



Juhani Pallasmaa

LIVED SPACE

*embodied
experience and
sensory thought*



**The World
and
the Mind**



03



'How would the painter or the poet express anything other than his encounter with the world'¹, writes Maurice Merleau-Ponty, whose writings analyze the intertwining of the senses, the mind and the world, providing a reliable ground for understanding artistic intention and effect.



04



Art structures and articulates our being-in-the-world, or the inner space of the world (*Weltinnenraum*)², to use the notion of Rainer Maria Rilke. A work of art does not mediate conceptually structured knowledge of the objective state of the world, but it renders possible an intense experiential knowledge. Without presenting any precise propositions concerning the world or its condition, art focuses our view on the boundary surface between our Self and the world. '



05



It is bewildering that while grasping what surrounds him, what he is observing, and giving shape to his perception, the artist does not, in fact, say anything else about the world or himself, but that they touch each other³, writes the Finnish painter Juhana Blomstedt. The artist touches the skin of his world with the same sense of wonder as a child touches a frosted window.



06



An artistic work is not an intellectual riddle seeking an interpretation or explanation. It is a complex of images, experiences and emotions, which enters directly our consciousness. An artistic work has an impact on our mind before it is understood. The artist finds his/her

way behind words, concepts and rational explanations in the ever repeated search for an innocent re-encounter with the world. Rational constructions provide little help for artistic search because the artist has to rediscover the boundary of his own existence, time after time.



07



'In my work, I have never had any use for anything that I have known in advance'⁴, said the great Basque sculptor Eduardo Chillida in our conversation once.



08



The artist's exploration focuses on lived experiential essences, and this aim defines his/her approach and method. As Jean-Paul Sartre states: 'Essences and facts are incommensurable, and one who begins his inquiry with facts will never arrive at essences. ... understanding is not a quality coming to human reality from the outside; it is its characteristic way of existing.'⁵

An artistic work approaches this natural mode of understanding entwined in the very experience of being. Sartre's view also suggests a difference between the categories of scientific and the artistic approach.



Existential Space



10



We do not live in an objective world of matter and facts, as commonplace naive realism assumes. The characteristically human mode of existence takes place in the worlds of possibilities, molded by our capacity of fantasy and imagination. We live in mental worlds, in which the material and the mental, the experienced, remembered and imagined completely fuse into each other.



11



As a consequence, the lived reality does not follow the rules of space and time of the science of physics. We could say that the lived world is fundamentally 'unscientific', when measured by the criteria of western empirical science.



12



The lived world is closer to the reality of dream than a scientific description. In order to distinguish the lived space from physical and geometrical space, we can call it existential space. Lived existential space is structured on the basis of meanings and values reflected upon it by an individual or group, either consciously or unconsciously; existential space is a unique experience interpreted through the memory and experience of the individual. On the other hand, groups or even nations, share certain characteristics of existential space that constitute their collective identities and sense of togetherness.

The experiential lived space is the object and context of both the making and experiencing of art as well as of architecture.

Architecture is an artform which serves commonplace utilitarian functions. But even architecture does not arise from the realities of use and usefulness, but from mental images outside the realm of utility. The impact of the art of architecture derives from the ontology of inhabiting space, and its task is to frame and structure our being-in-the-world and give it specific meanings. We inhabit our world and this particular way of habitation is given its fundamental sense through a pre-understanding of existence as projected by constructions of architecture. Architectural constructions frame the world and make it understandable for us.

Art in general has an interestingly dualistic relation with technology. Various artforms accept and utilize inventions of technology, but ultimately, they turn their back to technological rationality and utility. The most ingenious construction technique remains mere engineering skill if the structure is unable to direct our view to the enigma of human existence behind technical rationality and unless it creates a metaphor of human being-in-the-world. Fundamentally, art turns technology and rationality as such useless.

Utility and Uselessness

In Alvar Aalto's view architecture is not at all an area of technology; it is a form of 'arch-technology', in other words, the art of architecture always returns technique to its ahistorical, archaic mental and bodily connections. The oldest is always fused into the newest. Generally speaking, the common view of art as a probe for future is a grave misunderstanding.

