ABSTRACT: In a recent interview, Bruno Latour, one of the founding progenitors of ANT (Actor Network Theory) and champion of Science and Technology Studies stated emphatically that the German philosopher, Peter Sloterdijk, “is the thinker of architecture”, (New Geographies, 0,3). By the use of the definite article it seems that we are to understand that Sloterdijk is the thinker of architecture today, and that the pressing problems that Sloterdijk can help us address include the implications that would result if we should architecture and design venture into the future production of biological species, as well as their ecological niches: A problem that Sloterdijk infamously addressed in his 1999 essay, Rules for the Human Zoo: A Response to the Letter on Humanism. The intricacies of ecological atmospheres and their affects are present from Sloterdijk’s early work, for instance, within The Critique of Cynical Reason, and become explicitly formulated in the Sphären (Spheres) trilogy, only fragments of which have been translated into English. The first part of this essay will present an introduction to Sloterdijk’s atmospheric ecologies. By atmosphere Sloterdijk sets forth not merely the affective qualities of ecological niches in natural and artefactual mixtures, but an ethics and politics of such spheres of existence. In the latter part of this essay I will set out a tentative ethico-aesthetics that can be drawn from Sloterdijk’s work in order to address the question of ecologies at the three scales of mental, social and environmental ecologies, and how design comes to play a role in the creation and destruction of these interrelated ecologies. In this I will also have the opportunity to draw on Félix Guattari’s ethico-aesthetics, and his formulation of the three ecologies, which I have appropriated above.

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Since the time of the ancients, the atmosphere, Sloterdijk tells us, has generally denoted the gaseous ball that envelops the Earth and makes us all “students of the air.” Furthermore, the necessarily ubiquitous element that is air and the ways in which the ventilation of air is achieved “is the profound secret of existence”, or so Sloterdijk insists (Sloterdijk 2005: 225). The atmospheric ecologies of the German philosopher, Peter Sloterdijk, that this paper will present, draw upon the thinker’s sphereological discourse, specifically his abiding concern for diverse spheres of existence and what he identifies as their immunological structures. It is not an easy task I set for myself as it is necessary to draw upon the largely untranslated volumes of Sloterdijk’s Spheres trilogy (Sphären), composed of: Spheres I, Bubble [Blasen]: Microsphereology (1998); Spheres II, Globes [Globen]: Macrosphereology (1999); and Spheres III, Foam [Schäume]: Plural Sphereology (2004). There are also several interviews with Sloterdijk that are available in English, and the very valuable fragments of text that have been translated, for example, in a dedicated volume of Environment and Planning D: Society and Space published in early 2009. In Germany, and Austria too, where he lives and works, Sloterdijk is often treated with some ambivalence. He is either described as being too French with respect to his writerly mode of expression, or else not sufficiently philosophical. It is true that in his book, Critique of Cynical Reason, an early work that is better known in the Anglophone world, Sloterdijk celebrates the attribute of cheekiness, and when interviews or statements appear from him in news print media, he frequently communicates an air of provocation. Like such French thinkers as Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, Sloterdijk is also fond of producing neologisms or augmenting the accepted meanings of terms, such as sphereology, neoteny, aphrology: These refer to our atmospheric spheres of existence, natural and artefactual; our premature expulsion from the mother’s womb into a world; and our modern condition of life as co-isolated cells or bubble-worlds foaming together, while remaining existentially apart. As well as offering a brief introduction to Sloterdijk’s sphereology, this essay will draw upon Félix Guattari’s ecosophy as a valuable conceptual realm of comparison. It will be helpful to the argument that unfolds here that where Sloterdijk frames his sphereology according to three scales that correspond to a microsphereology, a macrosphereology, and finally, a treatment of shared and divided spheres or foams of existence, Guattari’s ecosophy also operates according to three scales, or three ecologies, that correspond to a mental, social and environmental ecology. Present in both Sloterdijk and Guattari’s work are ethical attitudes that respond to contemporary ecological crises, and indications as to the role a creative aesthetics might play in responding to these crises.

