammatic or abstract machine does not function to represent, even something real, but rather constructs a real that is yet to come, a new type of reality*." [11] It is the *diagram* of relationships between Sartrean notions of nothingness, action and freedom that will allow us to construct a *new type of reality*; a new set of relations that can help us answer the question: what drives the creative act? What is it that drives the human spirit towards shaping the material, or potentially material, world in particular ways at particular moments of our lives and of history? In order to begin to elaborate a possible answer, we first need to take a look at the *creative act* itself.

2.2 Creative Action through Negation

In referring to creative action in the discipline of architecture, we are really trying to find the closest term to the Spanish verb *proyectar*[12]. There is no direct translation, but it really embodies the action which is central to this paper, therefore I will attempt to approximate its meaning. The closest translation of the term in the English language would be *projecting*[13] which could be defined as a casting forward of something that is devised in the mind and then presented in some other format for consideration. It implies the act of projecting ideas, intentions, creative wishes from the *virtual space* of the mind to a two or three dimensional physical space. It is this *act of projecting* which is being referred to when discussing the creative act in this thesis. However, *proyectar* in an architectural context is something different from pure artistic activity. It isn't just imagining, inventing, creating; it largely entails constant *negotiation*[14]- negotiation between the diverse parts that make up the complexity of this action and negotiation of social and cultural responsibilities that become generative of this creative action.

The act which drives an artistic creation, being first and foremost an *action*, is linked to the notion of the *for-itself* , whereas *the result* of the act -the object- is linked to the idea of *for-others*. In architecture, the result of a *projection*, is an object - or *subject-object*[15] - which undoubtedly will have social and cultural repercussions in the world. And although the result cannot be de-rooted from the human act which produced it, it nonetheless acquires another dimension given by *the look*, the critique, of the other – the awareness of the other, which in turn provides a kind of self-awareness in the subject-object. When proposing an object into the world in the form of a matter-geometry transformation, one is aware that it will be open to the

possibility of *the look* of the other. This notion could or could not drive and influence the act itself. We will see that there have been periods in history where this awareness has overtaken the wish to act for-itself, and as a result that creative action has been driven by the notion of for-others. Although the for-itself is bound to become a for-others when placed in the world, there is an important difference in what *drives* the creative act; is it the notion of an awareness of the look of the other (for-others) or is it by a will to break with an accepted continuity in the form of negation (for-itself)? Or is it simply an act of discovery of what already is - what already exists as an eternal unchanging identity (in-itself)?

Paul Valery in his platonic-style dialogue, yet highly un-platonic in conception, *Eupalinos or The Architect* has Socrates and Phaedrus exchanging thoughts which give us certain insight into their psyche. Phaedrus, in love with beauty, *projects* his thoughts towards creating work which allows his creative drive to remain active. Socrates on the other hand is in search of eternal and fixed values, thus his thoughts are towards the absolute and the unchanging, paralyzing his creative spirit as a result. In a Sartrean context one could say that Phaedrus is driven by the for-itself; by something that is not fixed but is more like a force, a projection, linked to *action* rather than observation. Whereas Socrates is immobilized by observations in search of the *In-itself*, a set of eternal values that deprive him of all *creative action*.

Although we are giving ourselves certain freedom of appropriation of Sartre's concepts, his notion of the *for-itself* is crucial in understanding the *kind* of creative act that is the theme of this paper. Furthermore, in the creative act that is targeted here, there is no distinction between the act itself and the subject who has acted; they are one and the same in that they create each other in a kind of motion of reciprocal action between the subject and the object. The creative act becomes part of one's *being,* a being that is questioned, re-formulated and re-established through every new creation, a *being-for-itself* that is free to reshape itself through every new action.

Referring again to Valery's *Eupalinos*, Phaedrus describes to Socrates his encounter with his friend, the architect Eupalinos, who in talking about his art of making things of form and use, would explain how he got so absorbed in his work that he would feel he was creating an architectural work out of himself ; building a human project out of himself. "*By dint of building,…, I believe I have ended up building myself*".[16] In *Being and Nothingness* Sartre alludes to the fact that in order to remain free the for-itself can never be a material object. Therefore the for-itself is more of a kind of force, energy, *action*, which manifests itself through the object but is never simply that object - it is the force that shaped it. In view of Valery's writing, one could argue that this is the same force that shaped Eupalinos' *being* as well as that of his buildings.

The force that drives creative action is that which shapes our material world, our objects. This force or *projection* towards the outside world, is imbued with a need to create oneself- one's own being. In this sense it is imbued with the notion of freedom; it is by acting on the world that we are creating our being-for-itself. The objects-in-the-world result of creative action are never just objects in-themselves since they are intimately tied to the idea of freedom afforded by the for-itself. Sartre associates negation with freedom, and it is this intuition which leads us towards

taking a closer look at the concept of negation, nothingness, in relation to the act of creating architectural form. Let us take a closer look through specific examples.

