Between Material Sensuousness and Thingness: the Significance of the Structural Glass in Kengo Kuma's Water/Glass House from the Perspective of Phenomenology

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Abstract
Realizing his idea of "anti-object," Kengo Kuma adopts structural glass excessively for the lounge in the Water/Glass House from the level of furniture pieces to the level of architectural elements including the floor. In order to understand the cultural significance of Kuma's idea of "anti-object" that relies on the refractive and reflective qualities of glass, this paper adopts two references: minimalism in art during the 1960s that criticized the status of the object and focused instead on materiality per se, and the phenomenology of thingness that criticized the object and that reinstated the intimate bond between man and the thing. Introducing these two references, this paper shows that the glass floor in the lounge of the Water/Glass House oscillates between two states: the aesthetic sensuousness for the glass' reflective and refractive materiality, and thingness for its ethical role as the floor that upholds silently human dwelling activities. While illuminating this conflictual dialectic between the two states, this paper argues that the aestheticism of material celebration should not stand on its own only to eclipse the thingly performance of an architectural element; rather, the former should be sublimated into the latter.

Keywords: "anti-object"; structural glass; minimalism; phenomenology; thingness

1. Introduction
Despite the complexity of minimalism in architecture, one of its most dominant and common features is to confront the modernist emphasis on the totality of form and volume over material. Conjoined with this confrontation is then its interest in a material's sensuous properties. Indeed, this minimalistic and sensuous architecture is found throughout the world: the excessive play of reflectivity in the lobby of the Hotel in Lucerne, Switzerland, by Jean Nouvel; the Prada Store in Tokyo by Herzog and de Meuron, a crystal made of curved and diamond-shaped panes of glass; and the fashion boutiques by John Pawson in New York and London, which present a "flowing opalescent space anchored in places by monolithic pieces of furniture and divided . . . by translucent screens" (McGuire, 1996, p.72).

Kengo Kuma is one of the most experimental minds in this trend. His continuous experiments with glass, stone, earth and wood are well-known, all of which focus on the properties of materials, rather than exacting any pre-conceived image or form upon given materials. Of particular interest is the architectural effect and significance of the structural glass Kuma adopts excessively for the lounge in the Water/Glass House (1995), in Atami, Japan. In illuminating this, I would like to introduce two cultural references. The first is the idea of "anti-object" in minimalism in art during the 1960s. The introduction of minimalism clarifies the historical origin of Kuma's idea of "anti-object." More importantly, the discussion of minimalism elucidates the shared fate between Kuma's "anti-object" and that of minimalism in that both saw the stress on the sensuous properties of materials themselves as a strategy to embody the idea. The other reference is phenomenology, in particular the philosophy of thingness by Martin Heidegger (1889-1976). For Heidegger, framing a thing simply as an object falls into the trap of the naturalized dichotomy between the subject and object, a dichotomy which the scientific world perspective propagandizes. Instead, Heidegger illuminates the thingness of a thing. By thingness, Heidegger means the pre-reflective intimate bond between a thing and the human being, and the thing's anonymous ethical performance in upholding a human situation. Adopting these two references, minimalism and phenomenology, this paper explores the status of the glass floor in the lounge of the Water/Glass House. The paper argues that its status is that of oscillation between phenomenal sensuousness and phenomenological thingness. It further investigates
the significance of this conflictual dialectic between the two states from the perspective of aestheticism and from that of the ethical function of architecture.

2. Spatiality of Kengo Kuma’s Water/ Glass Residence and "Anti-Object"

Kengo Kuma’s Water/ Glass House (1995) presents an unprecedented space of transparency and continuity. The lounge [Fig.1.] on its third floor is an oval whose perimeter is defined by transparent glass. Its furniture pieces are also made of glass so that they might dissolve into nothing, continuing the aesthetics of visual continuity and openness. The use of glass carries on further. The floor utilizes laminated safety glass and is equipped with lighting fixtures underneath. On account of the glass floor, what arises is a dramatic perceptual play in which the ripples on the pool constantly appear to invade the interior. Seen together with these undulating ripples, the curvilinear transparent profile of the lounge transforms itself into something like a giant water drop with an inhabitable space inside. In the end, it seems to establish a metaphorical reciprocity between glass and water: glass is water, or at the very least, watery in its production process that includes an aquatic stage.