Time is an essential dimension in art - I venture to say that it is the most important dimension - but not as a duration or futurism, but as a mental regression to earlier, more archaic and undifferentiated modes of consciousness. A momentary reconstruction of the evolution of the human mind takes place in artistic experience.



Newness and Eternity



30



'If you want to find something new, you have to study what is oldest', my professor Aulis Blomstedt taught me wisely forty years ago.

The central ingredient of art is time, not as a narrative, duration or futuristic interest, but as an archeology of collective and biological memory. Myths store the earliest experiences and mental themes of the human mind. Even the most radical art derives its strongest impact from the echo of this timeless mental soil and images of supra-individual memory.



31



The time of art is regressive time - in the words of Jean Genet: 'In order to achieve significance, every work of art has to patiently and carefully descend the stairs of millennia, and fuse, if possible, into the timeless night populated by the dead, in a manner which allows the dead to identify themselves in this work.'¹¹

T.S. Eliot's *Wasteland*, one of the great works of poetry, is a splendid example of the way in

which a creative mind, aware of tradition, combines ingredients from completely different sources. The temporal origins and boundaries of images lose their meaning in this creative fusion. *Wasteland*, as all great works of art, is an archeological excavation of images. The poem cross-connects historical images of timeless myths with the commonplace life in the poet's own time. The poem combines references from the Bible to Ovid, from Vergil to Dante, from Shakespeare to Wagner, Baudelaire to Hesse. The poetic work begins with a motto quoted from Petronius' *Satyricon* and ends in the reiteration of the final incantation of the Upanisad.

All great works are collaborations, which invite the deep memories of culture to surface through their imagery. In his book *The Art of the Novel*, Milan Kundera argues that all good books are always wiser than their writers, because good writers listen to the wisdom of the novel. In the same way, great buildings are wiser than their architect, because they are products of a collaborative effort between the individual creator and the entire history of the discipline.



Art and Emotion



33



Also the artform of architecture mediates and evokes existential feelings and sensations. Architecture of our time has, however, normalized emotions and usually completely eliminates such extremes of the scale of emotions as sorrow and bliss, melancholy and ecstasy.



34



35



The buildings of Michelangelo, on the other hand, represent an architecture of melancholy and sorrow. But his buildings are not symbols of melancholy, they actually mourn.

These are buildings that have fallen in melancholy - or more precisely - we lend these buildings our own sensation of metaphysical melancholia.



36



In the same way, the buildings of Louis Kahn are not metaphysical symbols; they are a form of metaphysical meditation through the medium of architecture, that leads us to recognize boundaries of our own existence and to deliberate on the essence of life. They direct us to experience our very

existence with a unique intensity.



37



Similarly, the masterpieces of early modernity do not represent optimism and love of life through architectural symbolization.



38



Even decades after these buildings were conceived, they evoke and maintain these positive sensations; they awake and bring forth the hope sprouting in our soul.



39



Alvar Aalto's Paimio Sanatorium is not only a metaphor of healing; even today it offers the promise of a better future.



40



The invisible cities of Italo Calvino enrich the urban geography of the world in the same way as the material cities built through the labour of thousands of hands.



41



The commonplace and desolate rooms of Edward Hopper, or the shabby room in Arles painted by Vincent van Gogh, are as full of life and affect as the 'real' rooms in which we live. The 'Zone' in Andrey Tarkovsky's *Stalker*, that exudes an air of inexplicable threat and disaster, is certainly more real in our experience than the actual anonymous industrial area in Estonia where the film was actually shot, because the landscape pictured by

Tarkovsky contains more significant human meanings than its physical original. The mysterious 'Room' searched for by 'the Writer' and 'the Scientist' under the guidance of Stalker, is finally disclosed as a very ordinary room, but the imagination of the travellers, as well as of the viewer of the film, has turned it into a metaphor and centre point of metaphysical significance and threat.



Boundaries of Self

In the text that he wrote in memory of Herbert Read in 1990, Salman Rushdie writes about the weakening of the boundary between the world and the self that takes place in artistic experience: 'Literature is made at the boundary between self and the world', he writes, 'and during the creative act this borderline softens, turns penetrable and allows the world to flow into the artist and the artist flow into the world'.¹²



43



All art articulates the boundary surface between the self and the world both in the experience of the artist and the viewer. In this sense, architecture is not only a shelter for the body, but it is also the contour of the

consciousness, and an externalization of the mind. Architecture, or the entire world constructed by man with its cities, tools and objects, has its mental ground and counterpart.



