

# Disintegrating Matter, Animating Fields

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## GEOMETRY

Philip Beesley's textile installations are created from multiple individual elements that are assembled into aggregates, fields, surfaces and clouds. The interconnections and calculations required in such assemblies are a matter of geometry. But then measurement is at the root of many textiles; we need only think for example, of the calculation that goes into preparing the harnesses for a loom. Beesley's earliest geotextile installations—*Haystack Veil* (1997) and *Erratics Net* (1998)—were mesh structures spread out over Atlantic coastal landscapes. Rather than stabilizing the earth beneath them as would a conventional geotextile, these installations hovered just above the surface of the ground, catching airborne matter and creating a still zone at the surface of the earth in which fragile plant life might take root. Beesley explains his approach to geometry:

*I came across the term geotextiles through Warren Seelig, who introduced me to large-scale textiles. My use of the term geotextile was a response to the traumatic idea...that one could stretch a Platonic, homogenizing, world-enclosing, totalizing grid over the earth to control it in one system. I was looking at alternate etymologies of [the word] geometry—in Gaia [earth...and mater [mother], the underlying fertile whole. I loved the idea of geometry having at its root a...life-force, rather than the dry, cutting quality that I associate with the Platonic absolutes. That gave me a certain attitude toward the engineering aspects of geotextiles—using a generative approach rather than a...controlling one. The aspect of geotextiles that I love so much is that they have mutual relationships with living things we implant into the earth that foster other growth.<sup>1</sup>*

Another early project, *Synthetic Earth*<sup>2</sup> (1996)—carried out in collaboration with the glass artist Katherine Gray—offered the possibility that geotextiles might be more than a matrix for fostering plant life; they might

even substitute for it as a kind of second nature. In this installation, an array of wax-sealed glass vessels containing 'digestive fluids' were embedded in a dense filigree mesh made of entangled barbed wires that he described as a 'shroud.'<sup>4</sup> This was one of the first of Beesley's installations to explore the relationship between inanimate and biological matter, a theme that he has continued to pursue up to his most recent work, *Hylozoic Soil* (2006). The term comes from the ancient Greeks, who saw the constant motion of inorganic nature as evidence that it was, in some sense, alive. Their word for this was hylozoism: this is the belief that matter is animate and possibly even conscious; and that life is inseparable from matter.

## ANIMA

Beesley's textiles do not merely have biological qualities, they have animate qualities—they feed and digest, burrow and push. He elaborates:

*The particular geotextiles I've been investigating have teeth in them. They're not benign instruments of stewardship; rather, they have their own agenda, they need to feed themselves, they dig into the earth, they push humans away, they need to eat and digest and forge themselves. I'm trying to conceive of a layer of the earth that is not at the service of humans but perhaps can have a mutual relationship with our own occupation.<sup>5</sup>*

An artificial fabric that acts on its desires; this is an uncanny body, as Freud used the term, something familiar yet strange that attracts and repels the viewer simultaneously. According to Ernst Jentsch, who first defined the concept in his essay 'On the Psychology of the Uncanny' (1906), one has 'doubt as to whether an apparently animate being is really alive; or conversely, whether a lifeless object might be, in fact, animate'<sup>6</sup> In the last century, the sense that people were 'ingenious machines'<sup>7</sup> was well enough established for some philosophers to wonder if human beings were fully alive or were instead, to some degree, automata. The guru G.I. Gurdjieff asked this question. He believed that people trapped within their own subjectivity experience life in a dream state, unconscious of their place in the universe and their potential. He called this a 'waking sleep.' Such people—driven by thoughts, feelings, and actions that are little more than mechanical reactions to external and internal stimuli—squander their life in a search for pleasure and emotional impulses. Instead, Gurdjieff argued, people need to become conscious of their connection to other beings, and their role in creation. This is why he tried to shock his followers, to 'wake them up' from their automatic reactions.<sup>8</sup>

In the same spirit, Beesley wants his textiles to unsettle and disturb their viewers. He describes them as 'carnivorous.' In *Hungry Soil* (2000), he explains that 'protruding hooks and latex bladders equipped with hollow needles imply mechanical operations on drifting organic matter: capture, injection, ingestion.' Like a Venus flytrap, these creations immobilize their prey before slowly incorporating them. We are reminded here of Antonin Artaud, who wished to recreate the thrill of raw experience in his theatre