Extending further the discussion of the design features of the pool, its height and width is so determined that, for one who sits on one of the glass chairs, its edge intermingles with the horizon of the Pacific Ocean [Fig.2.]. The water in the pool incessantly overflows to interact with the movement of the waves of the ocean. The pool functions as an intermediary layer through which what is distant—the ocean—and what is near—the floor sitting slightly above a pool with a depth of fifteen centimeters—can be joined together. The pool is also roofed with thin stainless-steel louvers [Fig.3.]. When light hits the louvers, it becomes diffused into particles to "dance on the water." With this series of effects, the hall seems to float around not only on the pool but also on the ocean, compensating its localized fixity with the illusion of nomadic fluidity. No wonder that this splendid sensorial experience becomes even richer, with glimpses of fleeting sea birds and the sound of their wailing cries.

Kuma's idea of "anti-object" explains the formal and spatial effect of his architecture to a certain degree. Indeed, Kuma has been continuously interested in the notion of "anti-object," conducting public lectures and publishing a book by using the notion itself as the title. This notion seeks to erase the massive and clear presence of architectural body, quoting Kuma's words, "I want to erase architecture. I have always wanted to do so, and I am not likely to ever change my mind" (Kuma, 2005, p.225). In embodying the idea of "anti-object," it seems true that he has never changed his mind since the initiation of his career. His early work such as the Kiro-San Observatory (1994) [Fig.4.] places the body of the building underground. According to Kuma, this work betrays the conventional conception of architecture as an object by presenting "a 'void,' or the exact reverse of an object" (Kuma, 2005, p.14). In contrast, his later works present a more sophisticated strategy. He wraps his buildings with multifarious layers of transparency or translucency in the heart of a landscape, in the process of which the massive body
of the buildings evaporates into porous filters of light and eventually into almost nothing. Here, form with its three-dimensional profile is replaced by invisible layers of transparency or layers of delicately thin reflective skins. In the case of the Water/Glass House, while entertaining the perceiver with the illusion of nomadic navigation on a sea, its lounge is meant to disappear and melt into the aquatic transparency of the pool. The pool itself is designed with no protective railing so that an unimpeded view towards the sea may be actualized, maximizing spatial expansiveness. The pool enfolds itself into the monumental horizontality of the sea, and is rendered in such a way that it becomes part of the larger continuous environment. Unlike the Kiro-San Observatory which removes the body of the building literally from the landscape, the Water/Glass House blends into the surroundings due to the transparency of glass and its reflectivity. The residence thus continues the theme of presenting a reversal of an object: "there is no point from which one can get an external view of the building" (Kuma 2005, p.220). In his more recent works, Kuma replaces mass with surface, continuing, according to Botond Bognar, the delicacy of the traditional Japanese architectural devices such as "wooden latticework (kooshi) and bamboo mesh and curtain (sudare), which . . . mediate between inside and outside while providing privacy (Bognar, 2005, p.35). In the case of the Headquarters Building of Louis Vuitton in Tokyo (2003) [Fig.5.], the mass is supplanted by the surface articulated by thin vertical wooden slats. In his Louis Vuitton Shop in Osaka, the surface again supplants mass by presenting an aesthetic dialectic between masking and opening, and between solidity and translucency. Kuma's replacement of mass with surface actualized in these two shops of fragility and delicacy stages another refined strategy to realize his idea of anti-object. This tendency to erase the heaviness of an object continued even in a case in which Kuma worked with stone. In his Stone Museum (2000), Kuma installed stone palings to formulate "a multi-layer, semi-transparent space that is totally different from the solid and closed atmosphere of a traditional stone building" (Chih-Ming Shih, 2011, p.22).

3. "Anti-Object" and Minimalism in Art

As a matter of fact, the term "anti-object" deserves a more detailed investigation. For this investigation, a primary reference is minimalism of the 1960s and, in particular, its criticism by Michael Fried. A minimalist work—whether by Robert Morris or Donald Judd—challenges the status of the author as the creator of meaning and the artwork as the object that represents the author's intention. Despite the different positions of Judd and Morris concerning the genesis of minimalism (Judd, 1975, p.182; Morris, 1968, p.223; Foster, 1996, p.44), they in fact shared the vision of specificity and literalness. Both Morris and Judd rejected "part-by-part" construction and compositional character in the object, as they reflect three qualities considered especially by Judd as the locus of meaning of art in the idealist sense: anthropomorphism, anthropocentrism, and illusionism. As an alternative, Judd put forth the specific and literal object in contrast with the traditional object, which was neither a painting, as it was three-dimensional, nor a sculpture, as it was not sitting on a pedestal and was stripped of any compositional, "part-by-part" logic. In contrast, Morris' "unitary form" laid stress on the form's wholeness, singularity, and indivisibility. It was in this context that minimalists favored a simple geometrical form for its typical and unsophisticated quality, calling it a "known-shape" (Morris, 1968, p.234). The shape does not represent anything: It is a hollow, meaningless form.