44



The geometries and hierarchies expressed by the built environment, as well as the countless value choices that they reflect, are always mental structures before their materialization in the physical environment. Our most commonplace acts give evidence of inner mental landscapes, as inevitably as the rituals and monuments that we hold at highest esteem. Precisely, our most commonplace acts, to which we place least amount of conscious attention and embellishment, provide most conclusive evidence of the state of our mind. A landscape wounded by acts of man, fragmentation of the city scape, and insensible buildings are all external monuments of an alienation and shattering of the human inner space.



45



'In accordance with the Almighty, we make everything in our own image, because we do not have a more reliable model; the objects produced by us describe us better than any confessions of faith',¹³ writes Joseph Brodsky in his book *Watermarks*, that analyses touchingly the writer's experiences of Venice. 'Architecture is constructed mental space', as my late friend, architect Keijo Petäjä used to say. When experiencing a negative attitude toward life or

a sense of gloom and anxiety, too often projected by environments of our time, we are usually unwilling and incapable of identifying our own mental landscape in it. If we could learn to interpret the unintentional message of environment and architecture, we would certainly understand better both ourselves and the problems of our fanatically materialist and irrational collective mind. A psychoanalysis of the environment could cast light on the mental ground of our paradoxical behavior, such as adoration of individuality and the simultaneous unconditional subordination to conditioned values. Today's regressive attitudes of architecture, for instance, in the case of current Collegiate Gothic in American Universities, calls for an urgent analysis. No doubt, the return back to historicist nostalgia hides a mental rejection and an incapability of integrating the self with the world. George Nelson an American architect-designer friend of mine, who died 15 years ago, foresaw the fall of the Nazi Empire through reading the unconscious hidden messages of Nazi stone architecture. He understood that the message which made most observes believe in the thousand year future of the Third Reich, in fact, signified an unconscious fortification against self-destruction¹⁴.

[next part](#)

Notes

¹¹ Jean Genet, *L'atelier d'Alberto Giacometti*. Marc Barbezat, L'Arbalét 1963, as quoted in Juhana Blomstedt, *Muodon arvo*.

¹² Salman Rushdie, 'Eikö mikään ole pyhää? (Isn't anything sacred?)', *Parnasso 1: 1996*. Helsinki, 1996, p. 8.

¹³ Joseph Brodsky, *Veden peili* (Watermark). Tammi, Helsinki, 1994, p. 55-56.

¹⁴ Letter of George Nelson to the writer 31 .8.1982.



THE TASK OF ART



47



As our consumer and media culture contains increasing manipulation of the human mind, in the form of thematized environments, commercial conditioning and benumbing entertainment, art has the mission to defend the autonomy of individual experience and provide the existential ground for the human condition. One of the tasks of art is to safeguard the authenticity of the human experience.



48



The settings of our lives are irresistibly turning into a mass produced and universally marketed kitsch. In my view, it would be ungrounded idealism to believe that the course of our culture could be altered within

the visible future. But it is exactly because of this pessimistic view of the future that the ethical task of artists and architects, the defense of the authenticity of life and experience, is so important.



49



In a world where everything is becoming similar and, eventually, insignificant and of no consequence, art has to maintain differences of meaning, and in particular, the criteria of experiential quality.'My confidence in the future of literature consists in the knowledge that there are things that only literature can give us, by means specific to it'¹⁵, writes Italo Calvino in his *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*, and continues (in another chapter), 'In an age when other fantastically speedy, widespread media are triumphing, and running the risk of flattening all communication onto a single, homogenous surface, the function of literature is communicating between things that are different simply because they are different, not blunting but even sharpening the differences between them, following the true bent of written language.'¹⁶



50



In my view, the task of architecture is to maintain the differentiation and qualitative articulation of existential space. Instead of participating in the process of further speeding up our experience of the world, architecture has to slow down experience, halt time, and defend the slowness of experience.