Of what use is Sloterdijk to the thinking of architecture and design in relation to our contemporary existence in the midst of challenging ecological crises? In a recent interview, Bruno Latour, one of the founding progenitors of ANT (Actor Network Theory) and champion of Science and Technology Studies stated emphatically that the German philosopher, Peter Sloterdijk, “is the thinker of architecture” (Latour 2008: 125). By the use of the definite article it seems that we are
to understand that Sloterdijk is the thinker of architecture today, and that the pressing problems that Sloterdijk can help us address include the implications that would result should architecture and design venture into the future production of biological species, as well as their ecological niches. Latour frames the problem like this: “Where are we when the Earth becomes not the environment, but rather what we have to be artificially producing? It is a matter of design. If you extend design to the idea of producing “biological species” and place them into an entirely re-done “natural park,” and so on.” (Latour 2008: 124). It is a provocative vision, and for many no doubt a disturbing one. In many respects it approaches a final solution based on a deep disavowal of working with the overstressed spheres of existence that we currently occupy. Presumably it demands the highest degree of techno-scientific intervention armed with equipment and techniques of engagement facilitated through developing biotechnologies. These remarks from Latour also obliquely frame the fiery debate that arose in response to what is referred to as Sloterdijk’s Elmau lecture, subsequently published as Regelen für den Menschenpark, and translated as Rules for the Human Zoo (Sloterdijk 2009). Before turning to a brief account of this controversial lecture, I will ask what is Sloterdijk’s response to the idea of an entirely manufactured world-environment. In an interview with Jean-Christophe Royeux Sloterdijk responds to the utopian (or dystopian) final solution of an entirely manufactured human environment with a considerable amount of suspicion. In response to imagining a solution such as a space station where human and other life might be preserved Sloterdijk remarks “it represents a model of the world condemned to artificiality. If we presuppose an exterior nature, we will never get around to assuming full responsibility for the environment. We still haven’t understood that the environment is precisely not nature” (Sloterdijk 2005: 236). Nature, practically personified, has seemed to offer up an endless cornucopia of resources to which we can return should our staged environment or manufactured world fail. And yet, out there in cold space, in the ‘cosmic void’, on that fantastic space station, where no doubt we would continue to ache for an earthly and gravity bound home, one small error would be fatal to an entirely manufactured environment.

In an email interview with Eric Alliez, Sloterdijk argues that his infamous lecture at Elmau did not treat biotechnology, genetics, and bioethics, or else, it only ventured allusively into this controversial terrain (Alliez, Sloterdijk 2007: 323). He claims instead that his focus was upon an elucidation of Martin Heidegger’s concept of the ‘Clearing’, or what Sloterdijk describes as the ‘ekstastic’ gap that opens between human intelligence and environment. We are in-the-world Heidegger repeatedly tells us, but for Sloterdijk this relation between being and world is not a good fit. The world is too big an airy sack to accommodate the human worldling. Hence Sloterdijk’s concept of neoteny, a term otherwise used in developmental biology to describe how humans maintain juvenile traits into their adulthood. Sloterdijk takes this term, neoteny, and describes it as a premature-born-ness, and frames instead an inadequate relation between human and world. Because the human animal enters the world too soon, they need a large even excessive amount of support for a lengthy period of time from parents or carers in order to survive. Paradoxically, this premature-born-ness results in the human falling out of the ‘natural’ world, distinguishing itself from animal, and developing another kind of existential world. In many respects the Spheres trilogy goes on to treat a series of more intimate abodes that the human has historically framed and/or occupied, from the intimacy of the womb to the ego-spheric co-isolation of agglutinated and serialised modern apartments. Sloterdijk is being slipper here in his electronic interview with Alliez, as in the same breath he also discusses the question of ‘anthropotechnics’ or how human beings produce themselves, and remarks that the challenge is how to think the difference between the abject eugenics that has branded the historical hide of Germany, and the emergence of novel approaches to biotechnology and the associated implications for biopolitics today. That is, the biopolitical vista shows us how fascist eugenics already foreshadowed our own biotechnological era, however far we want to remain blind to this association. What Sloterdijk does demonstrate in Rules for the Human Zoo, is how the question of biopolitics, or how the human ‘flock’ might be managed by maintaining an appropriate balance between the bestialising and taming tendencies of a population, has preoccupied philosophers at least since Plato’s philosopher king. This philosophical account of biopolitics predates Michel Foucault’s historical location of the governmental activation of biopolitics in the mid 18th Century by more than two thousand years.

In Rules for the Human Zoo, the simple house, architectural gesture par excellence, oikos of intimacy of man and his constructed surrounds takes on the role of domesticating frame and also, curiously, ushers in the age of pets. The Clearing, following Sloterdijk’s reading of Heidegger’s famous concept, is that terrain in which houses are constructed, but also the battlefield into which men emerge from their homes to construct societies and social hierarchies. (Sloterdijk 2009a: 21). Using the voice of Friedrich Nietzsche’s character of Zarathustra to further illustrate the battle between taming and bestialising tendencies, Sloterdijk presents a scenario in which “through a collaboration of ethics and genetics”, and here Sloterdijk gets perilously close to his so-called allusions to a “bioethics”, men have “domesticated themselves and committed themselves to a breeding program aimed at pet-like accommodation” (Sloterdijk 2009a: 22). Here are the intimations of an “anthropotechnology” at the heart of which can be located one of the fundamental gestures of architecture, the basic provision of shelter. Sloterdijk goes on to stress that a titanic battle is underway in our contemporary culture between bestialising tendencies and civilising tendencies, to which we could add their associated approaches to architecture (Sloterdijk 2009a: 24). He avers that humans are self-fencing and self-shepherding creatures, and wherever they live they create parks around themselves, and here we need only think of the innumerable examples of gated communities that we have become familiar with today to hear what Sloterdijk is saying.