What interests me is the difference between Morris' "unitary form" and Judd's "specific object." With the notion of "unitary form," Morris hoped that the fragmentary properties of a form such as color, scale, and material properties are subsumed by its indivisible singularity. This emphasis on the unifying role of the singularity of the form, according to Morris, was not to cancel each fragmentary quality, but to sublimate it to the wholeness of the form. However, Judd's specific object was different. An important factor which
establishes the specificity of the object situated in an actual space was the manifestation of the untamed rough materiality of the object: anodized aluminum, florescent Plexiglas, perforated steel plate, stainless steel, and so forth. And, in this regard, one should also take note of Morris' obvious interest in materiality, despite his emphasis on "unitary form," as his "unitary form" appeared in various materiality including steel plate, fiberglass, Plexiglas, and wood. One effect yielded by this emphasis on material in minimalist work is that its hollowness—or meaninglessness as it is not an object and as such it has been liberated from the subjective intentions of the author—is now taken up by the sensuousness of the material itself. Put differently, materiality starts to attract one's attention to appear as the new subject matter, being encouraged by the thematic emptiness of the work. Of course, the presence of the material in this case does not represent anything; otherwise, it would be running contrary to the ideal of minimalism. Accordingly, Fried wrote, "Like the shape of the object, the materials do not represent, signify, or allude to anything" (Fried, 1998, p.165). This indicates a condition that material itself is now liberated from any subjective will and is given an opportunity to present its presence, i.e., literal sensuousness. According to Fried, this non-figurative form effectuates a theatrical situation, in which the beholder, who has become emancipated on account of its non-figurative quality from the habit of deciphering its meaning or associating it with an imagery, is now led to a perception of its endless sensuous materiality: from the rough steel meshes with tactile seduction to the reflectivity of the highly polished steel plates and to the gentle spreading of fluorescent lights into the real—not imaginary—space of gallery (Picazo, 1996, pp.125-129). In particular, in the reflection of the surrounding space through highly-polished materials, what emerges is another quality which has been characterized as an underlying ideal of minimalism: expansion. The object is not a self-enclosed entity any more. Its hollowness opens out to interact with the surrounding conditions of light, wall, floor, and ceiling, and further expands into the real built environment equipped with the constantly changing natural light and weather. In this "presentment of endlessness" (Fried, 1998, p.166) of the non-signifying element, meaning never fixes itself to remain inexhaustive and indeterminable. Even though Fried's criticism of minimalism was antagonistic, it revealed one of the foundational aspects of minimalism, namely that it is "incurably theatrical." For some, this was the very contribution of minimalism: "the death of the author" and "a birth of the viewer" (Fried, 1998, p.166).

4. Materialistic Sensuousness and Phenomenological Thingness

Fried's criticism of minimalism is useful in understanding the minimal, sensuous architecture like Kuma's. It clarifies not only the fact that Kuma was not the single artist or architect who theorized and practiced "anti-object," but also the fact that Kuma's reliance on sensuous properties of materiality themselves in the process of overcoming the status of the object resonates minimalism in art. Just as the thematic emptiness of a minimalist work is compensated by its sensuous materiality, what compensates for the unpretentious and restrained quality of Kuma's form and space is the sensuousness emanating from the materials of architectural elements. On account of this sensuousness, before one stands on the platform in the lounge of the Water/ Glass House, his or her interest is directed towards the glass of which it is made. The glass' constant interaction with the natural light in combination with the ripples below triggered by wind gives rise to an unending theatrical situation. Fried's characterization deepens itself in this case, however. This is because Kuma dramatized further the glass' reflective and refractive quality by placing electric lights underneath and producing ripples mechanically. The lounge is thus in a sense doubly theatrical, being more incurable than, again borrowing Fried's phrase, the "incurably theatrical" spatiality of a minimalist work.

