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Landscape and the Little Man: Aalto, the Institution and the Individual

The architecture of Alvar Aalto had numerous formative interests, including an awareness of the forms and poetics of landscape, and a regard for the “little man,” the individual Finn living in a modernised industrialised welfare state. The role of the individual is the subject of an essay in the recent New Nordic catalogue where historian Lars Trägårdh identifies a Nordic “statist individualism,” in which “the central axis around which the Nordic social contract is formed is the alliance between state and individual.” Trägårdh’s findings recall Aalto’s commitment to his universal user: “a love for the little man,” and a perceived need for “a kind of guardian when our era’s mechanised life style threatens to strangle the individual and the organically harmonious life.” Aalto also proclaimed that “Nature is, of course, freedom’s symbol,” implying personal and political liberties associated with nature and landscape. The New Nordic articles signal a need for a contemporary conversation about architecture’s social and environmental roles, both in and beyond the socially progressive Nordic democracies. Aalto’s work endures in its everyday uses, and as a critical and historical precedent for reflection on architecture as a socially and environmentally responsive art, within and beyond the Nordic countries.

This paper examines the role of landscape in Aalto’s architectural strategies as they mediate between the institution and the individual. Based on experience of Aalto’s Jyväskylä University and Säynatsalo Town Hall projects, and informed by a formal analysis, following and adapting Eisenman’s method, of the Jyväskylä main building and festival hall, this paper discloses and investigates landscape, architectural and detail design strategies in Aalto’s work in conjunction with recent thinking on individual and community in the Nordic states. It considers the value of Aalto’s legacy, in architecture made between the landscape and the “little man”.

Introduction: Nordic dualities

In the catalogue of the exhibition New Nordic – Architecture and Identity, held at Denmark’s Louisiana Museum of Modern Art in 2012, social and landscape issues are raised in three articles. Two socially-oriented articles, one focused on the individual, the other on community, form a question as to whether the user of Nordic institutional architecture is the individual, or the community; a third article challenges assumptions on matters of site and place, and questions a “topographical determinism” of climate, geology, building materials, even an implicit nationalism, in Nordic architectural thinking.¹ The coincidence of these articles juxtaposes social issues with landscape questions, and offers contemporary perspectives on the representational content of democratic and educational institutions. This paper aims to give these issues historical context by looking at two institutional projects by Alvar Aalto, whose architecture was engaged with nature and landscape, and with the fate of the “little man,” his everyday architectural dweller and user.

The work of Alvar Aalto continues to exemplify a “humanised” architecture whose forms and ideals have influenced practitioners including Jørn Utzon, Glenn Murcutt and Shigeru Ban. Robert McCarter remarked in his 2014 Aalto monograph on “this Aalto ‘school’ of Modern architecture,” with its ideals of “designing for human experience and compatibility with the natural environment over what Aalto called ‘the tyranny’ of both the formal and the technical.”² In this paper, personal experience of two Aalto projects informs a reading of landscape strategies at different scales, to comment on apparent relationships between the institution and the individual or the community, evident in Aalto’s architectural interweaving of cultural and natural materials, and his architectural strategies in defense of the “little man” against the effects of technologised modernisation and the bureaucratised democratic or civic institution.

Individual, community, landscape

The high social value of architecture in Finland in the form of designed educational environments was noticed by Australian social scientist Andrew Scott, in *Northern Lights* (2014), where he describes a series of Nordic public policy initiatives in his quest to inform policymakers in developing social, educational and environmental reforms for Australia. Scott finds Finnish schools “very well designed and resourced … stimulating and rewarding places in which to work,” while school architecture and school environments are seen as factors in the high esteem of Finland’s world-leading education system.³ Scott quotes a Jyväskylä school principal’s remarks that building and classroom design are strategic contributors to successful learning: “The pedagogical approach, the way you work with the kids, is also [about] how you plan your environment and use it in your learning and teaching.”⁴ The educational institution itself seems consciously directed to the benefit of the individual: Australian school principals visiting Finland in 2012 observed an education system that held the individual child in high regard: “the belief in making a difference for each and every child … ensures a supportive learning environment.”⁵ That the individual may be the principal beneficiary of this system, rather than an idealised “community,” suggests an architecture

whose composition and details embody and make real that institution's ideals.