Sloterdijk, in a sweeping statement that opens his essay, “Cell Block, Egospheres, Self-Container” argues that the two most successful innovations of 20th Century architecture are the apartment and the sports stadium. The oikos today as primary ecological sanctuary, takes the form of serialised, agglutinated apartment cells or private world bubbles: “The apartment as living cell, represents the atomic level in the field of habitat conditions: just as the living cell in the organism simultaneously embodies the biological atom and the generative principle” (Sloterdijk 2007a: 91). With this architectural organism, which we can see must necessarily present a fragile ecological condition, Sloterdijk is then able to present his

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model of a psychosocial immune system or his theory of immunology. Immunisation relies on the fact that a community can be sufficiently contained so as to allow no space for the errant bacteria or virus to take hold. The modern apartment block, with its accumulation of living cells, is textured with differing degrees of impermeability and porosity. Today this block, with its accumulation of living cells, is textured with differing degrees of impermeability and porosity. Today this

its plane of immanence. What Deleuze calls affects Agamben calls “carriers of significance” (Agamben 2004: 46). Agamben describes Uexküll’s schema as follows “an infinite variety of perceptual worlds that, though they are uncommunicating and reciprocally exclusive, are all equally perfect and linked together as if in a gigantic musical score” (Agamben 2004: 40). As we have seen, Sloterdijk, rather than using the model of a musical score, or a plane of immanence, chooses the seething material of foam, but also suggests that the modern understanding of ecology is suggestive of a science of general domestication.

Although Sloterdijk wants to suggest an extreme wariness with this account of ecology and its connection with the concept of oikos, as ecology still risks being ‘naturalised’, it can also lead him to make such remarks as “all men are not only born free and equal but [they’re] all condemned to look after the space in which they live and ensure the breathability and liveability of their environment” (Sloterdijk, Royeux 2005: 230). The notion of house cleaning can be seemingly extended to more open fields of social action. Nevertheless, because of the continuing “betailising tendencies” of modern man, which “tends to accompany displays of great power: whether as open warfare or raw imperial power, or in the daily degradation of human beings in entertainments offered in the media” (Sloterdijk: 2009a: 15), we see that humans as often as not devise means of destroying environments in order to vanquish their enemy, forgetting that in such destruction they may also be threatening their own well being. There is another significant moment in history where Sloterdijk locates the emergence of the concept of environment, and that is during World War One on the battlefield in Ypres with the inaugural deployment of gas weaponry: “the discovery of the environment took place in the trenches of the First World War, in which soldiers from both sides had become so unreachable by munitions or explosives that the problem of atmospheric war must have appeared to them acutely” (Sloterdijk 2009b: 45). Sloterdijk goes on to describe clouds of yellowish smoke drifting across the battlefield, soldiers spiting blood and begging for water, their diffuse environment having been targeted as a vital, atmospheric sphere of existence (Sloterdijk 2009b: 42).

The development of gas weaponry can be seen to develop in an almost direct genealogical line and according to a horrifying economic or business-minded logic toward the use of Zyklon B to stabilise hydrocyanic acid in the gas chambers of the infamous German concentration camps. This technology, Sloterdijk elaborates, was first developed for pest control. He remarks, “The 20th century will be remembered as the period whose decisive idea consisted in targeting not the body of the enemy, but his environment” (Sloterdijk 2009b: 43), whether that enemy is a louse or a human organism. The inextricability of organism and environment here is recognised in terms of how the organism as assemblage of mobile affects and percepts extends into the environment, which offers the prosthetic affordability of its
very livelihood and longevity. Once the environment is made unliveable, there is no longer any place of retreat for the organism, whether human, animal, or other, and outer space certainly appears to be an improbable solution.