One could take a close look at the defined stylistic movements in art and architectural history, and define the evolution from one to the other as being driven by an attempt to negate the attributes that characterized the movement prior to it. It is not the purpose of this paper to give a historical overview - rather the attempt is to focus on contemporary creative acts - but as mode of introduction, would it not be possible to claim that the Renaissance was indeed driven by an attempt to negate earlier medieval dark and fragmented aesthetics? And didn't the Baroque try to do away with the rigidity of Renaissance planning and composition? As well as its French extension, Rococo, which in vogue of escaping all previous norms and traditions delved into an untamed world of flowery romance, only to be dethroned by rigid Neo-classism which denied all ornamentation?

Taking this as our starting point for a more in depth look at the idea of negation as a driving force, for-Itself, it is interesting to pause on what first caused this new rationalist wave. At the center of the purist theories in the mid eighteenth century was an essay put forth by a French cleric, Abbe' Laugier. In his *Essai sur l'Architecture* there appeared a very powerful illustration called 'primitive cabin' which illustrated his conception of the origin of architecture as formed only by tree trunks and branches. His thesis was that columns should declare their function and that all embellishments were unjustified.[17] This illustration is pure negation and absence. For those who felt, and still today feel, identified with it, it represented true architectural expression of human spirit, devoid of flourishing that distracted from its main purpose. Throughout history it has reappeared in architecture books and thesis writings as a reminder to return to pure expression of architectural function. It's power is in the radical nature of its message which stands in affirmation of purity through a lack -or nothingness.

Abbe Laugier.
Primitive Cabin

Another interesting punctual moment was in the early twentieth century when architect and theorist Adolf Loos wrote his influential essay *Ornament and Crime,* where he manifested that architecture and all applied arts had to do away with all ornamentation, which for him was merely a residue of barbaric customs. His manifesto largely driven by a repudiation of the florid style of the Vienna Secession, the Austrian version of Art Nouveau, had a very strong social and moral underlining. He felt that negating any kind of ornamentation was an important step in improving the human creative spirit and elevating culture beyond mindless frivolities. For Loos this lack of ornamentation was the embodiment of freedom from undesired ties. Coherent to his thesis, the work he created after the publication of this controversial essay was a vivid materialization of his theories and clearly stood out from his contemporaries who at times just remitted to mockery, famously characterizing his work as aesthetically equivalent to a manhole cover. His creations were a manifestation of a *lack* which for him was the embodiment of freedom and evolution: "*The evolution of culture is synonymous with the removal of ornament from utilitarian objects.*"[18] Today, we might remark on the blandness of the facades, but in early 1900 the lack of embellishments was a shock to fellow architects, critics, and passersby alike who at times could not look past this absence of the exterior and give attention to his more meaningful contribution in the spatially rich interiors, example of his *raumplan* theories.

A.Loos. House in
Michaelerplatz

In the context of nothingness as a driving force for creative action it is important to point out that it is not always about a *lack*, but rather of negating certain attributes and affirming those that are perceived as being linked with the idea of *freedom-* freedom to undergo an *original* creative process with the end of transforming matter into form and use. In the work and writings of Adolf Loos we also see an embodiment of nothingness not just as a lack, but as an affirmation of change; a will to steer the course of creative action away from learned formulas and towards his idea of cultural freedom and cultural progress. In describing his work he states that he does not conceive of architecture through plans, sections and facades, instead he works with spatial interaction of rooms which are broken into different levels and offer varied ceiling heights as a will to break the monotony of the *free plan* advocated by his contemporaries. He proposed a spatial richness and complexity which offered much more than the sum of its parts. His seemingly straightforward exteriors gave way to rich and subtle complexities that still challenge our understanding of space.

A.Loos. Muller House

2.3 Contemporary Negation

This background will serve as a diving board to now delve into more contemporary notions of nothingness, within the context of creative action. I would like to start by analyzing a doctoral thesis presented recently by architect, theorist and professor Federico Soriano called *Sin_tesis*.

This title, which in Spanish has the double meaning of *without thesis* as well as *synthesis*, gives us an insight into its content, now published as a book, which is a thesis without a thesis; a thesis based on negating the very notion of thesis, yet presented as a thesis in the very rigid public university system of Spain. Instead of presenting in the conventional thesis format, Soriano elaborates a series of negations which tie together his architectural work, writings and teachings. The six chapters are headed by six negations; six words which negate six very basic qualities of any architectural project. As he explains in the introduction, these absences of architectural attributes are for him more ambiguous, broader and suggestive than presences. "*In some moments we must arrive at not having anything, in order to go back and recognize things with new eyes*"[19]

These six negations - *without scale, without form, without weight, without plan, without detail, without gesture* – have allowed Soriano to question both the differences and the continuities of his work with the twentieth century Modern Movement and with that of his contemporaries, paving a nonlinear road out of a will to work freely, without the acceptance of any absolute truth or any theory which is fixed and unchanging. "*Any theory has to be modified and corrected instantaneously, must be open enough to allow everything to fit in it*"[20] This engagement with constant change brings us back to the Sartrean notion of the *for-itself* where one is free from all forms of determination, all conventions.