An individualist bias in Finnish public policy is noted by historian Lars Trägårdh, writing on the success of Nordic capitalism in confronting recent financial crises and globalisation. He identifies within the Nordic nations a "statist individualism" wherein "the central axis around which the Nordic social contract is formed is the alliance between state and individual."⁶ Yet while Trägårdh privileges the individual, architect Peter MacKeith proposes that schools, colleges and other recent Nordic buildings reflect socially sustaining ideals of community, in "community buildings and spaces of great quality and available to all, within buildings and learning environments designed to reflect the values and ideals of an open, progressive society."⁷

In the essay "Making Place", Norwegian architect Mari Hvattum queries longstanding assumptions of Nordic architecture's affinity with "nature" and "place". Hvattum characterises contemporary Nordic work as "an architecture that effectively debunks the myths of authenticity and 'naturalness' that surround Nordic building, replacing it with a far more interesting kind of contextualism"⁸; this context is made not only of topography but is complicated by "layers upon layers of human action, sedimented in memory, language, customs, and physical form" – that is, a re-negotiation and reinterpretation of concepts of "nature" and "place".⁹ In such a context of new questions and more nuanced attitudes to landscape, nature and place, it is interesting to consider how attention to both individual and community might be evident in Aalto's work and ideas, particularly in his institutional buildings and their details. Aalto sustained two interrelated sets of ideals throughout his career: an ideal of harmony between humankind and the natural world, and an empathy for his everyday public client, the "little man" – maintaining both in the face of twentieth-century modernisation and the modern institution – as Richard Weston summarises: "For Aalto, architecture was always a form of mediation between man and nature, in the struggle for existence, and between 'the little man' and the bureaucratic institutions and technologies of a mass society."¹⁰ Investigation into Aalto's architecture shows a duality, on one hand, a concern for the individual in the building and the landscape, and on the other, with formal strategies that represent institutional ideals. Aalto's attention to such problems is central to his architectural legacy.

The little man: in-between and harmony

A selective review of Aalto's words suggests that his intellectual and emotional affinities may have been with the individual; he closed his RIBA lecture in London in 1957 by saying, "We should work for simple, good, undecorated things, but things which are in harmony with the human being and organically suited to the little man in the street."¹¹ Aalto's term "the little man" (in Finnish *kadunmies*, the man in the street, little man; or *tavallinen ihminen*, common man, everyman, the man in the street) seems to typify an architect's condescension to an everyday client. Yet Aalto used the phrase "the little man" repeatedly throughout his long career to designate the potential plight of the human being confronted with bureaucracy, war and modernisation; he illustrated a 1928 article "The Rational Cinema" with a collage

including Charlie Chaplin's Charlot, the Little Tramp (in Chaplin's words the "little fellow") to promote ideas of the "anti-monumental quality" of cinema.¹² The term "little man" appears to imply Aalto's empathy with his fellow Finn, even to invoke the Finnish ideal of "sisu," a resourceful courage shown by Finns, notably through wars and other national challenges.¹³ Sigfried Giedion presented Aalto as Modernism's man of the people: "his architecture encounters less difficulty in overcoming the resistance of the common man than that of others of his contemporaries."¹⁴ As testimony to Aalto's apparent empathy, most of his buildings (town halls, offices, libraries, universities, theatres, shops and housing) remain in good condition, used and maintained as everyday settings for daily life throughout Finland.¹⁵ Aalto's example challenges corporatised contemporary architecture and public environments with its insistence that architecture should look after everyday people. Sarah Williams Goldhagen affirms that Aalto's human vision, while difficult to realise, was not an irrational dream; rather, "Aalto's 'humanism' was an inexpertly articulated call for Modernists to create a rationalist architecture of the *human being*: a physiological, perceiving, thinking creature."¹⁶ Rather than proposing projects for an abstract "society," it seems that Aalto saw the sensitive, responsive individual as the key recipient and user of his architecture.