There is one intriguing fact about the glass platform. Despite the fact that the glass is structural, its transparency, coalesced with the memory of non-structural glass's fragility—we all have this memory, whether it was related to smashed windows or cups—plays against one's inherent subconscious connectedness with the earth as the terra firma, or the solid and stable land that we rely on. Whether one sits down or stands up, a platform always actualizes this inherent reliance of man on the solidity and trustworthiness of the terra firma, operating as its proportional figuration (Rykwert, 1982, pp.23-33; Leatherbarrow, 2004, pp.114-130). The uniqueness of Kuma's platform made out of laminated structural glass consists in the fact that it defies this expectation by revealing the otherwise hidden aquatic underworld. In that the glass platform has challenged the normalized expectation, this might be considered a unique achievement. The glass platform challenges the banal passing of the platform in our routine experience of architecture and the world. It makes one rediscover what he or she has taken for granted, bringing him or her to a refreshed memory and appreciation of the platform, its solidity and reliability. It is a kind of defamiliarization of platform, which could be justifiably commended as accomplishing the role of art as defined by Victor Shklovsky (1893-1984) in his 1917 "Art as Technique," a manifesto of the Russian Formalist methods (Shklovsky, 1965, p.12).

Stating from a different angle, the 'glass platform' oscillates between two states: glass with its materialistic sensuousness and platform with its thingly nature that supports human dwelling activities...
such as a dining occurrence. In the former state, confronting the modernist preference of the totality of form and volume over material, the architectural element displays uninhibitedly the sensuousness of its material, or the laminated structural glass with endless refraction and reflection reinforced by the surrounding aquatic landscape of a pool and an ocean beyond. In contrast, the latter state emphasizes the element's tacit operation as floor, i.e. its performance as the proportional figuration of one's intrinsic subconscious connectedness with the earth as the terra firma. Accordingly, the perceptual experience in the Water/Glass House also oscillates between two moments: first, a moment in which one is conscious of the fragmentary materialistic properties of the architectural element and, second, a moment in which one appreciates the elements' ethical function to silently uphold human dwelling activities and memories. It is true that this strife between materialistic attention and thingness is a source of the poetic quality in the Water/Glass House. One's immersion into one of the two moments is constantly defamiliarized by the presence of the other.

From a phenomenological perspective, however, the materialistic attention in this strife leaves something to be desired. This is because, as Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) would put it, the interest in the phenomenal sensuousness of an architectural element initiates aestheticism, aestheticism as the equivalent of the scientific interest in the staged, fragmentary properties of a thing, rather than the thing itself. An excessive interest in phenomenal qualities further hypnotizes one in such a way as to blind his or her transcendental intuition towards a larger whole. The perception loses sight of what Heidegger considered the holistic thingly nature of the element which is situated in the context of the Lebenswelt. Furthermore, the highly-reflective, aestheticized perception defiles a deeper layer of the pre-reflective, intimate perception in which the thingly nature of an architectural element is immeasurably measured, or lived, by the living body.

To concretize my argument further, I would like to introduce a passage by Heidegger where he argues that our proper relationship with a thing transcends an interest in its fragmentary, sensuous qualities: color, sound, roughness, hardness, resonance, resiliency, and so forth. In defense of the difference between the thingly character of a thing and its sensational properties, Heidegger wrote:

If we consider moreover what we are searching for, the thingly character of the thing, then this thing-concept again leaves us at a loss. We never really first perceive a throng of sensations, e.g., tones and noises, in the appearance of things—as the thing-concept alleges; rather we hear the storm whistling in the chimney, we hear the three-motored planes, we hear the Mercedes in immediate distinction from the Volkswagen. Much closer to us than all sensations are the things themselves. We hear the door shut in the house and never hear acoustical sensations or even mere sounds. In order to hear a bare sound we have to listen away from things, divert our ear from them, i.e., listen abstractly... In [this abstraction] the thing vanishes (Heidegger, 1993, pp.151-152).

Heidegger's point with this passage is that the localized interest in material properties of an architectural element in our typical life situation occurs rarely. In one's relationship with an architectural setting, for instance, one does not look at pieces of brick, but the brick wall. One does not look at multi-colored marble, but a marble floor. One does not look at wrought iron, but a balcony that is made out of wrought iron. In the discourse of the thing by Heidegger, the sensuous material properties are sublimated into a larger horizon, i.e. an architectural element each of which is the actualization and idealization of the human praxis: wall as the emblem of face-to-face axial encounter; floor as the modification of an irregular topography to bring about a horizontal platform on which men stand in equality; and balcony as the place for the theatrical involvement with urban occurrences (Leatherbarrow, 1993, pp.129-130). If one starts to focus on material properties of an architectural element, Heidegger argues that this unique type of attitude is one of aestheticism, (which, as argued previously, is equivalent in its focus on localized properties to the scientific manner of treating the world.) The attention to the material properties of an element, rather than what the element performs and actualizes in human dwelling, indicates that one's relationship with his or her surroundings has left the horizon of the everyday life and moved towards the highly reflective and artificial domain called aestheticism. In other words, when we are dealing with the thing, not its fragmentary properties, our interest is destined not to an aesthetic, self-narcissistic enjoyment of its properties, but to an augmentation of the praxis of human dwelling and culture through the very material properties. To be sure, the emphasis on thingness of an element does not suppress an interest in its material properties: wooden floor, marble floor, tile floor and glass floor. Rather what is of great importance is to understand the nature of an intended situation for which a particular material is more suitable than others.