What is significant in Soriano's six negations is the underlying message that the negation has to start at the root of the process, at the very beginning of the act of projecting/ creating, in order to free the contemporary creative process from accepted binds and existing limitations. In

without scale he makes the case for an architecture generated by a notion of multiplicity of scales and against the accepted notion of a single 'correct' scale granted only by that of the body. Contemporary sense of scale must be ambiguous and changing; contingent to the material which constitutes it, the structuring of its interior space, the elements which define its use and its context. In *without form* he advocates for an architecture whose generation is not driven by an a-priori form imposed onto matter but one which has an *inconsistency of determination* in its inception which will allow the object to absorb change in form without losing the form itself. In *without weight* he calls for an architecture which is not generated out of traditional ideas of permanence and stability granted by mass; but one of dynamic lightness whose strength no longer exists in the manifestation of its massive presence, but rather in its absence.

In Soriano's thesis – or lack of thesis- we see a similar approach to the creative act as described in Paul Valery's *Eupalinos*; there is a definitive will to *proyectar* in order to build oneself in a different, contemporary, yet undefined way; building with a lack of eternal rules, with ambiguities rather than certainties, with negation rather than affirmation. By *projecting* with absences and dissolving learned affirmations, one is left with *intuition* as a driving structure of action, a non-temporal non-model, at times arbitrary and completely lacking in assigned values; a vivid model of the *for-itself*. Soriano's essays on the various negations are imbued with the belief that in an architectural project there is no conclusion other than the final result, other than the object itself.[21] Yet the final object itself is never an object *in-itself*, as it is intimately tied to the action which generated it.

In the contemporary project - result of contemporary creative action - a project must be the embodiment of uncertainties and have the capacity to constantly raise open questions to which there is no one answer. These questions, and possible temporal answers, must necessarily be re-phrased and re-oriented such that every reading of the project presupposes it's re-writing. One is obliged to act to create a project without having the security of knowing the outcome of the project, acting with no proof or support- with nothingness.

Thus the act of creating architectural form, *proyectar*, in Soriano's *Sin_tesis* is driven by a kind of Sartrean *nothingness*, an impulse towards the uncertain, towards working with *abstract machines* that can acquire new identities at any given juncture; at any moment within the independent action of the *for-itself*. Yet it is this machine, or diagram, that allows us to work with uncertainties in order to attain a kind of freedom of action- a freedom in the process of creative action- which can only be achieved through negation, or nothingness. "*Our challenge is to build a discipline of absences. Free of meaning. Futile. Let us not go look for values that substitute the classic or the modern ones.*"[22]

We have seen how for Sartre action implies nothingness and nothingness is invariably tied to the idea of freedom. In our appropriation of Sartre's terms, nothingness is the generator of the action (creative action/ *proyectar*) which is also tied to the idea of freedom- as it is only through negation that one can cause the breakage necessary to attain freedom. "*It is the organized form … which must be surmounted and denied in order for it to be able to form the object of a revealing contemplation.*" Sartre mentions this in the context of the worker who

realizing the harsh conditions of his present situation needs to break away from himself and the world in order to "*make of it the motive for his revolutionary action.*"[23] By deviating from Sartre's context and in order to elucidate the concept of creative action, or artistic creation, it becomes almost necessary to extract the notion of the subject as being the sole category for action. Allowing these concepts to be applied to categories other than that of pure subjectivity, we are stretching and thus transforming Sartre's concepts of thought.

This thesis is based on the intuition that within artistic disciplines, and specifically that of architecture, one is always operating by placing oneself in opposition to either past or contemporary modes of thought, often represented by an individual or a collective of individuals. With an awareness of this in mind, the intention is to ask ourselves, in view of current theories in architecture and interdisciplinary advances, what could we say are, if any, the negations which push contemporary creative action within the discipline? What is our contemporary denial? It is hard to evaluate ones state in history when one is immersed in it. But can we elucidate a philosophical stance in today's act of creating that also leans on the appropriated Sartrean term, *nothingness*? As creators of form through matter-geometry[24] transformations, what is the nothingness of our time?

Negating context: formal versus environmental contextualism
Today the notion of context as a fixed entity, defined by static constructs, is shifting. More complex forces are being considered as part of the context, denying the static quality of the built environment.