Säynätsalo and Jyväskylä: institution, community, individual and landscape

Two institutional designs by Aalto mediate between landscape and the individual: Säynätsalo Town Hall (1949-52), and the auditorium and main building at Jyväskylä University (1951-75). At Säynätsalo, writes Nicholas Ray, Aalto "seems to have found ways to express a community, and to celebrate and idealise its values, in the mid-twentieth century."¹⁷ However, while the town that Aalto planned as context for Säynätsalo has not materialised, leaving the building largely isolated in the forest, democratic ideals and strategies remain evident in this renowned civic building. The finely-made brick outer walls seem to represent community resolve and integrity, while within the complex, elements that can be seen and used and details that can be touched evoke a concern for individual contact and wellbeing. Andres Duany has diagnosed in Aalto's works "consistently rational principles underlying their apparently idiosyncratic formal and organizational structures," including "strong consideration of the perception of buildings from pedestrian vantage points, and an associated control of



Fig. 1 Säynätsalo Town Hall. Eastern granite stairs and council chamber. Photograph by John Roberts, 2008.

silhouette.”¹⁸ Aalto’s design for perception is not accidental; silhouette is observed from outside the building as in the landscape or the city: the profile of the meeting room changes with each step taken by a visitor. This phenomenon is designed strategically, as a rational principle, satisfying the individual eye and creating a full experience of the architecture.

In *New Keywords* (2005) the terms community and individual are reviewed through social sciences discourses. Community implies a social connection “felt to be more ‘organic’ or ‘natural,’ and therefore stronger and deeper, than a rational or contractual association of individuals, such as the market or the state.”¹⁹ The Säynatsalo courtyard is not a piece of nature but a designed artifice, deriving partly from Aalto’s experiences of Finnish farmsteads and Mediterranean *piazze*. The courtyard is a synthetic landscape possessing elements of refuge, garden, and even the “paradise” of the Persian walled garden, recalling also Aalto’s ideal of harmony, and of architecture’s “ulterior motive … the thought of creating a paradise.”²⁰

The Säynatsalo Town Hall project (Figure 1) has been analysed by Peter Eisenman and by Rob Aben and Saskia de Wit – the first from a formal architectural viewpoint, the second as a formal landscape analysis.²¹ Both see conflict between internal and external factors in the building’s form: at landscape scale, an enclosed square courtyard is impacted by external vectors of aligned urban elements; at architectural scale, both sources describe the separation and turning of the library block, and the relocation of the council chamber tower relative to entry and hierarchy of circulation. While Aben and de Wit interpret the project in terms of Finnish culture and landscape, Eisenman develops an understanding of the architecture by formal analysis, considering order, and generic and specific states of form:

Form in its generic state will provide the conceptual reference for all physical manifestations of specific form, as well as give the basis for the specific ordering of this form … The understanding of this state is realized through an analysis of its inherent properties: volume, surface, mass, and movement.

Form in its specific state provides the perceptual means for the comprehension of the systemic order. This order is clarified by such properties of specific form as shape, colour, texture, size, scale and proportion.

A building which is realized as a specific form must have a generic antecedent.²²

Eisenman’s analysis provides a basis for a reading of Aalto’s Jyväskylä University main building (below). It can also inform a comparison of the Säynatsalo outdoor stairs as different elements, and a hypothesis that one seems designed for group use while the other accommodates the individual. Both outdoor stairs – granite to the east, grass to the west – are generally regarded as entry elements, yet their forms are different: the orthogonal eastern stairs, located at the end of the long town axis, with their freestanding balustrade and fine regular treads, have space and a clear axial line; a group can follow up the stairs, gather in the courtyard or turn immediately and follow the pergola towards the council

chamber. The eastern stair volume rises in its own space, stepping up beside the brick volume of the council chamber. By comparison, the grassed stairs seem to twist away from the courtyard's orthogonal axis, breaking down and flowing outward in plan and in a convex section, squeezed between walls, the lines of their timber risers folded by outward pressure (Figure 2).

