

SIGNS OF RESISTANCE

RE-MEMBERING TECHNOLOGY

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Introduction

While it can be demonstrated historically that sophisticated craft processes predate the advent of systematic philosophy, we have yet to appreciate the significance of this realization for a philosophy of tectonics in architecture. If patterns of thought can be seen to arise ultimately from patterns of action, it might be useful to consider the ways in which the articulation of materiality and process in the making of architecture might serve as the basis for a communicative and meaningful technology. By considering certain philosophical observations on the phenomenology of perception, as well as the influence of these ideas on the discussion of materiality in art, this paper develops a narrative role for the expression of tectonics in architecture. Highlighting the ethical dimension of the maker's encounter with material in the process of construction, this notion also suggests a means to reintegrate the poetic and the instrumental aspects of technology.

Remembering the Body

In the book entitled *Matter and Memory*, first published in 1896, the philosopher Henri Bergson stated: "The objects which surround my body reflect its possible action upon them."¹ This profound observation carries a double importance for the issue of materiality in architecture. Firstly, Bergson's argument implies that our perception of the things in the environment around us is dependent on the body's capacity to transform them. Echoing the Kantian schema of the *a priori* structures that limit our potential knowledge of the external world, Bergson begins to propose a new framework for understanding the concepts that we have about the things around us. Taking the action of the body as the ultimate root of knowledge he suggests that our physical engagement with the "stuff" of the world provides both the source and the limits of our understanding of the things in it. Secondly, and more significantly for the issue of a *narrative* role for technology in architecture, if the actions of the body determine what (as well as *how*) we can know about the "external" world, then this same external world — having been acted on in a variety of ways — must be an equivalent source of knowledge about the body. How buildings might communicate this story of the body's encounter with material will also be considered in concluding this discussion.

What Bergson is suggesting in the above formulation is, for him, primarily a means to resolve a more traditional philosophical problem — the dualistic split between the mind and the body — prevailing in Western thought since the time of Plato. For Bergson, a reciprocity in the relationship between the body and its immediate environment is the key to bringing together two competing positions in the philosophical thinking of his time — the Realism that would deny the intellect access to the "real" world of things beyond it; and an equally flawed, though more academically engaging, Idealism. This idealism, inspired by the Cartesian and more recent Hegelian systems, would reduce the role of the body to an unfortunate encumbrance of the otherwise independently cogitating mind.²

While Bergson used his insight into the mind/matter relationship to develop a theory of the formation of consciousness and the images contained in the memory ("Memory is just the intersection of mind and matter"³), it was Maurice Merleau-Ponty, one of Bergson's keenest followers at the Collège de France, who later reworked this notion in terms of the experience of the "lived body" in space. The symbiosis between the body and the things in the world suggested in *Matter and Memory*, forms the basis of Merleau-Ponty's concept of the "chiasm," described in the unfinished work entitled *The Visible and the Invisible*, published posthumously in 1964.⁴ The chiasm, or the intertwining, of the organism and its perceptual environment emerged out of the phenomenological reading of the process of perception inspired by Bergson's early work. This led Merleau-Ponty to posit a fundamental continuity between the lived body and its material surroundings, expressed in the concept of the "flesh of the world," at the root of our sense of self, as much as our sense of things: "It is that the thickness of flesh between the seer and the thing is (as) constitutive for the thing of its visibility as (it is) for the seer of his corporeity; it is not an obstacle between them, it is their means of communication. ... The thickness of the body, far from rivalling that of the world, is on the contrary the sole means I have to go unto the heart of the things, by making myself a world and by making them flesh."⁵

The potential importance of this way of thinking, in terms of the aesthetics of materiality that is at issue in the present paper, is again suggested by Merleau-Ponty's preliminary statement of the notion in the earlier essay

entitled "Eye and Mind," which appeared in 1961. Discussing the preoccupations of the painter Paul Cézanne, he describes the role of the artist's body in both the reading and the representation of the experience of the world, accepting that, as "we cannot imagine how a *mind* could paint. It is by lending his body to the world that the artist changes the world into paintings."⁶ The interface between body and world that takes place through the medium of the paint provides the philosopher with a model for all perceptual activity: the mind's access to the 'outside' world must inevitably arise from the body's movement in it, which also necessarily involves a movement of it:

