

The Minimal Life of the Self

A Review of Stefan Kristensen's *La Machine sensible*

La Machine sensible, by Stefan Kristensen. Paris: Hermann (Collection "Tuchè"), 2017, 318pp. 28EUR, ISBN 9782705694524.

Reviewed by Louis Schreel (Ghent University)

This review can be cited by reference to the webpage for Phenomenological Reviews:

<http://reviews.ophen.org/2018/10/26/stefan-kristensen-la-machine-sensible/?lang=de>

1. Introduction

In his new book, *La Machine sensible*, Stefan Kristensen conceives the human mind as a sensible machine: a machine that seeks to stabilize incoming fluxes of sensory stimulation, before being rationally reflected. This opens up a thought-provoking discussion with contemporary phenomenological conceptions of the minimal self, which reappears as a technical invention, an artifact produced by the sensible machinery that works beyond our conscious grasp and reflective understanding. Like the technical object, the minimal self is for Kristensen an artifact produced to stabilize the relation between man and his environment. But in *La Machine sensible* technical invention does not amount to the application of a given system of knowledge. Machinic invention has its roots in the irrational and becomes rational ordering only after having fulfilled its primordial function: the organization of matter by life.

For the sake of brevity, this review will focus strictly on the theoretical issues that animate *La Machine sensible*. The true strength and originality of Kristensen's book lies in combining a rich conceptual framework with detailed commentaries of empirical work both in psychopathology and in twentieth century art. Of the three parts that make up the book, I will discuss only the first ("The Self and the Machine") and the third ("The Essence of the Machine"), the second ("The Machine and the Figuration of the Self") being entirely devoted to the motive of the machine and the figuration of the self in *art brut*, James Tilly Matthews, Fernand Deligny, Victor Tausk, Bruce Nauman, Marcel Duchamp, Jean Epstein and Jean-Luc Godard. Kristensen has a deep background both in the phenomenological and psychoanalytical traditions and his astute appreciation of their respective virtues does not make him any less perceptive of their respective weaknesses. Honest about its goals and the unresolved puzzles pertaining to its rather brief examination of phenomena of biological organization, the book is most sharp in its ability to set up a dialogue between Merleau-Ponty, Lacan, Szondi, Maldiney and Deleuze & Guattari. With that in mind, *La Machine sensible* is highly recommendable for anyone interested in the crossovers between phenomenology and psychoanalysis, and the way these can open up an original reflection on contemporary visual art.

2. Aisthesis Disturbed: Machinic Delusions

The first part of Kristensen's book begins by turning to the literature on schizophrenia, in which the motif of an 'influencing machine' (*une machine à influencer*) represents a particular kind of delusion that is important for a good understanding of schizophrenia. The delusion of an influencing machine stands for an experience in which the patient is convinced to be manipulated through a machine, which itself remains beyond his or her grasp. Examining the subjective dimension of schizophrenia, Kristensen approaches this delusional experience as a particular kind of *feeling*. This avoids categorizing schizophrenia as a disturbance of *either* the psyche *or* the soma, since feeling usually involves both. Kristensen argues that whatever the person's predominant schizophrenic symptoms, these can be regarded as instances, appearances, expressions of the same disturbance, the same fundamental kind of psychotic feeling of an influencing machine.

To situate the disturbance at the level of feeling is not to deny, however, the neurobiological basis of schizophrenia. Discussing the early clinical work of Viktor Tausk and Gaëtan Gatian de Clérambault in the light of recent work of Alfred Kraus, Thomas Fuchs, Louis A. Sass and Josef Parnas' phenomenological Examination of Anomalous Self-Experience (EASE), Kristensen acknowledges that neurally based cognitive dysfunctions often play an important role, and indeed that they may often play the causal role in terms of kicking off symptoms. This does not mean, however, that subjective experiential phenomena, together with subjective responses to these phenomena, may not *also* play a key role. Rather than proposing an either/or dichotomy between neurological explanation and phenomenological description, our author follows Parnas in the viewpoint that phenomenology may just as well offer an explanatory contribution for the understanding of psychotic delusions. Accordingly, 'the investigation concerns here the sense of this experience of alterity, from the point of view of the subject undergoing it' (29).