The west stairs seem to facilitate outward-directed informal sitting and individualised use, privileging exit over entry, and with materials requiring ongoing maintenance and occasional reconstruction.²³ Exemplifying Eisenman's specific formal attributes of "shape, colour, texture, size, scale and proportion," the western stairs counter regular order with staggered shapes at acute and obtuse angles, in varying sizes and proportions, the colours and softer textures of grass and timber seemingly suited to individual rather than mass circulation. Ultimately, while the solid eastern stairs draw visitors up to the leveled piazza, the flowing western stairs appear to draw the visitor out and down to a low, unconstrained lightly forested space; view lines also direct outward from the courtyard through the angled western opening. Conceptually, and in terms of vision and circulation, the grassy stair seems to result partly from a landscape vector connecting higher up the hill to the north, a gravitational force that requires resolution, through both resistance and yielding: resistance, by the library block counterweighted by its basement under the courtyard; and yielding, in creating at the western corner a kind of formal "overflow". Thus, in the way that a well-made dam includes a corner spillway for vagrant waters, the courtyard includes an exit route for the wandering individual, the "little man" of Aalto's schemes.



Fig. 2 Säynätsalo Town Hall. Western grassed stairs.
Photograph by John Roberts, 2008.

Within the courtyard's shelter, the building entry welcomes the visitor to join a route winding up and into the meeting room; one proceeds as though circumambulating a large rock. Details of material and atmosphere make a sense of individuality: of care for the individual hand in the leather-wrapped door handles and timber handrails; for the individual foot in the stairs of soft brick rising to the Town Hall chamber; for the individual eye in the low light of the corridors and stairways entering through finely proportioned, accurately located windows. Similar details are found, in different form but in similarly intimate individuated elements

of circulation, in the passageways, stairs and doors of the Jyväskylä festival hall and main building.

Jyväskylä: institutional landscape, individual details

Modernity, according to *New Keywords*, is accompanied by the “emergence of the new conception of the person”:

[Modernity] destroyed many of the traditional social institutions and radically transformed others, freed men and later women from inherited or ascriptive identities, and defined them as naturally free and self-determining individuals who wished to make their own choices, shape their own lives, and form their own relationships with others ... Their social identity does matter to them but it is contingent, subject to critical reflection, and revisable.²⁴

Modernity offered a new sense of social identity in which the “free” individual had the power to make choices, to vote, to act, to form relationships; this individual became the “little man” of Aalto’s aspirations and design strategies. Beginning with a winning competition entry in 1951, Aalto transformed the old Jyväskylä teachers’ college into a modern college (now Jyväskylä University) campus – a strategy itself aimed at recreating the city’s reputation as “the Athens of the North”. Aalto in a 1955 address said famously, “I believe that there are many moments in life in which the way things are organized is too brutal, and it is for the architects to give life a more sensitive framework.”²⁵ He mentioned also “the dangerous passage between Scylla and Charybdis, between individualism and collectivism.”²⁶ Aalto had indicated his full awareness of this duality, referring to Jyväskylä:

As we all know, modern education is highly collectivized. All we can manage is to raise our children within more or less the same system; there can be no question of any real individualism in education today. We also know that collectivism has its benefits, but that it can also harm human beings. The right course lies somewhere between absolute individualism and excessive collectivization.²⁷

In this section, a formal analysis of the Jyväskylä main building and festival hall outlines how Aalto located and formed a building to steer a course between “absolute individualism and excessive collectivization” in his home town. Aalto’s main building houses a complex program and is located at the corner of the new campus on his chosen site, upon a natural ridge where four potentially conflicting urban, institutional and environmental elements coincide: the old college buildings to the north, the new U-shaped campus to the west, the city to the east, and the hillside forest to the south.

A formal analysis: Jyväskylä University: concept and harmony

A formal description of the architecture allows the argument of the building, in Eisenman’s words, to be “intellectually as well as visually comprehensible.”²⁸ This analysis provides a basis for comprehending the individual building within the greater order of its environment

or setting; it also allows an opportunity to see individual circulation and detailed elements within the totality. Eisenman considered this relationship and expressed an ideal of harmony not unlike Aalto's own aspirations of harmony:

If we demand of form that it should provide us with the means for giving comprehensibility to the total environment, it follows that a clear priority accrues to the form-giving process. On this reckoning the form of an individual building need not necessarily be expressive of its form or function, so long as it contributes to the order, scale, harmony, and pattern of the total environment.²⁹

As Aalto noted in his 1951 Jyväskylä competition description, titled "URBS," he needed to resolve conflicts in the main building: at urban scale, between the city and the park-like university site; and at building scale, between the complex interior program and the circulation dynamics involving "the main thoroughfare route through the university, which allows the university to be independent of the festival hall when it is being hired out."³⁰ A sequence of diagrams follows the formal development of the main building/festival hall complex at the eastern entry to the university campus. A centroidal square is assumed as the generic form of the Jyväskylä University main building and the auditorium or "festival hall."³¹