*Visible and mobile, my body is a thing among things; it is caught in the fabric of the world, and its cohesion is that of a thing. But because it moves itself and sees, it holds things in a circle around itself. Things are an annex or prolongation of itself; they are encrusted into its flesh, they are part of its full definition; the world is made of the same stuff as the body.*⁷

According to Merleau-Ponty, it is the attempt to render this experience of the shared corporeality of the artist and the world, that sets Cézanne's work apart from his near contemporaries, the French Impressionists. Their elevated awareness of subjective sensations had tended to dissolve the physicality of things on the canvas into an immaterial play of shadows and light. Cézanne was attempting in his own work to hold on to this new sensitivity, while reestablishing the "material thingness of the objects" he was depicting.⁸ His reservations about the possibility of achieving this objective are described in another essay by Merleau-Ponty, "Cezanne's Doubt," from 1945. With the benefit of the philosopher's later insights it might be possible to propose an alternative path to the same resolution, by considering the exact nature of the interface between the body and the world that the materiality of the work of art — indeed, any work of construction — allows us to appreciate. Out of this process should emerge a heightened sense of the ethical dimension to the encounter between ourselves and the natural world, based on the realization that we are all, ultimately, born of the same material. As the Book of Genesis would have it, recalling the birth of Adam from God's moulding of the primal clay: "for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return." For a translation of this notion into the terminology of an aesthetic philosophy, the writings of John Dewey provide a useful starting point. As he describes in *Art as Experience* from 1934:

The epidermis is only in the most superficial way an indication of where an organism ends and its environment begins. There are things inside the body that are foreign to it, and there are things outside of it that belong to it de jure if not de facto; that must, that is, be taken possession of if life is to continue. On the lower scale, air and food materials are such things; on the higher, tools, whether the pen of the writer or the anvil of the blacksmith, utensils and furnishings, property,

*friends and institutions, all the supports and sustentances without which a civilized life cannot be. The need that is manifest in the urgent impulses that demand completion through what the environment — and it alone — can supply, is a dynamic acknowledgment of this dependence of the self for wholeness upon its surroundings.*⁹

Recovering an Ethical Technology

So far what should have become clear is the extent to which our sense of self-identity is dependent on our relationship with the materials of the natural environment. If our encounter with materiality gives us a means to calibrate our capacities and frailties as human beings in the world, then it is only through the relative resistance of a material to human interference, or transformation, that this critical self-awareness can be measured. Clearly this takes us beyond what Louis Kahn has more recently referred to as just "letting the brick be what it wants to be," for, as Dewey takes such pains to point out, it is only through our challenge to a material's inherent resistance that we can begin to understand our own characteristic capacities - the crucial point from which characters of *homo sapiens* and *homo faber* begin to emerge. As Dewey writes, in discussing the actions of the living creature:

*The only way it can become aware of its nature and its goal is by obstacles surmounted and means employed; means which are only means from the very beginning are too much one with an impulsion, on a way smoothed and oiled in advance, to permit of consciousness of them. Nor without resistance from surroundings would the self become aware of itself.*¹⁰

For Dewey, the language of aesthetic experience can provide a means for exploring this awareness, which should also, in a sense, be a part of the richness of our everyday life. It is here also, I would like to suggest, that a properly articulated language of technology can help us to recover our sensitivity towards this "lost" dramatic narrative — playing out the encounter between the self and its surroundings, through the tectonics of constructed objects.