In the most general terms, it is for Kristensen a person's most immediate and fundamental, affective relationship to self and to world, which is disturbed in schizophrenic psychosis. This disturbance is a feeling of losing contact and connectedness with the world, of withdrawing into a world of one's own, and of sensing the world as a hostile otherness. In schizophrenia, patients lose their sense of ownership; they seem to have no sense of property, not of a world but also not of themselves, even to the point of owning their bodies. It is this alienating feeling, which the patient's language is unable to articulate and make sense of, and which may lead to a breakdown of personality, a cleavage of several personalities, and to several kinds of corporeal symptoms.

The sense of losing possession or control, at once over the world and over oneself, implies that possession, power or control lie *elsewhere*. The delusion of the influencing machine involves 'the experience of domination, of a relation of asymmetrical force, which the machine is a particularly emblematic image of' (36).

One may certainly have the feeling of great energy and feel compelled to use it, but one seems to have no power to control it. It is as though something *else* is exercising this control and the patient does not know what this other is: he or she feels it as a foreign power that is mechanically triggered by an external causality.

Whatever form these experiences take, their presence is for the subject always an ordeal that gives rise to different strategies to confront these impulses, whose essential trait is that the subject cannot escape them. It is due to this experience of passivity and powerlessness on the noetic level that one can speak of a machinic phenomenon on the noematic level (taking up a Husserlian vocabulary here) (30).

In an important concluding passage of the first chapter, Kristensen argues that one shouldn't understand the schizophrenic delusion only negatively, as the delusional construction of a threat. Following Kraus, Fuchs and the psychoanalyst Ludivine Beillard-Robbert, he argues the schizophrenic delusion is 'a fundamentally ambiguous phenomenon' (13, 23) that can be considered at once as a symptom of disturbance and as an act of resistance, offering a certain stabilization. Indeed, 'the simple fact that a hallucination is produced, that an image be drawn, that a text be written, either in front of the psychiatrist or in the most intimate reclusion, means that the delusional subject is in a process of resistance in the experience that he goes through' (36). Kristensen emphasizes this point to debut the idea that the delusion would be itself a phenomenon empty of meaning. One must distinguish the patient's primordial experiences, which appear to him or her as meaningless, and the delusion, which is produced as an attempt to make sense of them. Without this distinction, one cannot account for the fact that the schizophrenic is still a self and that he or she maintains a perspective onto the world. Like the drowning man who cannot swim, the patient continues to struggle¹:

The creation of an influencing machine in the psychic realm of the schizophrenic subject corresponds to a situation of complete powerlessness within which, nonetheless, the possibility of emancipation is given, although it is remote and inaccessible. This is exactly the paradoxical meaning of the delusion: to express the need of liberation by giving form to the confinement (38).

3. The Bodily Self and the Sensible Machine

Kristensen's understanding of the delusion of the influencing machine as at once a passive confrontation to something unknown and an active response to it, is central not only to his analysis of schizophrenia, but also to his philosophical understanding of selfhood (*ipseity*) in general. Against a conception of the self as characterized by

¹ This metaphor of drowning appears in an article by the phenomenologist Waltraut Stein. She writes: 'Like the drowning man, the schizophrenic continues to struggle with surprising energy. He tries to "learn to swim" to come to terms with his psychosis in some way. Perhaps if he can go along with it for a time it will cease to disturb him so and he can find a way to overcome it, he thinks. But eventually he finds that it is too late and that there is no going along with it. Whatever he does, this power is always against him. Usually he finds that his efforts even increase his sense of being dispossessed'. (Stein, 1970: 99).

full-fledged autonomy and self-reflective transparency, Kristensen argues the self is ‘structurally constituted by the internal tension between necessity and liberty’ (37). More precisely, Kristensen proposes a two-level model of the self, whereby the higher-level properties (the intentional, cognitive structure which has a degree of autonomy from the world) emerge from lower-level, sub-personal and non-conscious dynamical processes that act deterministically. The reflective, cognitive structure of the self, which is the mark of subjective autonomy, is for our author constituted by three fundamental, pre-reflective dimensions of experience: temporality, embodiment and self-differentiation inherent to pre-reflective experience. For Kristensen, these pre-reflective dimensions manifest dimensions of internal or intra-subjective alterity, which are never fully dominated and controlled by the subject. In Dan Zahavi’s terms, which Kristensen cites approvingly:

Subjectivity seems to be constituted in a way that allows it to relate to itself in an othering way. This self-alteration is something inherent in reflection. It is not something that reflection can ever overcome (Zahavi 2004: 150).