There seems to be an interesting parallel between Heidegger's thingness and Morris' "unitary form." They share a common character: In both states, material properties do not stand out, but sublimate themselves into a holistic status, whether it is called thing in Heidegger's case or form in Morris' case. Simultaneously, both thing and form do not reduce the individualized, fragmentary properties to nothing; rather, these properties are sublimated to a higher horizon. The major difference between thingness and "unitary form" is, however, that the thing is engaged in life and emerges as such in human situations, while the
form is not engaged and appears as a specific object of indifference. This difference has a further resonance. The thing is self-effacing in its upholding of a human situation, very much like the brush which goes unnoticed when it is operated by a master calligrapher, while the form is present in a solitary and aloof fashion (Leatherbarrow, 2000, p.158).

Returning to Kuma's Water/ Glass House, what seems to be present here is not the anonymous performance of an architectural element, but its material attraction. The sensuous material qualities of the platform—its reflectivity, its transparency, its play with the ripples underneath, and its play with the electric light fixtures—are not simply a defamiliarization of the habitually and thus uncritically accepted platform. Rather, the sensuous qualities also destabilize the status of platform itself as a part in the holistic architectural ensemble to support dwelling. The glass platform is not so much about the defamiliarization of the platform as about the appropriation of the platform into the purpose of celebrating the sensuous potentials of glass. As matter of fact, this is the very reason why glass is everywhere in this house. And, everything is an analogy to the material properties of glass: from the fluctuating water in the pool to the invisible air in the sky. An excessive interest in visual continuity and transparency dominates the whole. Isn't the purpose of defamiliarization to reilluminate a thing, not to subsume its thingness into its own localized physical properties only to make one forget about it? Consequently, in the midst of this focus on materiality, the situational unity of dwelling which the platform silently participates in and upholds goes overlooked. In other words, in Kuma's work there seems an unjustified approbation of material properties over the addressing of life situations.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, I believe that this investigation into Kuma's conception of the "anti-object" up to now has a meaningful resonance in contemporary architecture that is characterized by an excessive interest in material properties. Such architecture proceeds with the ability to cultivate material potential and to employ the broadened palette of materials. While this type of architecture is phenomenological in that it cherishes the expression of sensuous properties and their interplay with the ever-changing natural light—sometimes dreary artificial light—and the passage of time, it is not phenomenological. This is because its phenomenal quality is neither emerging out of the lived world, nor situated within the praxis of life, but is predicated upon a highly simulated setting with an aesthetic perceiver in mind. It remains sometimes within an empiricist terrain emphasizing, for instance, the tactile as a trans-visual alternative (in a symptomatic response to the hegemonic relationship between body and mind). It fails to see the difference between the sensational or the phenomenal, on one hand, and, on the other, the phenomenological. In phenomenal architecture, it is often the case that the concatenation of sensuousness is celebrated, as if the aim of architectural design is to mesmerize the perceiver sensuously, and, in this process, the dimension of the situational augmentation of daily life is put aside.

Probably, one could argue that architecture like Kuma's residence is beautiful for its phenomenal sensuousness. Certainly, it is so. However, one who is attracted to this kind of the beautiful should remind himself or herself of Karsten Harries' insight (Harries, 1989, pp.1-32). The beautiful whose loop is enclosed within itself to confirm its self-sufficiency and which therefore fails to open a higher gate for humanity is simply empty, self-narcissistic, and even nihilistic, however beautiful it is: The beautiful is not in the moment in which an object indulges with, and flaunts, its sensuousness, but in the moment in which the object invests its material properties in a human praxis and transcends into a thing situated in the fabric of the everyday. The beautiful Harries would endorse is this anonymous radiance of a thing. From a certain angle, despite the intention to erase architecture by adopting glass, the lounge in Kuma's Glass/ Water House is in fact undeniably present for its sensuous beauty and seems to pay little attention to the paradoxical anonymity of architectural elements when they operate as things. The gist of the idea of "anti-object" is not about whether glass erases architecture—an approach which I believe ends up becoming simply another form of literalism—but about how to restore the thinly nature of architectural elements which are with us and yet which efface their presence.

References


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