The need for this kind of recovery is not difficult to discern, as the ethical dilemma confronting the role of technology today has been frequently discussed. Martin Heidegger in *The Question Concerning Technology*, written in the early 1950s, had already diagnosed the now familiar tendency of instrumental technology towards the total domination of the natural environment, coupled with the denial of traditional human temporal and physical limitations. Treating the natural world as a stock of raw material or a standing reserve, merely intermediate "between our will and our goals," is allowing us to lose our sense of our selves, as much as our sense of the materiality of the world around us. The predominantly insensitive or thoughtless deployment of contemporary technologies can be seen as a direct result of the separation between the *thinking* and the *making* aspects of humanity noted above — what Heidegger refers to as the split

between the poetic and the instrumental aspects of the original meaning of technology. By tracing the Greek etymology of the word he uncovers the relation between *techne* and *poiesis*, both being concerned with the “art of making” and suggests that technology, as much as art, provides a vital medium for revealing the “truth” about the world.¹¹ Heidegger had already (in the book *Being and Time*, 1927) provided a powerful description of the unique sensibility that emerges from the use of the human body, and its extension through the tool, in the encounter with material in the making process. This notion of a deeper or embodied form of knowledge, arising out of the body’s interaction with physical things, is something that an expressive and articulated architecture can help provide access to. The key is to reestablish the link between the eye of the perceiver and the hand of the maker, by inscribing in the surface of the material the story of the making process, restoring the dialectical relation between the “construction of knowledge” and the “knowledge of construction,” implied in the original coupling of *techne* and *logos* in the forming of the word *technology*.¹²

Paradoxically, it is the surface of a material that reveals its true importance for the issue of a narrative dimension in technology. Just as poetry makes use of a kind of thickening at the surface of language in order to heighten the awareness of its own materiality, a poetically articulated technology can help refine our sensibility towards the particularities and pleasures of bodily experience. It is here that the possibility of a symbolic technology begins to emerge, as the full implications of the lost language of tectonic expression become apparent.

Phenomenology in Action

A clear example of this intention in recent art is the emphasis on a heightened sense of materiality in minimalist sculpture. The British artist Richard Long has consistently addressed these issues in the search for a more sustainable encounter with the natural world, using various strategies for balancing the intellectual and the organic aspects of the process of creating his work. Born in 1945 in Bristol, England, Long studied art at St. Martin’s School of Art in London and began exhibiting his work in the mid-1960s. The early photographs of interventions in the landscape such as the “Line Made by Walking” (England, 1967) and “Throwing Stones into a Circle” (Morocco, 1979) set the pattern for a series of subtle combinations of geometric ordering and natural materiality. The line in the grass is literally formed by the artist’s repeated footsteps; the rough geometries of circles and lines of objects, made by throwing, or kicking, stones, sticks or pebbles. The gallery pieces express a similar intention, rearranging the commonplace, everyday materials to provide an experience of the balanced exchange between the artist’s actions and the natural environment. In addition to the intimate scale of the tactile experience, the notion of the microcosm is consistently explored throughout Long’s work. Retaining the geometry of circle and line in more precise configurations, the site-inspired gallery works also speak allegorically of the process of movement: the path as journey from end to end, as well as the endless rhythmical cycles of the mythical eternal return. The

rough jagged stone and weathered driftwood shapes maintain a subtle balance of organic freedom and intellectual control. The Pythagorean tradition of universal harmony is evoked by the geometry, alongside the literal human presence implied by the marks of the maker’s hand - perceivable through the signs of material resistance. Formed by the body, these pieces carry the traces of the body’s passing and reveal the measure of our natural human capacities and limitations when confronted with the forces at work in the world. As Long himself writes of his art:

*The work is the expression of both the intellect and the body, they are absolutely complimentary. It’s no good just having a good idea, it’s also necessary for me to make it... for me to do it myself, because my work is my own footsteps, it is only what I can do, so the handprints in the gallery are my hands and the stones that I turn up on the mountainside are the stones that I can physically handle myself at that place. And I have found that place by walking to it. My work is the portrait of myself in the world.*¹³

The emphasis on walking reveals a further preoccupation with the order implied by our temporal and physical limitations. The cycles of moving and resting, the selecting of places for eating and sleeping, are all implied in the work’s suggestion of places in some way set apart - as if marked out for the rhythmical observance of the everyday rituals of life. From an historical standpoint, this recording of rhythm in the making of our artifacts provides an important source for our structures of thinking about the world. The sense of order and pattern that could be discerned in a worked surface can therefore also be seen as inspiring our first tentative cosmologies.¹⁴