Although the pre-reflective, embodied level of the self is perpetually self-differing within the ‘diachronical’, egoless flow of time-consciousness, Kristensen agrees with Zahavi that one can speak already at this rudimentary level of a ‘minimal self’ (122).² However, he disagrees with Zahavi’s view that minimal self does not depend upon *social interaction* for its development and/or its sustenance. Following Matthew Ratcliffe, Kristensen argues the constitution of minimal self should be re-conceptualized in *interpersonal* terms: ‘the primitive level of self-experience is always already of an intersubjective nature’ (126).

Our author develops this reconceptualization around two ideas. The first is that minimal self and alterity construct each other reciprocally through a pre-reflective libidinal and social dimension of ‘body schema’ (47, 54, 64). Drawing on the late work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty and the neurologist and psychoanalyst Paul Schilder (whose influence on Merleau-Ponty he reconstructs in detail), Kristensen conceives bodily ‘*sensing itself*’ (*le sentir lui-même* (49)) as a perceptual process that happens independently from conscious intentionality and reflection, and is interdependent on action. According to this account, sensing is a skillful bodily activity in which perception and action are constitutively interdependent, unlike at the personal level, where the action a perception leads to may depend on the agent’s intentions (105, 271). In Schilder’s sense, the body schema designates an integrated set of dynamic sensorimotor processes that organize perception and action in a sub-personal and non-conscious manner. As such, the body schema must be distinguished from what is sometimes called the ‘body-image’, which is the body as an intentional object of consciousness, i.e. the body as experienced as owned by the experiencing subject. For

² In Zahavi’s characterization, the ‘minimal self’ designates the most fundamental sense of subjective ‘mineness’ or ‘first-personal givenness’ that accompanies all of our experiences and functions as a condition for the spatiotemporal structuring of experience. Cf., Dan Zahavi, *Self and Other: Exploring Subjectivity, Empathy and Shame*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014.

example, the body schema appropriates certain habitual postures and movements automatically. The body schema also incorporates certain significant parts of its environment into its own schema: the painter's brush becomes an operative extension of her hand; the blind person's cane becomes a sensing extension of the hand.

At this primordial level, a minimal self emerges from a libidinal, bodily relation to alterity. That is to say, the sensorimotor contribution of the body schema is actually constitutive of selfhood, rather than being merely causally implicated in experiences. But this dimension of embodiment is not of the order of personal *ownership*: the libidinal production of the bodily self through body schema precedes the constitution of an ego that distinguishes itself from its libidinal investments, and the primordial relation between self and alterity is characterized by a 'fundamental polymorphism' (52). This means that the libidinal body forms with the environment a system of reciprocal implication, stimulation and expression, a pre-personal, essentially 'anonymous and general existence' in which there is 'confusion of an individual body schema with that of the other' (53). Being essentially anonymous, non-personal and non-conscious, the body schema forms a 'sensible machine' that is not phenomenologically available to the reflective subject: it is neither the perception or imagination, nor the cognitive understanding, nor the emotional apprehension of 'my' body, but rather the libidinal drives that organize the body as it spontaneously interacts with its environment.

From this perspective, the unconscious is this libidinal dimension of my being in the world; if it remains inaccessible to consciousness and to explicit intersubjective sharing, this is not due to its radically intimate [psychic] character, but rather to its pre-reflective, corporeal generality (56).

As Henri Maldiney writes, paraphrasing Merleau-Ponty, the bodily *sensing itself* forms the 'untouchable' side of the self, 'that *of the self* which I will never touch [*cela de moi que je ne toucherai jamais*]' (Maldiney, 2007: 138).