51



Architecture must defend us against excessive noise and communication. Architecture must maintain and defend silence.



52



Art is generally viewed as a means of reflecting reality through the artistic artefact. The art of our time thought provokingly often reflects experiences of alienation and anguish, violence and inhumanity. In my view, mere reflection and representation of prevailing reality is not a sufficient mission of art. Art should not increase, or reinforce human misery, but alleviate it.



53



The duty of art is to survey ideals and modes of perception and experience, and thus, open up and widen the boundaries of the world.



54



'Art is realistic when it attempts to express an ethical ideal', ¹⁷
Tarkovsky writes, giving the notion of realism a surprising new meaning. Along his work of art, an authentic artist always creates his ideal reader, listener and viewer. In the postscript to his novel *The Name of the Rose* Umberto Eco¹⁸ divides writers in two categories. The first writer writes what he expects his readers to want to read, whereas the second creates his ideal reader as he writes. In Eco's view the first writer is capable of writing mere kiosk literature, whereas the second may write literature that touches human soul for century to come. I believe that also authentic architecture can only be born through a similar process of idealization. The role of ideals and idealization is equally important in architecture. An authentic architect thinks of an ideal society or dweller as he designs. Only a construction that constructs something ideal can turn into meaningful architecture. Without any deliberate futurism, great architecture is always a harbinger of a more humane future.' Only if poets and writers set themselves tasks that no

one else dares imagine
will literature continue to
have a function', Calvino
states. 'The grand
challenge for literature is
to be capable of weaving
together the various
branches of knowledge,
the various 'codes' into a
manyfold and
multifaceted vision of
the world.¹⁹ Confidence
in the future of
architecture can, in my
view, be based on the
very same knowledge;
existential meanings of
inhabiting space can be
wrought by the art of
architecture alone.
Architecture continues to
have a great human task
in mediating between the
world and ourselves and
in providing a horizon of
understanding the human
existential condition. The
disappearance of beauty
in our contemporary
world is alarming. Can
this mean anything else
but the disappearance of
human value, self-
identity and hope.
Beauty is not an added
aesthetic value; longing
for beauty reflects the
belief and confidence in
future, and it represents
the realm of ideals in the
human mindscape.
'Beauty is not the
opposite of the ugly, but
of the false',²⁰ as Erich
Fromm wrote. A culture
that has lost its craving
for beauty is already on
its way towards decay.



Knowledge through Art



56



The prevailing view in our culture makes a fundamental distinction between the worlds of science and art; science is understood to represent the realm of rational and objective knowledge, whereas art stands for the world of subjective sensations. The first is understood to possess an operational value, whereas the world of art is seen as a form of exclusive cultural entertainment. In an interview in 1990 concerning complexities and mysteries of new physics, Steven Weinberg, who won the Nobel Prize for physics in 1979 for his discovery of the relationship between electromagnetism and the weak nuclear force, was asked: 'Whom would you ask about the complexity of life: Shakespeare or Einstein?' The physicist answered quickly: 'Oh, for the complexity of life, there's no question - Shakespeare.' And the

interviewer continued:
'And you would go to Einstein for simplicity?'.
`Yes, for a sense of why things are the way they are - not why people are the way they are, because that's at the end of such a long chain of inference... ²¹Art articulates our existentially essential experiences, but also modes of thinking, that is, reactions to the world and processing of information take place directly as an embodied and sensory activity without being turned into concepts, or even entering our sphere of consciousness.



Embodied Consciousness

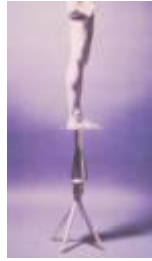


58



Our consciousness is an embodied consciousness, the world is structured around a sensory and corporeal center. 'I am my body'²², Gabriel Marcel claims, 'I am the space, where I am',²³ establishes the poet Noel Arnaud. Finally, 'I am

my world'²⁴, writes
Ludwig Wittgenstein.