The etymology of *cosmos* and its links with *cosmetic* explain the persistence of this kind of order as a key to our understanding and make clear the archaic importance of the articulation of surface in the revealing of the underlying order of things. The archetypal image of surface for humanity is the ground, which also forms the focus for so much of Richard Long’s work. The source of all life as well as the materials we have to construct with — it is this sense of the ground that lies at the root of many of our metaphors of stability, belonging and beginning. However far technology removes us from the realm of the tangible, Long’s work should remind us that every object we construct out of the materials of the earth also reveals our attitude towards the body in the world. Every act of making is still in some sense an act of touching the ground.

If technology is to recover its poetic or narrative dimension, it is Long’s notion of providing a portrait of ourselves in the world that should be a primary objective for the symbolic dimension of materiality. Where tectonic articulation has traditionally been seen as a purely self-referential mode of expression, it should now be possible to imagine a more allegorical function for the use of a language of technology. Once we begin again to search for a sense of our limits in the world, instead of our power to control and exploit it, we should be able to read the

materiality of construction as the story of the body's ultimate belonging. To translate for a moment into linguistic terminology, the key is to awaken our sensitivity sufficiently to appreciate much more the manner of the saying, aside from what is actually said. If we return to the roots of speech as expression, as Merleau-Ponty does in the *Phenomenology of Perception*, then the capacity for bodily gesture to communicate intention becomes even more immediately apparent.¹⁵ Instead of being merely an adjunct to speech, the gestural or mimetic dimension of expression might be recovered for its true depth of meaning. This would provide a means to describe a truly spatial language of expression, moving beyond the misleading semiotic interpretation of the communication of meaning in architecture.¹⁶

In concluding this brief discussion on the nature of a symbolic technology, there is one final clarification on the question of terminology, particularly in the context of Martin Heidegger's writings on the importance of "being-with-things." If we consider his use of the term authenticity, and its roots in the Greek self-creation, we can now begin to see how technology might assist us in the Being-in-the-world that Heidegger is searching for.¹⁷ If this Being can be seen as a "being-through-things" as I would now claim is possible to maintain, then the language of technology we have been considering in this paper allows a connection of two kinds of making: Creation of the self grows from creation by the self, in these terms, though not only in the obvious sense implied. As that great poet of the tectonic, Paul Valéry has written, in the dialogue *Eupalinos or the Architect*: "One of our friends, whom it is useless to name, said of our Alcibiades who was so beautifully made: 'Looking at him, one feels oneself becoming an architect!'.¹⁸

NOTES

- ¹ Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory* (New York: Zone Books, 1988), p. 21.
- ² *Ibid.*, pp. 9-16.
- ³ *Ibid.*, p. 13.
- ⁴ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "The Intertwining-The Chiasm" in *The Visible and the Invisible* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1968), pp. 130-155.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 135.
- ⁶ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Eye and Mind" in *The Primacy of Perception* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1964), p. 162.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 163.
- ⁸ Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993), pp. 298-328.
- ⁹ John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: Perigee Books, 1934), p. 59.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*
- ¹¹ Martin Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology" in *Basic Writings*. (New York: Harper Collins, 1993), p. 318.
- ¹² Marco Frascari, *Monsters of Architecture* (Savage, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1991), pp. 116-117.
- ¹³ Richard Long, "Interview with Richard Long by Richard Cork" in *Walking in Circles*. (London: South Bank Centre, 1991), p. 250.
- ¹⁴ Indra Kagis-McEwan, *Socrates' Ancestor* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1993), pp. 41-47.
- ¹⁵ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (London: Routledge Kegan Paul, 1962), pp. 174-199.
- ¹⁶ Walter Benjamin, "On the Mimetic Faculty" in *Reflections* (New York, Schocken Books, 1978), pp. 333-336.
- ¹⁷ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), pp. 98-106.
- ¹⁸ Paul Valéry, "Eupalinos or, The Architect" in *Dialogues*. (Princeton, NJ: Bollingen Press), pp. 74-75.