<sup>4</sup> Quotations from Philip Beesley in *Statement* (July 20, 2006) and in *Synthetic Earth* (1996) website project description, [www.philipbeesleyarchitect.com](http://www.philipbeesleyarchitect.com)

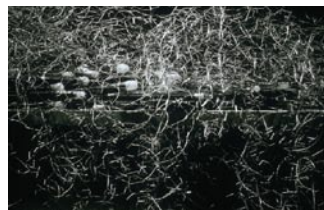
<sup>5</sup> Beesley interview, March 4, 2007

<sup>6</sup> Ernst Jentsch, *On the Psychology of the Uncanny* (1906), cited by Sigmund Freud in his essay *The Uncanny* (1919), translated by Alix Strachey (1925)

<sup>7</sup> Term taken from Mimi Cazort, Monique Kornell and K. B. Roberts, *The Ingenious Machine of Nature: Four Centuries of Art and Anatomy* (National Gallery of Canada, 1996)

<sup>8</sup> For an authoritative account of Gurdjieff's teaching, see P.D. Ouspensky, *In Search of the Miraculous: Fragments of an Unknown Teaching* (Harvest/HBJ Book, 2001)

<sup>1</sup> Philip Beesley, telephone interview with Sarah Bonnemaïson and Ronit Eisenbach, March 4, 2007



<sup>2</sup> *Synthetic Earth* (1996)

9 Antonin Artaud, *The Theatre of Cruelty, The Theory of the Modern Stage*, ed. Eric Bentley (Penguin, 1968) p. 66

10 Antonin Artaud, *To Have Done with the Judgment of God*, Antonin Artaud Selected Writings ed. Susan Sontag (University of California Press, 1976) p. 571

11 Philip Beesley, 'Orgone Reef,' (cover article) *Architectural Design* vol. 75, no. 4 (July-Aug 2005), p. 52

12 See Lynn Margulis, *Origin of Eukaryotic Cells*, Yale University Press, 1970; Lynn Margulis and Dorion Sagan, *Microcosmos: Four Billion Years of Evolution from Our Microbial Ancestors*, HarperCollins, 1987; Lynn Margulis, *Symbiotic Planet: A New Look at Evolution*, Basic Books, 1998; and Lynn Margulis and Dorion Sagan, *Acquiring Genomes: A Theory of the Origins of Species*, Perseus Books Group, 2002

13 Philip Beesley, *Implant Matrix* (1996) project description in Philip Beesley Architect (unpublished portfolio of work), no date, p. 8A

to shatter a false sense of reality: 'the Theatre of Cruelty has been created in order to restore...a passionate and convulsive conception of life.'<sup>9</sup> The philosopher Gilles Deleuze and the psychoanalyst Félix Guattari also criticized the automatic self in their concept of a 'body without organs,' a term adopted from Artaud:

*When you will have made him a body without organs, then you will have delivered him from all his automatic reactions and restored him to his true freedom.*<sup>10</sup>

For Deleuze and Guattari, the body without organs is the self freed of automatic habits, traits and tics. It is a body actively realizing its potential in experiences with other beings, 'becoming' itself. It is a body without boundaries, yet one constantly organizing itself into new patterns. Beesley's textiles are precisely such self-organizing entities, growing from their 'encounters' with other bodies, as we see in his description of *Palatine Burial* (1996):

*At first a bare latticework controlled by the geometry of its elements, [becoming] increasingly formless and growing darker as it ingests decomposing matter. Thicker and fertile, enveloping the implants and making a complete turf.*<sup>11</sup>