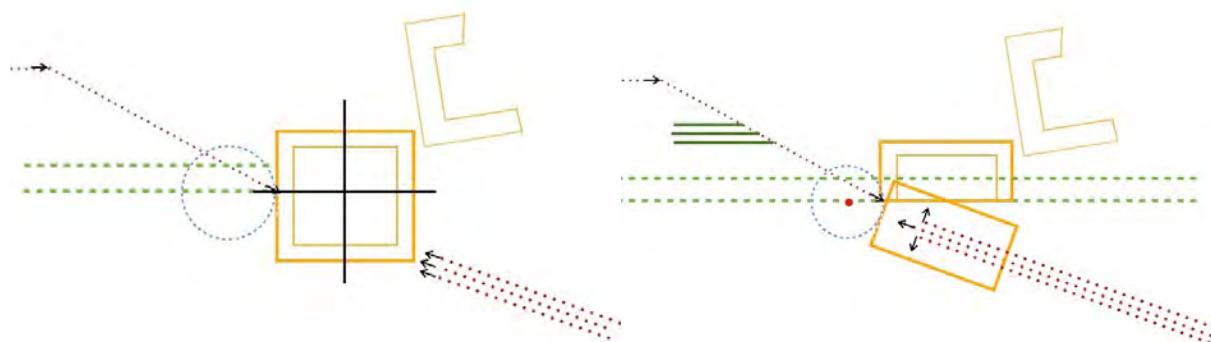


Fig. 3 Jyväskylä University. Formal diagram: generic centroidal square is split and turned by axes of movement and alignment from campus (l) and (r) from city.
Diagrams by John Roberts, 2015.

The generic main building, a centroidal square volume axially aligned with the campus buildings, is located on a natural terrace at the top of a ridge overlooking Lake Jyväsjärvi, near the buildings of the old Jyväskylä Pedagogical Institute. Two axes of movement converge from opposite directions to transform and particularise the generic centroidal volume (Figure 3). From the city the uphill Seminaarinkatu street creates a powerful "city axis" beside the older buildings, while from the campus a path following the line of new buildings deflects 30 degrees past an echelon of retaining walls, towards the terrace and square. The axes are organising vectors; the city axis includes vehicles and pedestrians,

while the campus paths are for pedestrians only. The university entry thoroughfare follows the strong alignment of the new campus buildings, maintaining a central axis of alignment.

The campus path axis terminates at the main building, creating a point of rupture. This rupture cuts into the main building and allows its southern half to be rotated south 20 degrees around the setout point, to a new alignment with the city axis. The northern volume becomes a four-storey building block; part of its roof is cut away above a multistorey top-lit arcade connecting campus and city, furnished with a massive balustraded stair accessing upper floors. The rotated southern volume becomes the festival hall, where two auditorium spaces are fused, aligned and unified into one interior by the strong city axis; the festival hall volume points arrow-like into the campus (Figure 4).

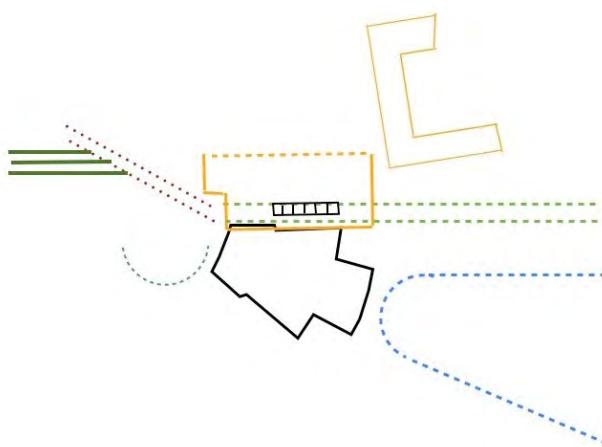


Fig. 4 Jyväskylä University. Formal diagram showing main building above; festival hall below; circular terrace to left. Diagram by John Roberts, 2015.