It is said that during a walk, the nineteenth century painter, James Whistler, stopped impressed with the landscape perspective beyond him. His disciple, seeing that he did not have his drawing utensils, quickly offered him his. But Whistler explained that he purposefully did not have his drawing materials in order to paint the perspective from his memory's impression of the place. The details of the landscape's context were not important to him; it was less about the *particulars* of the landscape and more about the *effect* it had caused him and how he would *project* this effect on a canvas. He seemingly did not want the specifics of the context to cloud a more powerful abstract impression which necessarily had to be guided by a sense of freedom from the context.

With freedom comes responsibility, and it is the responsibility of those who shape matter-through-form-and-use to understand the very nature of that matter not by imposing form onto it, but by shaping form around its forces. By rethinking the idea of context in relation to the forces which make up that context: the sun, the wind, the smells, the colors- those immaterial energies that are the new *environmental* shapers of form.

> *"It is no longer a question of imposing a form upon matter but of elaborating an increasingly rich and consistent material, the better to tap increasingly intense forces. What makes a material increasingly rich is the same as what holds heterogeneities together without their ceasing to be heterogeneous."*[25]

Architects are trained to work from documentation of a place; information on its context and history as well as from visits to the site which are in turn documented and recorded. However, freedom from the old notion of contextualism has become necessary. To avoid the repeated imposition of a supposed contextual or historicist form onto our reading of context, it is necessary to follow Whistler's example. It would be more liberating to not even visit the site until well into the development of the project, and if a visit were necessary to not document it. Greater levels of freedom can only really be achieved through deeper levels of abstraction.

Although the term *contextual* is still widely used, it is hard today to classify an object-in-the-world (a construct) as contextual without some skepticism. Currently, there is an affirmed denial of modernist *tabula rasa* or *terrain vague* where one would obliterate all context and start from scratch; but there is also great skepticism towards the notion of context driving formal strategies of action. We can no longer codify and classify our attitude towards the site as contextual or acontextual. There is an in between situation which has much more potential as it takes into account the *heterogeneities* of matter of the context, giving way to a new kind of contextualism driven by a reading of the forces of the environment, both natural and artificial, rather than the form and the meaning of it. Seen this way, built form becomes contextual in that it exists as a material manifestation of its context which invariably transforms- and is transformed by- this context. When a project is built on a site, neither the site nor the project will ever be the same, a site changes the project and the environment engulfs it transforming it over time. It has no meaning or value other than that which we wish to project onto it. And meanings are fleeting, they change with time, with new information, with a change in attitudes or with different cultural perspectives.

To give an example, let's take the case of the Louvre extension. At the time that the pyramid was proposed in the Louvre courtyard there was outrage at the thought that something so devoid of material and formal mimicry of its surroundings would withstand the test of time and that it would inevitably be dissonant in the classical context. Few people could see that the architectural language was in fact very much in tune with the existing spatial configuration of the Louvre palaces around the courtyard, but more importantly, many failed to recognize the capacity of form to reorganize the flow and revitalize the static Louvre courtyard. With time, those voices of outrage have subsided into praise and for many it is now hard to imagine the Louvre without that addition- it would be seen as a void, as if there was an absence. There are innumerable examples of this kind of transformation of value. To not steer far from the Louvre, the tour Eiffel is a vivid example of this; from object of outrage and indignation it became that of veneration and unquestioned national pride.

IM Pei. Louvre extension

Negating anthropomorphism. Architecture and the Body. Performance
Our relationship with the environment, both natural and built, is also in flux. Just as the context onto which ideas are projected is not fixed or *solid*, neither is the relationship between these ideas and the notion of the human body. In antiquity the human body acquired a symbolic and representation status; often regarded as a microcosm of universal harmony, with the implied presence of the body in the architectural by figuring as an important metaphor or analogy for the

architectural. The dimensioning of columns and rooms was often based on the human figure, extending the perceived harmonious proportions of the human body to those of the built environment. However, this concern for human proportions in relation to the parts and the whole of a building, stress a body-centered conception of our built environment in precise static and representational terms, without taking into account the variant aspects of the human body and its interaction with its surroundings.

The body is our physical presence in the world and the means through which we understand our environment, both built and natural. Although it highly conditions our engagement with the world, in the context of contemporary architecture it is necessary to re-think this oversimplified relationship between the body and the built environment at the root level of the generative act. The concept of body-centrality in the built environment has been overused and exhausted to such a degree that all we can see now are the limitations of this structure of thinking. Isn't it rather more suggestive to look at the body as a type of being; a *being- for-itself, un*fixed and undetermined? Rather than defining its proportions and static whole-parts relationships, couldn't we look at the body as an entity in transition, in constant changing relationship with the built environment? *"We know nothing about a body until we know what it can do, in other words, what its affects are, how they can or cannot enter into composition with other affects, with the affects of another body."*[26]