59



The senses are not merely passive receptors of stimuli, and the body is not a mere point of viewing the world through a central perspective. Our entire being in the world is a sensuous and bodily mode of being. The body is not the stage of cognitive thinking, but the senses and our bodily being as such structure, produce and tore silent knowledge. The senses are not merely passive receptors of stimuli, and the body is not a mere point of viewing the world through a central perspective. Our entire being in the world is a sensuous and bodily mode of being. The body is not the stage of cognitive thinking, but the senses and our bodily being as such structure, produce and tore silent knowledge.



60



In fact, the knowledge of the traditional societies is stored directly in the senses and muscles; it is not a knowledge molded into words and concepts. Learning a skill is not founded on verbal teaching but rather on the transference of skill form the muscles of the master directly to the muscles of the apprentice through sensory

perception and mimesis.



61



The same principle of embodying - or introjecting, to use a notion of psychoanalysis - knowledge and skill continues to be the core of artistic learning. The foremost skill of the architect is, likewise, turning the multi-dimensional essence of the design task into an embodied image; the entire personality and body of the architect becomes the site of the problem.



62



Architectural problems are far too complex and existential to be dealt with in a solely conceptualized and rational manner.



**Sensory
Thought**



64



The artforms of sculpture, painting, music, cinema and architecture are all areas and modes of thinking. They represent modes of sensory and embodied thinking characteristic to the particular artistic medium. Architecture is also a mode of existential and metaphysical philosophy though the means of space, matter, gravity, scale and light.



65



Our world is structured on the basis of mental maps and in the formation of these experiential schemes the structures of the environment play a central role. The existentially most important knowledge of our everyday life - even in the technological culture does not reside in detached theories and explanations, but it is a silent knowledge beyond the threshold of consciousness that is fused with the daily environment and behavioral situations. But the poet, too, speaks of encounters at the `threshold of being'²⁵, as Gaston Bachelard writes.



66



Art surveys the biological and unconscious realms of our body and mind. Thus, art maintains vital connections with our

biological and cultural
past, to the soil of
genetic and mythical
silent knowledge. The
essential time dimension
of art points to the past
rather than the future, art
maintains roots and
traditions rather than
uproots and invents.



The Thinking Hand



68

Martin Heidegger connects the hand with our thinking capacity: '... the hand's essence can never be determined, or explained, by its being an organ which can grasp ... Every motion of the hand in every one of its works carries itself through the element osthinking, every bearing of the hand bears itself in that element ...
²⁶ Gaston Bachelard writes about the imagination of the hand: 'Even the hand has its dreams and assumptions. It helps us understand

the innermost essence of matter. That is why it also helps us imagine (forms of) matter'.²⁷



69



All the senses 'think' and structure our relation with the world although we are not conscious of this perpetual activity. In my view, the sensory and embodied mode of thinking is essential in art and all creative work. The well-known description of Albert Einstein of the role of visual and muscular images in his thinking process is an authoritative example of this. 'Words and language, as they are written and spoken, do not seem to have any role in my thinking mechanism.'



70



Psychic entities, which seem to be the elements of thinking are certain signs and more or less clear images which can be voluntarily repeated and recombined. The above elements are, in my case, visual in nature and, some of them, related with muscles. Ordinary words and other signs have to be laboriously sought only in the second phase when the mentioned associative play has been sufficiently established and can be repeated if desired,²⁸ Einstein confesses (in his famous

letter of Jacques Hadamar.) It is evident that an emotional and aesthetic factor is equally central in scientific creativity as it is in the making and experiencing of art. Henry Moore writes about a bodily identification and the simultaneous grasping of several points of view in the sculptor's work: 'This is what the sculptor must do. He must strive continually to think of, and use form in its full spatial completeness. He gets the solid shape, as it were, inside his head - he thinks of it, whatever its size, as if he were holding it completely enclosed in the hollow of his hand. He mentally visualizes a complex form from all round itself; he knows while he looks at one side what the other side is like; he identifies himself with its centre of gravity, its mass, its weight; he realizes its volume, and the space that the shape displaces in the air.'²⁹ Our educational philosophy should, finally, acknowledge the existence of sensory thinking and embodied intuition as counterparts and complementaries of conceptual thought, in order to understand the multi-dimensional and layered essence of art and creativity, or, I would like to say, in order to understand

ourselves as human
beings.