The many small elements operating together in a larger network, interacting and interconnected, and growing into one fertile matrix, appears to be a form of symbiogenesis—the merging of separate organisms to form a new organism. This concept is most closely associated with the biologist Lynn Margulis, who believes that mutation and natural selection alone are not sufficient to explain variation in living creatures.<sup>12</sup> Rather, she proposes, millions of years ago single-celled organisms such as bacteria and blue-green algae—that stored their genetic material in single loops rather than in chromosomes in nuclei—existed interdependently and cooperatively. As one such organism engulfed another, both survived and eventually evolved into cells that possess nuclei and organelles, as does most cellular life today. The mitochondria in cells are evidence of this process, since their genetic material is different from that found in cell nuclei. In fact, many sections of the human genome appear to have their origins as bacteria or viruses, and gene mapping has revealed most species to be cross-linked by genetic material that has been transferred from one host to another. If we read symbiogenesis into Beesley's work, we can conceive of a viewer of his *Implant Matrix* (2006) for example, being incorporated into it. According to Beesley, the matrix is 'capable of mechanical empathy,' reaching out to viewers as 'erotic prey.' He continues, 'The structure responds to human presence with subtle grasping and sucking motions, ingesting organic materials and incorporating them into a new hybrid entity.'<sup>13</sup> The viewer thus ingested might serve a specific function—say, triggering certain internal reactions, or acting as an 'organelle' within the network.

## IMMERSION

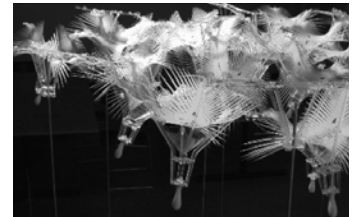
Let us return to Deleuze and Guattari for a moment, to explore their prime example of a 'body without organs'—that is, the earth. 'This body without organs,' they say, 'is permeated by unformed, unstable matters, by flows in all directions, by free intensities or nomadic singularities, by mad or transitory particles.'<sup>14</sup> The idea is that what we experience as solid is actually being constantly created by forces in motion. What we think of as stable or constant (continents, oceans, and clouds; sunlight and energy; biological life) is in fact ceaseless flow. This fluid activity is the body without organs, a state of flux that is always present and acts on matter at all times.

Beesley attempts to provoke the viewer of his works into becoming aware of the flows in which textile and viewer are equally immersed. Since *Gill Array* (2002), Beesley's work has become increasingly technologically sophisticated through digital fabrication techniques that allow him to create units that are precision-cut and cast and intricately interconnected, allowing him to realize the works as sensitive, delicate registers that make the interrelationship between textile, viewer, and environment visible. Inorganic nature works on Beesley's textiles—they deform with gravity and respond to the slightest change in wind or air pressure. They provide a nuanced reading of incidental occurrences in their proximity. They extend outward with feelers and sensors to include the viewer in their ambience—in one interpretation, this could be seen as a generous outward reaching, in another, a hungry or threatening grasping.

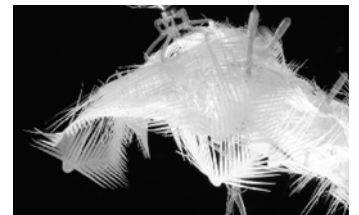
A suite of subsequent projects—*Orgone Reef*<sup>15</sup> (2003), *Orpheus Filter* (2004), *Reflexive Membranes* (2004), *Cybele* (2005), *Implant Matrix*<sup>16</sup> (2006) and *Hylozoic Soil* (2007)—seem alive. If these installations could be said to be conscious, it would not be a centralized consciousness focused in one area (such as a brain), but would instead be distributed throughout the body of the textile, in small loops of information that give minute instructions and react to specific inputs. One element communicates to another, linked by matter and conductive tissue. This advance in his work was the result of a collaboration with researchers at MIT's Media Lab, after which Beesley began to incorporate microprocessors linked to small actuators (mechanical devices such as pumps or vibrators) into his works, enhancing their animate life-like qualities. By adding light and motion sensors to the system, the installations are able to respond to people entering the room, further blurring the boundary between the viewer's sense of self and the textile's 'sense' of the viewer. The result is a decentralized, unsettled and dispersed consciousness. Beesley welcomes the blurring of boundaries that results:

*One thinker I could point to that has been germinal for me is the psychologist Donald Winnicott. His studies into the formation of the psyche in babies...has produced tantalizing material. Winnicott looks at transitional objects—bits of cloth, a diaper, a toy, clothing, or mummy's breast originally—and how someone relates those things. Before you become an indi-*

14 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, translated by Brian Massumi (University of Minnesota Press, 1987) p. 40



15 *Orgone Reef* (2003)