In this context we have to ask ourselves, what can the body *do*? How does it understand the environment? As a first approximation one could intuit that it is through experience, through a kind of *phenomenal* reading of the environment. But instead of relying purely on the sensorial, we would like to look at a broader and less personalized notion of experience, which is that of experiencing movement. A body that experiences space as a changing entity, is that which is allowed to move in and around it, enhancing the dynamics of the physical milieu and simultaneously enhancing its readings of it. There must be a kind of symbiosis of the body with the action and the space. The body must focus outside of itself in order to experience the space in action, almost without realizing *it* is the element undergoing the action/movement.[27]

Choreographing Space
Body-space symbiosis

The idea of how a body can *perform* as an extension of the space and the space as an extension of the body's action, rather than as a representation of it, opens up many more possibilities of proposing something new- something unique emerging out of the immaterial world into the material world of our built environment. The meaning of the body itself has no interest. Instead it gains significance when it is activated by its external connections and *affects*, through what it can do- through its *action.* Therefore space ceases to be a mere container for the body and becomes an element of an event /action that includes the body.

Thus, instead of relying on analogy and proportion, sublimating the body to measurement and representation, one could think of the body almost as if it were a collection of force fields, or vectors, which affect a space through its changing movement within it. There is a strong affirmation within the realm of contemporary practice to negate older conceptions of anthropomorphism in favor of discovering new unforeseen relationships between the body and

its physical milieu not based on symbols and representation but rather on effect and affect through action/ performance.

> *"Architecture should seek less to be an abstraction of the lineaments of the body and more to engage the body's effective and affective spectrum. It is a faulty assumption that patterning architecture on the body makes it more human, just as it is a faulty assumption that the body is the pattern of the universe."*[28]

We have seen that by negating context we are negating the relationship between the object and the environment; and that by negating anthropomorphism we are negating the traditional relationship between the human body and the object. These two negations imply another one of equal importance; namely an understanding that formed matter in itself has no meaning- has no value as an object of representation.

Negating representation: abstract operations on matter

We have seen how for Sartre destruction only makes sense in the context of human consciousness, or by meaning attributed by humans and that it is otherwise just a rearrangement of matter. In this case the reference to meaning is more about an *event,* an *action*, which is implied by the material manifestation of that action, i.e. destruction. Likewise, creation, as another type of rearrangement of matter and energy, would also only make sense in Sartrean terms through human awareness of the meaning embedded in the very act of creating.

However, the idea of meaning in a creative act has other levels of interpretation. In Sartre's example, destruction , is represented by the effects of an earthquake or a cyclone. The action is the earthquake the result is destruction. In creative action, the action can be like an earthquake (lacking meaning in itself) and the result need not have meaning or represent anything in particular but it might *acquire* social and cultural meaning through a human wish to project that significance onto it. The earlier example of the tour Eiffel illustrates this. The tower was created as a temporary manifestation of engineering prodigy, wanting to neither be a monument or a symbol, but has now acquired a symbolic status due to an imperative human wish to project that specific meaning onto the object. In looking at the act of creation there is an important distinction between acting with the wish to be read and interpreted by others (through *the look*, the awareness of the other) or acting in a more abstract sense to achieve creative freedom and break from prescribed paradigms.

There have been clear moments in history where creative action was driven by a strong will to produce a result that would have a reading-in-the-world; it would be interpreted by others in order to communicate a *message.* The result of the action became an object of representation, an object with a code that needed interpreting by the other. The post-modern period in art and architecture is a clear example of this action *for-others.* Influenced by the overpowering force of linguistics, architecture became semantic. To exemplify this is the work of Robert Venturi as described in his most significant critical book *Complexities and Contradiction in Architecture.* In a sense he was also operating in opposition to the modern movement which he felt had become too simplistic eliminating all richness and complexity within the creative act and final result, however he worked trying to find immutable values from

Venturi. *House for his mother*

the past- a sense of the inmutable in-itself. *"As an architect I try to be guided not by habit but by a conscious sense of the past—by precedent, thoughtfully considered."*[29] The house he designed for his mother is the embodiment of his semantic approach to architecture; it is emblematic of an architecture which needs to be read, it is like a game for architects and critics who can read into the details and realize Venturi's gestural messages through continual references and playful takes on historic architecture.

In our current world, there is an interesting dialectic between the notion of for-others and for-itself when looking at the pressing issue of global warming and acting on the world with respect to the environment. The difference between acting respectfully as a purely politically correct wish and acting respectfully for the very pressing need of the environment itself, is in fact the difference between the for-itself and for-others. Acting for-others, one is just acting to be *read* and understood as being environmental by others, but the wish to be environmental is not what is driving the creative action, it is an awareness of the other's *look* which is driving it. Thus we have seen an increase in the number of institutions being formed to capitalize on this wish, to satisfy the need be recognized by *the* other and given a "green" qualification in the form of certificates [30] and points which attest to the environmental soundness of the specific object/ building in question. It is an external reading which drives the action, not an internal motive.