The Gift of Imagination



72



The uniqueness of the human condition is this; we live in the manifold worlds of possibilities created and sustained by our experiences, recollections and dreams. The ability to imagine and day-dream must be considered the most human and essential of our capabilities. But the deluge of excessive, nonhierarchical and meaningless pictures in our culture of images - 'the rainfall of images'³⁰ in Italo Calvino's words - flattens our world of imagination. The image flood of television externalizes and passivates images when compared with the interior imagery evoked by reading a book.

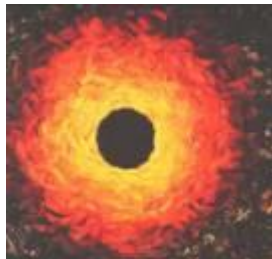


73



There is a dramatic difference between a passive looking at pictures on one hand, and images created by our imagination on the other; the effortless images of entertainment imagine on our behalf. The image flow of consciousness industry detaches images from their historical, cultural and human context and thus 'liberates' the viewer from investing his/her emotions and ethical attitudes in what is experienced. Benumbed by mass communication, we are already prepared to watch the most outrageous cruelty without the least of emotional involvement. The deluge of images that grows overwhelming for the senses and emotions, has suppressed empathy and imagination. In my view, the lack of horizon, ideals and also alternatives in today's political thought is a consequence of a withering of political imagination. As our imagination weakens, we are left at the mercy of an incomprehensible future. Ideals are projections of an optimistic imagination, and it seems, the loss of imagination is bound to ruin idealism. The pragmatism and lack of stimulating visions today are likely to be

consequences of an
empowerished
imagination. A culture
that has lost its
imagination can only
produce apocalyptic
visions of threat as
projections of the
repressed unconscious.
A world devoid of
alternatives, due to the
absence of imagination,
is the world of Huxley's
and Orwell's
manipulated subjects.



74



The duty of education is
to cultivate and support
the human abilities of
imagination and
empathy, but the
prevailing values of
culture tend to
discourage fantasy,
suppress the senses, and
petrify the boundary
between the world and
the self. Education in any
creative field today has
to begin with
questioning of the
absoluteness of the
world and with the
expansion of the
boundaries of self. The
main objective of artistic
education today is not
directly in the principles
of artistic making, but in
the personality of the
student and his/her self-
image in relation to the
world and the traditions
of the craft.



75



The idea of sensory training is nowadays connected solely with artistic education proper, but the refinement of sensory literacy and sensory thinking has an irreplaceable value in other areas of human activity. I want to say more; education of the senses and the imagination is necessary for a full and dignified life.

Notes

¹⁵ Italo Calvino, *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*. Vintage Books, New York 1993, p. 1.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 45.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 151.

¹⁸ Umberto Eco, *Matka arklpäivän epätodellisuuteen* (Semiologia quotidiana). WSOY, Helsinki 1985, p. 350.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 112.

²⁰ Erich Fromm, source unidentified, most likely *Escape From Freedom*.

²¹ Interview in *Time Magazine*, 1990. Source not identified in detail.

²² As quoted in 'Translator's Introduction', (Hubert L. Dreyfus & Patricia Allen Dreyfus), Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Sense and Non-Sense*. Northwestern University Press, Evanston, III., 1964, p. XII.

²³ As quoted in Bachelard, *ibid.*, p. 157.

²⁴ Origin of the quote unidentified.

²⁵ Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*. Beacon Press, Boston, 1964, p. XII.

²⁶ Martin Heidegger, 'What Calls for Thinking?'. *Basic Writings*. Harper & Row, New York, 1977, p. 357.

²⁷ Gaston Bachelard, *Water and Dreams: An Essay On the Imagination of Matter*. The Pegasus Foundation, Dallas 1982, s. 107.

²⁸ Jacques Hadamar, 'The Psychology of Invention in the Mathematical Field', *Education in Vision Series*. Princeton, 1943.

²⁹ Henry Moore, 'The Sculptor Speaks', *Henry Moore On Sculpture* (edited by Philip James). MacDonald, London 1966, p. 62-64.

³⁰ Italo Calvino, *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*. Vintage Books, New York, 1993, s. 57.

[feedback](#)