16 *Implant Matrix* (2006)

vidual, those things are...extensions of you. There's a remarkable disintegrity, a delicious immersion, an opening of boundaries that occurs. Winnicott speaks about this kind of thing in the formation of the psyche, how the point is to separate and draw a boundary around yourself, to become self-actualized—in a healthy scenario. But there's a lurking sense in his writing that he actually loves reading that in reverse—of uncoiling and immersing and returning into the earth. That sensibility of the transitional object—a layer of physical material which has such a potent role in relating to our identities is something that marries very well with my geotextiles. They function like Winnicott's transitional objects: their agenda is to facilitate dissociation, to release, to open the boundaries. Integrity—that is the hardening of boundaries—is a kind of curse. I'm trying to point to disintegrity, or dissociation as offering something vital.<sup>17</sup>

## EXPANSION

In writing about his work, Beesley returns time and again to the possibility of consciousness transcending the boundaries of the body. He cites a vivid evocation of this sensation in a text by Roger Caillois:

*Then the body separates itself from thought, the individual breaks the boundary of his skin and occupies the other side of his sense. He tries to look at himself from any point whatever in space...And he invents spaces of which he is 'the convulsive possession'...blurring...the frontier between the organism and the milieu...*<sup>18</sup>

The hylzoic or life-like qualities of Beesley's textiles are intended to help their viewer blur the distinction between self and other, to step outside of their self, and extend their self-consciousness outwards. Ideally, the viewer would see that they are part of an entire chain of being and of awareness that extends outward in all directions. Beesley touches on Wilhelm Reich's conception of such a vital web, which served as an inspiration for the *Orgone Reef* installation:

*The term 'Orgone' was coined by Wilhelm Reich, a psychologist working alongside Freud, to suggest a fertile life force encircling the world. Reich, whose work was tinged by obsession, saw the world as an evolving entity dominated by primordial energies. His visions offer a poignant alternative to the Modern version of progress.*<sup>19</sup>

Another view was articulated by the Jesuit scientist Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, who saw 'consciousness' arising from the spherical nature of our planet. 'One of the most fundamental characteristics of the cosmic structure,' Chardin says, is 'the roundness of the earth.'<sup>20</sup> Without the involution of matter upon itself...there would never have been the biosphere... In [its] advent and development, life...[is] not only accidentally, but structurally, bound up with the contours and destiny of the terrestrial mass.'<sup>21</sup> According to Teilhard de Chardin, life—spread out in a centripetal extension over the surface of the globe—reaches a 'critical point' with the appearance of humanity.

*Man discovers that he is nothing else than evolution become conscious of itself, to borrow Julian Huxley's striking expression...Having reached the peak, we can now turn round and, looking downwards, take in the pattern of the whole.*<sup>22</sup>

His term for evolution's awareness of itself is the noosphere, from nous, the Greek word for thought. 'Confined to the surface of a sphere, idea will encounter idea, and the result will be an organized web of thought that envelops the earth—'mankind has...succeeded not only in becoming cosmopolitan, but in stretching a single organized membrane over the earth without breaking it.'<sup>23</sup> For Teilhard de Chardin, this is a spiritual manifestation of the earth's evolution; with the spread of humanity over the surface of the earth, 'we have the beginning of a new age. The earth gets a new skin. Better still,' he says, 'it finds its soul.'<sup>24</sup>

Philip Beesley's extraordinary, seductive and emotionally powerful textile installations suggest that such a membrane already exists upon the surface of the earth—intertwining matter, all living creatures and consciousness. His works are his way to allow us to become more aware of it.

17 Beesley interview, March 4, 2007. For more on Winnicott's concept of the transitional object, see D. W. Winnicott, 'Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena,' *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis* vol. 34 (1951) pp. 89–97

18 Roger Caillois, *Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia*, (1937) translated by John Shepley, in *October: the First Decade* (MIT Press, 1987)

19 Beesley, 'Orgone Reef,' p. 52

20 Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The Phenomenon of Man*, translated by Bernard Wall, with an introduction by Julian Huxley (Harper & Row, 1959) p. 239

21 Teilhard de Chardin, *Phenomenon of Man*, p. 273

22 Teilhard de Chardin, *Phenomenon of Man*, p. 221

23 Teilhard de Chardin, *Phenomenon of Man*, p. 241

24 Teilhard de Chardin, *Phenomenon of Man*, p. 183