Again, the focus here must necessarily be on how a specific material or technique can *perform* in a given environment, and not what it represents in this or that context. The notion of mixing the natural and the artificial, or using the natural in artificial ways, becomes appealing not for its political correctness (as with the over-used terms e*co* and *green)*- but for the vast potential for innovation that such strategies may bring. The material research which is underway as a result of these energies has produced vastly uneven results. The largely successful incorporation of recycled and recyclable materials, sustainable methods of production and expertise on material efficiency, has been dwarfed by politically motivated 'good intentions' where the use of the term *sustainable* justifies less successful aspects of the project, most often related with design responsibility in respect to its cultural and social context.

100% recycled
Politically correct?

However, sensitivity towards nature-oriented policies has shifted technologies from the high-tech experiments, residue of the Modern Movement, towards *hybrid* models where the inception of a new kind of relationship between technique and ecology can be found in the form of abstract operations on nature. This interaction between the natural and the artificial allows, to a certain degree, for material systems to work in harmony with nature but also for the possibility of nature to work as a material and technical system. Thus new concepts are generated, and terms such as *hybrid technique* and *hybrid materialism* begin to emerge as intertwined concepts necessary for the advancement of contemporary material practices. The emphasis is on an abstract use of the properties of matter at the moment of generation; an abstract creative action *for-itself*.

Grasscrete Systems
Abstract operations

3.1 Appropriation and Transformation of Sartre's Concepts

From the beginning of the paper, we have sketched out certain notions extracted from readings of Sartre that have instigated a tangent exploration into what drives a creative *being* into creative action. We have been inspired by Sartre's structure of action, and to a degree have needed to appropriate and transform this structure in order to build arguments in favor of our thesis. In having a model of thought migrate from one structure to another, we have inevitably made some elastic assumptions and conclusions that are not strictly speaking *Sartrean*. We have extracted the idea of action from the category of purely subjective, and stretched it in order to fit an intertwined understanding of the subject-object of action. In creative action the subject and object are one and the same.

To build a thesis around appropriated concepts might seem problematic to some, and a close scrutiny of the assumptions made could cause a debate on their legitimacy. There is a definite awareness of the loose-fit use made of some of Sartre's concepts. But it was the reading of Sartre's complex ontology of existence that first incited the posing of these questions in the first place, recognizing that human creative activity is an indispensable part of our *being.* This is a very specific *type* of action, and in narrowing down our focus to this action we invariably will deviate from Sartre's much broader and encompassing notions of action. However, as a counter argument, it would be hard to deny that in developing his concepts Sartre himself – as did many other before and after him- deviated from appropriated concepts developed by other philosophers, and made them his by placing them on the lens of his particular point of view.

3.2 Focus on the Lack: Figure/Ground as a Matter of Point of View

The idea of negation, as origin of nothingness, has been the element that connects the examples put forth. However, when discussing negation or lack of something, we could just as equally discuss it in terms of an affirmation or presence. In a sense, it is a matter of perception. *"No one object, no group of objects is especially designed to be organized as specifically either ground or figure; all depends on the direction of my attention"*[31] Leaning on this statement by Sartre's himself, one could argue that negation or affirmation is neither figure nor ground, and that in each circumstance it depends on the way one looks at a particular situation; it is a matter of *perception* of a particular situation. So far we have only really taken into account a western notion of negation, but if for a moment we direct our glance to the east we might discover that we have taken liberties with some assumptions.

To give an example, in the west, we take for granted that artistic projects strive towards a certain kind of beauty of an object or a space that is always synonymous with the use of light and clarity. It is true both historically as it is today that we create spaces around the modulation of light, and have a very direct relationship with light, used as a material with which to enhance the reading of a space or an object. As Tanizaki accounts in his classic book *In Praise of Shadows*, traditional Japanese aesthetics, on the other hand, is built around subtle play of dark modulated

shadows, without which there is no beauty in either art, architecture, theater- any form of creative expression. Japanese culture according to Tanizaki cannot be understood without these shadows, and in his small poetic book he takes the western reader through a journey of discovery of the beauty of darkness, without which one cannot appreciate the dark shades of *nō* theater costumes, or the dark lacquers of Japanese objects, or the opacity of materials and spaces of Japanese architecture. It is this lack of light in favor of shadow that renders Japanese creations unique. *"(…) the beauty of a Japanese room depends on a variation of shadows, heavy shadows against light shadows – it has nothing else. Westerners are amazed at the simplicity (…)but it betrays a failure to comprehend the mystery of shadows."[32]*

For westerners a space in shadow tends to mean and symbolize something very specific, we assign value and significance to the quality we recognize as *lacking light*. It might remind us of a church in penumbra where one must act in a very specific, respectful way due to the somber atmosphere, or even of a more ominous and dreaded feeling of finding oneself alone in a poorly lit alley, or we simply see it as something needing to be illuminated. So is it a lack of light, or lack of darkness? For westerners light is the figure and darkness is ground, or lack of light; but for Tanizaki and eastern culture the opposite is definitely true. Thus, positive/negative, affirmation/negation, light and dark are in a sense all values which we assign depending on how we choose to direct our attention. The same can be said when we talk of negation. That which we see as negation in one moment could be affirmation in another if we chose to focus our direction in that way.