The second idea is that human subjectivity, that is to say, full-fledged selfhood with a degree of 'ontological depth' (123), emerges from a *cultural-reflective* dimension of interpersonal relations and symbolical-cognitive structures, such as language. Our author is fully aware that this second idea, as well as the identification of the libidinal basis of embodiment with the impersonal, non-subjective order of the unconscious, brings him particularly close to the position of Lacan. In fact, one of the strengths of the second chapter of *La Machine sensible* lies in showing how – despite the different conceptions of the unconscious in the early Merleau-Ponty and Lacan – the late Merleau-Ponty's identification of the unconscious with the anonymous 'flesh' (*chair*) of the world is compatible with Lacan's views on the discontinuous, problematic relation between consciousness and the unconscious. Despite valuing this proximity, however, Kristensen is also critical of Lacan. In conceiving the developmental emancipation to the symbolical dimension of subjectivity, Lacan neglected the importance of the productive role of the libidinal body and of affectivity

in the constitution of the self. In Merleau-Ponty's terms, Lacan's conception of the symbolic led him into an 'idealist deviation' (58, 63), conceiving the emergence of subjectivity strictly in terms of the symbolic and conscious mediation of instinctually driven life. For the generative constitution of the self, a model which does not do right to its bodily, affective, emotional and temporal constitution remains incomplete indeed.

By contrast, the psychoanalytically inspired work of the phenomenologist Henri Maldiney and the schizo-analytical work of Félix Guattari (both with and without Gilles Deleuze), demonstrate for Kristensen the possibility of a constructive conversation between phenomenology and psychoanalysis, which is in the spirit of Merleau-Ponty's late project of an ontology of the generativity of the flesh. Reading Guattari, Maldiney, Deleuze and Leopold Szondi in this light (whose influence on Deleuze & Guattari he also reconstructs in detail); our author's goal is as follows:

... to construct a position from which to sketch a critique of the dominant reception of Merleau-Ponty in the domain of the theory of the *self* – a reception that draws mostly on the *Phenomenology of Perception* and leaves aside the objections and new perspectives in his seminars at the Collège de France and in the corpus of *The Visible and the Invisible* (47).

4. The Minimal Life of the Self: Three Challenges

There are three general theoretical points that are key to Kristensen's two-level model of the self that are helpful to see where his challenges lie. These points concern the emergence of self, the relational role of the environment, and the relation between the personal and the sub-personal.

i). **Emergence:** In thinking about the productive character of the self-organizing dynamics of sensorimotor processes, Kristensen seeks to conceive of a sub-personal level at which the biological and the mental are fundamentally indistinct (108). Against Szondi, who still remained caught in a dualism between blind sub-personal biological processes and the autonomous, mental realm of the self ('*le moi pontifex*' (106)), Kristensen aims to show how minimal self emerges in development from repetitive cycles of sub-personal, 'infra-subjective' sensorimotor processes of perception and action (235). In a touching passage on the work of the Feldenkrais therapist and choreographer Mara Vinadia (178-181), Kristensen notes how higher level cognitive processes and symbolical, linguistic forms of communication can be entrapped by sensorimotor disorders; as in the case of an autistic girl of three years and nine months old who expressed herself only by crying and shouting, who didn't allow any eye contact and who didn't let anyone get closer to her than three meters.

Faced with any kind of frustration or transgression of these limits, she would respond with immediate violence, bending her body like an arc and hitting her head against the ground. The therapist approaches this situation as follows: keeping her distance from the patient, her face and body averted, she takes on a series of

immobile bodily postures, holding each figure for a fixed time interval, followed by a few steps in the room. When Vinadia arrives at her sixth posture, she notices the child has risen and begins to imitate her accurately, step by step. Yet, the patient doesn't imitate her last posture: rather, she begins with the first, forcing Vinadia to start over from zero, and maintaining a lag of six between her and Vinadia's postures. Astonishingly, after a number of weeks of repetitive sequences the child allows for more and more proximity, imitating Vinadia's with lags of 5, 4, 3... up to the point of allowing the therapist to face her, and moving in perfect unison with her, such that it becomes impossible to designate who is initiating and imitating. Eventually, the child allows for more people, even strangers, to approach and address her.