The dynamic city axis vector pushes the auditorium upwards, forming a foyer space connected by glass doors to the city, and by full-height windows to the forest. The city axis aligns the foyer doors, the main central staircase and the centre of the symmetrical auditorium; smaller staircases deflect to either side from the axis at right angles towards the hall's upper section. While the foyer realigns and opens out to the south towards forest views through full-height windows, the main building, like the library at Säynatsalo, is turned



Fig.5 Jyväskylä University. Main building to left, festival hall to right. Photograph by John Roberts, 2008.

to receive north light. The skyline (of the crafts and drawing rooms) is formed by a block of windows outlined in white, located in a stepped cutaway in the wall, and turning to “look around” the corner through cutouts in the east and west cornices (Figure 5).

The brick perimeter walls of the original centroidal square of the main building are impacted and given final form by vectors of circulation, orientation and internal program. The main building's four-storey brick façade, terminating the campus vista, is visually unified into a cliff of brick with shears and steps in plan, both splitting and joining with the festival hall's outward-inflected western wall, which also terminates the uphill vector of the city axis from the east. The form-giving axes, routes, volumes and alignments of the project are concealed behind the height and angles of this landscape-scale wall. The balustraded stair element in the entry thoroughfare continues the line of the pedestrian circulation axis upward to landings, with natural light entering from above through lozenge-shaped skylights set in a rectangular ceiling, maintaining the form and function of the original generic courtyard.

The generic is thus made particular and individualised in the building's form, as above, and also in the details and individual elements “furnishing” and completing the interior spaces. Numerous details seem transposed from the outdoor world (the “landscape”) into the building's interior. The topography of the hill within the town is replayed, and formally concluded inside the atrium, by the solid, rhythmically rising stair balustrade, which eventually locates the ascending individual in the highest part of the building's courtyard interior, under the artificial sky. At a smaller scale, in a stair detail in the festival hall foyer, a handrail is wrapped in black leather; the handrail is prominent at foyer level but is concealed at the landing, slotted into the white balustrade, only to turn and reappear above the balustrade (Figure 6). This singular detail echoes elements glimpsed in the natural world: a dark stick, a black branch in silhouette, a shadow on snow, an impressed snow bank; when experienced, such details can seem like a brief passage of landscape re-made inside the building. This detail exemplifies the process by which a landscape-like detail becomes part of Aalto's strategy of gradually refining the building at smaller scales, translating an institutional architecture from concept to building form to the singular human-scale element. Located, formed and materialised with care, the handrail surprises, welcomes and assures



Fig. 6 Jyväskylä University festival hall. Stairs, balustrade and handrail. Photograph by John Roberts, 2008.

the “little man” in a building made to achieve a harmony within the landscape, the campus and the city.

Conclusion: design for the little man

Aalto’s work, relative to his early ideals, located in landscape settings, and experienced by the contemporary “little man” visitor, elaborates nuanced relationships between the institution and the individual or the community. Formal analysis reveals building strategies relating to external urban and landscape forces at various scales in Aalto’s institutional architecture, interweaving “the cultural and the natural” and sensitive to the presence of the “little man,” who finds accommodation in the finer haptic and visual details of Aalto’s buildings. Aalto’s legacy remains provocative and relevant at landscape, building and detail scale, within his buildings and in his designed landscapes, as at Jyväskylä and Säynatsalo. His mellowing buildings remain welcoming and accommodating, with readable insights from which contemporary architecture may continue to learn, about attention to architectural form, social function and individuated detail in buildings and landscapes designed for the enduring benefit of the “little man,” the individual man, woman and child of contemporary society.

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 - 4 Scott, *Northern Lights*, 101.
 - 5 Scott, *Northern Lights*, 128.
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 - 8 Hvattum, “Making Place,” 115.
 - 9 Hvattum, “Making Place,” 115.
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- 22 Eisenman, *The Formal Basis of Modern Architecture*, 85.
- 23 Kari Jormakka pointed out to the author in conversation at Säynatsalo in 2011 that recent restoration works have built only ten steps, rather than the original fourteen. See Figure 2.
- 24 Bhiku Parekh, "Individual," in Bennett, Grossberg and Morris, *New Keywords*, 183.
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- 26 Aalto, "Between Humanism and Materialism," 180.
- 27 Aalto, "Between Humanism and Materialism," 178.
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