3.3 Questioning Negation as Driving Force for Freedom

With the examples put forth, we have seen how negation within a creative discipline has been used as a strategy of action and breakage from past or current state of affairs in order to push the discipline forward. Action through negation is a breakage –a rupture- that allows us to not feel imprisoned, and instead explore unseen territories of creative freedom. We operate with the hope that there is improvement in sight; that by negating we will in fact get close to freedom. As for Sartre, every moment is a moment of contingency which is open to being something different from what it is in the present; it opens up a world of possibilities.

It is with this positive undertone that I delved into the idea of negation in the creative act as a means towards freedom and using this negation to push aside those affirmations that impede our free thinking - our possibility to achieve creative freedom. Negation *or lack* of assumptions is much more suggestive in a creative process; it produces a sense of openness and risk during the generative act.

However, as much as we want to be original and break from adopted notions of creative action- the fact that we are striving for a breakage from something implies an acknowledgement of the existence of that from which we want to break. Thus one could argue that this wish for negation actually implies a continuity by the very act of negation. Differently put, Sartre mentions that we are constantly missing ourselves because our being is hostage to *the other*. In our analogy, our creative being is constantly missing itself because it is hostage to the other by a wish

to negate *the other*.[33] And that which is being negated now was once also put forth as a break –or an attempted break- of continuity with another theory or practice. These recurring attempts of breakage – although motivated by a wish for freedom- imply a recurring, repetitive pattern.

Another important point is that it is hard, in any creative endeavor, to state complete breakage with the past. As much as this might be put forth as a manifesto, and acted upon as a driving force, there are always implicit continuities- even if we might not be aware of them. We will always attempt to operate by negating previous strategies of creative action and proposing seemingly new ones; and although this might produce punctual successes, in a larger scheme this could be seen as an endless, almost cyclical, pattern, which is far from being unpredictable and *novel*. As for Sartre, one could argue that this wish to attain freedom will never be fully consummated and will inevitably result in failure. This failure to really break or really negate a current state of affairs, as we have seen, is bi-fold: on the one hand it is because in no artistic discipline does one ever really operate in a vacuum and on the other because operating around negation is in fact implying a continuity through that very negation.

CONCLUSION

4.1 Creative Action Rooted in Nothingness and Freedom

Inspired by Sartre's ontology of existence and categories of being, we have come to identify three types of creative action within the context of architectural thought; action induced by a will to discover unchanging, eternal rules that will always lead to a supposed 'correct' and predictable path (in-itself); action produced by a wish to be free from prescribed formulas and driven by a wish to break – to negate- inherited paradigms (for-itself); and finally action caused by an awareness of *the look* of the other, by a wish to be read and interpreted by the other (for-others).

Identifying the for-itself as the only category that introduces negation and is inherently linked to freedom, we have focused on both past and contemporary punctual moments in which the creative act has been guided by this force through the notion of nothingness. We have seen how in creative action, the idea of nothingness is not merely a result of independent action granted by the for-itself, but is in fact the motor of this action- it is the intuition that inspires the act. And it is through active use of various negations, uncertainties and ambiguities that one can act in pursuit of freedom.

This freedom, however, is a kind of condemnation to uncertainty; to working without models or tested formulas. As Sartre put it: "*Man is condemned to be free.*" It is daunting to act with nothingness, to strive to act with freedom where there are no known outcomes, no linear traces that assure us of our action being on the right path. There *is* no path, there is only nothingness at the beginning and the end; the only thing that keeps us going is the action itself- the awareness of the freedom hopefully granted by this kind of creative action.

4.2 Unanswered Questions

Can this thesis be generalized to all creative acts, not just the architectural?

> *"[Duchamp discovered] art's profound dependency on and relationship to its physical and intellectual contexts.(…) Concepts were then, and remain today, the primary walking sticks with which we navigate new space and reshape ourselves. There is no reason to deny architecture the power of this extraordinary transformative engine. Concepts are the architecture of hope."* [34]

To approach the topic of creative action I have chosen to focus on a discipline that results in visible matter-geometry transformations, has strong social and cultural underpinning and implies *labor* in a very Satrean sense. The creative, generative, act in architecture implies a complex and broad projection of ideas, while allowing us to provide specific examples to support the thesis. The inception of an architectural project requires careful negotiation with other disciplines- both technical and artistic, and was chosen in part for its encompassing and general nature. The hope was that analyzing the creative act, related to such a complex discipline, would permit a certain applicability to the creative act of other more specific artistic disciplines.