Kristensen emphasizes that the initial refusal to enter into relation is not a sign of indifference but of a hyper-sensibility to the presence of others – an interpretation confirmed by neuro-scientific approaches of autism. The therapist's work has consisted in establishing a reciprocal relation between the child and herself, a corporeal relation of sensing reciprocity that restored the sensorimotor dynamics constitutive of minimal self. This does not mean, of course, that a sequence of physical gestures alone could implement a cognitive state or a sense of possessing a self. The main takeaway is rather, that aside from higher-level neural processes, sub-personal sensorimotor processes of perception and action make a special, constitutive contribution to the machinery of selfhood.

ii). **Environment:** The second issue is about the relational role of the biological and social/collective environment and concerns the idea that minimal self is not only intimately embodied, but also intimately embedded in its environment. How does attention to this environmental embedding contribute something important to an understanding of the emergence of minimal self? In this regard, Kristensen distinguishes the kinds of account that typically stress features of organic integration, unitary functioning and sense-making across different levels of bodily embeddedness, from the more radical dynamic viewpoint he finds in Guattari and Deleuze, which stresses features of instability, chaos and heterogeneity characteristic of the energetic dynamics constitutive of minimal self (244-255).

For Kristensen, Merleau-Ponty's analysis of our perceptible integrations with the world in *Phenomenology of Perception* is exemplary of the first kind of account, as he conceives these integrations as the emergence of one unified 'flesh' by means of a reversible 'chiasmic' relation between body and environment. This approach emphasizes there is a minimal 'nucleus' of stability that constrains and directs the ongoing dynamics, a self-organizing nucleus that enables meaningful interactions to take place between the system and its environment (254, 294). Kristensen refers in this regard to Francisco Varela's theory of autopoiesis, which defines living 'autopoietic machines' by the self-referential organization of the causal interactions taking place in material systems, i.e. the self-referential, recursive organization of the causal loops that determine the particular dynamics within or between systems (254, 260). As the name suggests, autopoietic machines are essentially self-producing: the

system produces ‘itself’ through the reciprocal causation between the components of the system and relations between them. One might say that from this viewpoint, one focuses on the *product* (minimal self) that emerges from dynamic processes: a composed, structured, organizationally closed system of self-production that to a certain extent determines the range and meaningfulness of its material interactions.

On the other hand, Guattari and Deleuze’s approach, which Kristensen is more sympathetic to, places emphasis on a system’s material, intensive dynamics, which are essentially driven by perturbations, ruptures in direction, breakdowns and failures, and which have no meaningfulness at all (they can acquire meaningfulness only for an eventual emergent system capable of controlling these dynamics). For Kristensen, the first, phenomenological point of view, tends to remain too one-sidedly focused upon the result: connections of meaning, autonomy and structure (254). The schizo-analytical viewpoint, however, stresses the primacy of dynamic material processes, and as such it emphasizes the heterogeneity underlying all constructed unity, the initial ‘chaosmos’ from which all order and stability emerge:

The point of view of the schizophrenic reveals the fact that the machinic assemblages [*agencements machiniques*] do not self-organize according to a meaningful order [*selon un ordre sensé*], but consist in the coexistence of heterogeneous elements whose mutual presence creates movements, displacements, production of novelty (245).

Within the phenomenological viewpoint, it is difficult to include the dimension of force or intensity. Merleau-Ponty’s ontology of the sensible is a philosophy of the birth of meaning [*la naissance du sens*] and as such it tends to suspend or neglect the dimension of force. (...) The main merit of the notion of the machine within the perspective of a theory of subjectivity is that it allows for the articulation of these two dimensions and to make them appear as reciprocal conditions: the force of the machine is the condition of manifestation of meaningful forms, and the meaningful forms are conditions of apparition of the movements of the machine, which are heterogeneous to the register of meaning and which appear precisely as perturbations of meaningful structures (269).

iii). **The relation between the personal and sub-personal:** We have seen that instead of assuming minimal self as a kind of *a priori* form that is necessary for any kind of sensorimotor processing or cognition to take place, Kristensen argues that a better viewpoint on minimal self should help to understand how it might itself emerge from dynamic sensorimotor systems and the role of environmental embeddedness in such systems. These two points about emergence and the role of the environment naturally have consequences on how to view the relation between the personal and the sub-personal.