Guattari opens his essay, *The Three Ecologies*, with a quote taken from Gregory Bateson’s *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*: “There is an ecology of bad ideas, just as there is an ecology of weeds”. Another way of stating this is that “now more than ever, nature cannot be separated from culture” (Guattari 2000: 43), and bad ideas can have a devastating impact on both natural and artefactual systems. What Guattari points out is that where Charles Darwin’s theory of natural selection pinpoints the family line, species or subspecies as the fundamental unit of survival, Bateson argues that the unit of survival is “organism plus environment” and that, in turn, it is only through bitter experience that the organism learns that if it destroys its environment it also destroys itself (Guattari 2000: 70). There is an ecology of bad ideas, just as there is an ecology of weeds: this is a statement that Guattari reminds us of in order to recognize the way thought and nature interlock upon what Deleuze and Guattari together have called a plane of immanence. Guattari’s three ecologies are composed of a social ecology, a mental ecology and an environmental ecology, and we are encouraged to think ‘transversally’ across these terrains of existence. It may be safe to suggest that where Sloterdijk offers the model of spheres of existence, for Deleuze and Guattari such spheres are rather akin to planes of existence, all of which are supported by a plane of immanence. Guattari’s three ecologies outline not just structures by which we can understand a world, but modes of praxis and existential territories. Where the social ecology “will have to work toward rebuilding human relations at every level of the socius” (Guattari 2000: 49), the imperatives of mental ecology “call for an appropriate mobilization of individuals and of social segments as a whole” (Guattari 2000: 57), and environmental ecology, finally, is not a straightforward account of ‘Nature’, nor does it belong only to special interest groups and nature buffs, but describes contextual ensembles both natural and artefactual, and could as well be called “machinic ecology” (Guattari 2000: 66). Techno-scientific progress, massive increases in population, mass media consumption, global warming, the ossification of social groupuscules, and so on and so forth, all these are comprised of the intricate articulations of the three ecologies. Latour, who has been cited above, suggests that by now we are over debates that divide nature from culture and have come to a point (at least a conceptual point) where we recognize that nature and culture form something more of a continuum (Latour 2008: 132). On the contrary, I would argue that we are not over it, that we are still struggling with this distinction and we still place the emphasis too greatly on one side or the other. We are environment-world forgetful creatures.

Do we want to have to arrive at a point in human history (or post-history) where we are obliged to create the whole thing, environment and human, animal and other organism? We are world-making creatures, we are also co-constituted with our worlds, but we must also remember that these worlds we create are at the same time our habitats, our environments. Karl Chu remarks in his essay, *Metaphysics of Genetic Architecture and Computation*, that as a result of the convergence of computation and biogenetics “for the first time, mankind is finally in possession of the power to change and transform the genetic constitution of biological species, which, without a doubt, has profound implications for the future of life on Earth” (Chu 2004: 76). Sloterdijk has a few very specific things he has to say about the emergence of what we could call a new biotechnological paradigm in architecture, which still remains very much at the service of preconceived notions of architectural form making, and the specific post-industrial subjects (or consumers) who come to inhabit it. With respect to biomorphism and design Sloterdijk remarks that “it’s mainly an expression of the fact that modern mathematics has caught up with organic form”, of course, novel software programs also help. Neither is it a matter of the triumph of mathematics over nature, he warns: “It’s not at all a question of a return to nature, it’s an insolent interpretation as a symbol of the fact that technique has attained the necessary savoir-faire to declare its responsibility over organic form” (Sloterdijk, Royeux 2005: 237, 238). That is, designers can now play with living matter, both at the level of tissue experiments, as well as at the level of appropriated evolutionary and other algorithms that contribute to the production of architectural form. The fact that a “bio-artist” like Oron Catts can produce a synthetic steak in a laboratory, a steak that is subsequently consumed as an expression of art, and then make light of the ethical issues that accompany this minor act of aesthetico-biotechnical expertise (Stephens 2009) this does not mean that artists and designers have become aware of the relationships that bind the human being to different environments.

A distinction between welt and umwelt – or between the world [welt] we construct and the environment [umwelt] we inhabit – is one that potentially results in a disavowal of the global ecological crises that are surging forth at the scale of the mental, the social and the environmental. The welt and the umwelt are concurrently laid out on a plane of nature-thought wherein one becomes indiscernible from the other. We construct the world as it constructs us, and in the same moment the world is our environment, an environment-world, at varying scales of operation. Are we world-creators, or doomed to an environment that we have creatively destroyed through our own avarice and greed? Sloterdijk shows us the gaseous and variably ventilated envelopes that create the intimate and inextricable couplings of organism and environment. Often we need to focus more closely on the intimate lodgings of the human, especially now that there is a greater likelihood that they are to be found in the setting of an urban habitat. As well as making this world, and worlds within worlds, from the home, to the school to “a national assembly, a “love Parade”, a club, a freemason’s lodge, a workforce, a shareholder meeting, a concert hall audience, a suburban neighbourhood…drivers stuck in traffic jam” (Sloterdijk 2007b: 63) we can only survive a certain rearrangement of our affects, our carriers of significance, before the whole assemblage fails or fall apart. Please leave this world in the state you found it, or better still, augment it only in so far as you make it more generally breathable and liveable for the incoming inhabitants.
REFERENCES