Admittedly, no matter how general the outlook may be, the analysis is necessarily reduced in scope. It is hard to deny that other creative disciplines, which might even have a more limited palette, imply creative actions specific to their expertise and are possibly nuanced well beyond the appreciation of an external observer. The degree of this nuance, or the success in applying the general to the specific, would need its own development beyond the scope of this paper and beyond the concepts inspired by Sartre's thoughts. Nevertheless, it is my belief that analogies made in the context of the architectural creative action and outcome, can be applied to other creative acts motivated by a completely different outcome.

Natural versus artificial creative acts. Questioning the meaninglessness of natural acts.
In reading Sartre, one is keenly aware of being in a strictly human context. Whether it is creation or destruction, for Sartre actions only acquire meaning in a human context, with human consciousness. A question that kept hovering over my reading of Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* was regarding the possibility of applying Sartre's notion of action to actions that take place, and are experienced, within a purely natural context- devoid of human projected meaning.

Nature also *acts* onto matter in order to transform it and the actions that some animals perform do have an end and an *intention*. Birds build intricate nests, bees create hives, ants carve out elaborate underworlds of tunnels and interlocking spaces; they all do it with a very specific purpose or *cause and motive.* Protective nests ensure the survival of their offspring, they engineer the most efficient geometrical shape to maximize surface for the production of honey, they create elaborate abodes to attract the opposite sex for mating; there is a *end.* It fulfils Sartrean notion of action in that there is a cause, motive and end, and it is not too far from the notion of *action as labor.* Thus, the assumption that action only has meaning in human consciousness seems to be, in this modest interpretation, open for question. Whether there is substance to this question can only really be answered with a more in depth elaboration of it. However, on the surface, it seems to have potential for another tangent in Sartrean inspired enigmas.

[1] Jean-Paul Sartre. *Being and Nothingness, p.*40

[2] Ibid., *p.*41

[3] Ibid., *p.*43

[4] Ibid., *p.*45

[5] Ibid., *p.*60

[6] Jean-Paul Sartre. *Exit and Three Other Plays,* p45

[7] Jean-Paul Sartre. *Being and Nothingness, p.*559

[8] Ibid., *p.*795

[9] Ibid., *p.*65

[10] Ibid., *p.*795

[11] Gilles Deleuza and Felix Guattari, A Thousand Plateaus, p142

[12] *Proyectar* in Spanish is 'the act of projecting'. In architecture it refers to the moments of creation - the creative act- when one projects ideas onto physical formats to be communicated

[13] Definition according to Miriam-Webster dictionary: *Projecting- to put or set forth: present for consideration, to reproduce on a surface by motion in a prescribed direction.*

[14] Federico Soriano, *Sin_tesis,* p.58

[15] *Subject-object* refers to the idea that the result of a creative act it still intimately tied to the human action which caused it. Therefore the subject becomes an integral, indistinguishable, part of the object- of the result.

[16] Paul Valery, *Eupalinos or the Architect.* p.30

[17] John Summerson, The Architecture of the Eighteenth Century, p15

[18] Adolf Loos, *Ornament and Crime* in Programs and Manifestoes, p20

[19] Federico Soriano, *Sin_tesis,* p.6

[20] Ibid., p.7

[21] *"En un proyecto no hay mas conclusion que el propio resultado final, que el propio objeto"* Federico Soriano, *Sin_tesis,* p.7

[22] Federico Soriano, *Sin_tesis,* p.193

[23] Jean-Paul Sartre. *Being and Nothingness, p.*563

[24] Matter-geometry as the underlying physical manifestation of the creative act.

[25] Deleuze and Guattari. *A Thousand Plateaus*, p.329

[26] Ibid., p.257

[27] Here we are not referring to action as related to Sartre's concept of action, rather just as synonym of movement/ performance within a milieu.

[28] Reiser + Umemoto. *Atlas Of Novel Tectonics*, p.85

[29] Robert Venturi. *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, p.13

[30] LEED certification is the most common of these institutions in the United States. *"LEED certification provides independent, third-party verification that a building project meets the highest green building and performance measures."* www.usgbc.org

[31] Jean-Paul Sartre. *Being and Nothingness*, p.41

[32] Junichiro Tanizaki. *In Praise of Shadows.* p.18

[33] It must be noted that in our case - this *other* is not necessarily a subject.

[34] Sanford Kwinter. *Architecture As Conceptual Art?* Harvard Design Magazine #19, p.4

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e+i architecture, *Choreographing Space,* photo Brandon Jacobs-Mills, 2007: p.12

Robert Venturi, Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture, p.119: p.13

Grasscrete Systems, www.arcat.com/arcatcos/cos30/arc30995.html: p.14

Cubic room, in *Refuse. Making the most of what we have*, p155: p.14