One way of considering the relation between the sub-personal and the personal is to conceive sub-personal sensorimotor processes as a kind of primordial, mute intentionality of the animal body with regard to the world – a Merleau-Pontian ‘I can’. Again, this insistence on the necessity of a primordial kind of subjective structure that is formally present in organic processes of self-regulation and self-

production points to a tension with Kristensen's point of view. Drawing on the work of Guattari and Deleuze, he stresses that the regulatory structures constitutive of the organism are not only constraining, but are themselves also constrained by material processes of individuation. These are morphodynamic, structure-making processes which grow out of intrinsic physical (thermodynamic, chemical) properties of their material elements. Preceding the passage to functional life, which they organize, these structure-making processes form a kind of static life that is intermediary between inorganic reality and functional life properly speaking. This intermediary order between matter and life fully organized is not a property of a self-referential, *organic* machine (a homeostatic, autopoietic, or organizational whole), but rather of an *inorganic* machine (an ontogenetic system of individuation).

Kristensen points out that for Guattari and Deleuze as well the organizational closure of psychic systems manifests itself as the emergence of a minimal self, i.e. an 'I sense' (129-130). But this minimal self is always secondary with regard to material processes of individuation, which it emerges from. Unlike Varela, Guattari and Deleuze do not consider the organism's unity to be derived from a particular type of minimal selfhood or internal unity that is essentially intrinsic to it, over and against the mere aggregates encountered in physical nature. What distinguishes them from the Varelian view of the organism as subjectivity is that they posit rather something like an inorganic machine, which 'processualizes' subjectivity. It is not minimal self which is the ground of the process of individuation, but rather it is individuation which grounds minimal self.

La Machine sensible makes a convincing case that in postulating the essence of minimal self is an irreducible first-personness, an intentionality or organizational closure, phenomenological viewpoints risk neglecting the material conditions within which minimal self is produced and meaningful interactions between the self and its environment take place. This is probably due to the fact that these approaches seek to refute reductionist approaches to consciousness, which would reduce the latter to its material basis. Although Kristensen shares this non-reductionist Husserlian spirit, he argues the opposite gesture is no less unfortunate as it risks disregarding the matter and keeping the organizational structure, emptied of all "ontic depth" (121). For Kristensen, psychic phenomena such as minimal self must also be conceived of in materialist terms, which means one must understand sub-personal, generative processes also in terms of specific, concrete mechanisms that are applicable to material elements. The challenge here is to define the continuity between the material, the living and the psychic, whilst acknowledging that material elements are 'a-signifying', i.e. heterogeneous to the semiotic domain in which the living and psychic create meaning (65-6, 74). This final challenge, then, is what allows Kristensen to inscribe Guattari's 'machinic phenomenology' (80) into the phenomenological program as formulated by the late Merleau-Ponty:

The ultimate task of phenomenology as philosophy of consciousness is to understand its relationship to non-phenomenology. What resists phenomenology within us –

natural being, the 'barbarous' source Schelling spoke of – cannot remain outside phenomenology and should have its place within it. The philosopher has his shadow, which is not simply the factual absence of future light (Merleau-Ponty, 1960: 176).

References

- Maldiney, Henri. 2007. *Penser l'homme et la folie*. Grenoble: Éditions Jérôme Millon.
- Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. 1960. *Signes*. Paris: Les Éditions Gallimard.
- Stein, Waltraut J. 1970. 'De-Animation: The Sense of Becoming Psychotic', p. 87 in: Straus, Erwin W., and Griffith, Richard M. (eds.). 1970. *Aisthesis and Aesthetics. The Fourth Lexington Conference on Pure and Applied Phenomenology*. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press.
- Zahavi, Dan. 2004. 'Alterity in Self', p. 150 in: Gallagher, S., Watson, S. , Brun, Ph. and Romanski, Ph. (eds.). 2004. *Ipseity and Alterity. Interdisciplinary Approaches to Intersubjectivity*. Rouen: Presses Universitaires de Rouen.