



## **Ralph Brodrück**

University of Technology Eindhoven

*Ralph Brodrück studied architecture at the Technical University of Eindhoven and Jan van Eyck Academie in Maastricht. He currently teaches architecture*

*and morphology at the Technical University of Eindhoven and the Academie voor Bouwkunst in Arnhem.*

# SENSORY TECTONICS

## *The relationship between sense and sensuality*

In the traditional definition the tectonic most of the time is described as a metaphorical representation of the physical forces at play in the structure of a building. Influenced by Modernism, accompanied by the morals of purity in construction and use of materials, this representation gets more and more abstract. This paper sets out to explore the possibilities of the tectonic not based on a symbolic representation, but as an appeal to the user on the primary level of sensory perception.

In this original layer of perception, according to Merleau-Ponty, my body is receptive to the World and in this receptivity “every thing speaks to my body and to my life.” In this dialogue the quality of the thing opens itself to the qualities of other senses. All of these qualities confirm the same view of that thing and reveal the relation between us and the thing. For Merleau-Ponty the most important aspect about art is not what it actually represents, but to make the visible.

In the light of the work of Joseph Beuys we become conscious of the body’s latent knowledge and of the possibility of rationalizing that knowledge. Through the structure of his work, concealed material properties become visible, revealing our relationship with the world. In Herzog & de Meuron’s architecture there is the same principle of arrangement as in Beuys’ artwork. It is the structure of architectural elements in H&M’s work, through which the material properties are made immediately perceptible. Finally, it turns out that sensory perception, as the most intimate relationship between user and building, constitutes the very foundation for a private meaning in their architecture.

### **Embodied knowledge**

In accordance with the basic principles of phenomenology the basis for meaning is not implied in the things themselves, but comes about through our relation with them. Before we are fully conscious of the World, according to Merleau-Ponty, the World already has meaning for us as we have built up, from the very beginning, a bodily relation to it.

By quoting a simple sensory experience by Sartre, Merleau-Ponty explains that a singular sensory-experience is as mysterious as the whole spectacle of perception.

*This red patch which I see on the carpet is red only in the virtue of a shadow which lies across it, its quality is apparent only in relation to the play of light upon it, and hence as an element in a spatial configuration... Finally this red would literally not be the same if it were not the 'woolly red' of a carpet.<sup>1</sup>*

The sensation of a specific sensible quality, such as red, is not determined by my experiences of that quality. This quality is not definite or objective. In the natural attitude of my seeing, I give way to the spectacle, and do not perceive 'red' but in fact I see the 'woolly red of the carpet'. Perception achieves a synthesis because of the fact that the embodied senses are in constant communication with each other by opening onto the structure of the thing. According to Merleau-Ponty, the thing's unity does not come about through a synthesis of different qualities by thinking, "we are given over to the object and we merge into this body which is better informed than we are about the world, and about the motives we have and the means at our disposal for synthesizing it."<sup>2</sup>

This knowledge my body has about the world, forms the foundation for meaning. We have to break through our natural familiarity with things to penetrate the primary layer of perception. According to Merleau-Ponty the most important purpose of art is not to reflect or imitate the visible but to make the visible.

### **Joseph Beuys: The structure of perception**

In her attempt to approach the basic principles of Beuys' art, Theodora Vischer concludes that the activation of the spectator's perception is a central theme for

1 Merleau-Ponty, Maurice: *Phenomenology of perception*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1976, p. 5 ; Merleau-Ponty is quoting J. P. Sartre, *L'Imaginaire*, p. 241.

2 Ibid., p. 238.



Beuys.<sup>3</sup> To bring this about, Beuys reduces the expressive means he uses, to their materiality and correlates them, so that concealed material properties become visible in a provocative way.

Beuys: *“There is a visible world and an invisible world. The non perceptible coherence of forms, forces and flows of energy belong to the invisible world. These invisible forms are invisible as long as I have no eye, no organ which has the capacity to perceive this plastically. For those providing themselves with such a perceptual organ, for them, these forms are perceptible.”*<sup>4</sup>

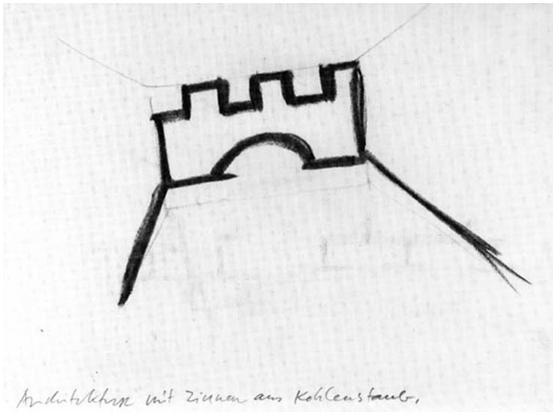
According to Vischer this approach is already recognizable in Beuys’ early drawings. Beuys understands colour not as a material from a tube, but as a substance which is characterized by chemical or organic properties. He widens the traditional palette with all sorts of paintable substances. These substances appeal to the other senses as well, such as smell. A drawing, originally painted in aquarelle, has a second image superimposed upon it using oils. Between these different layers there is no dialogue, but they are in contrast. The oil paint’s heavy materiality contrasting with the aquarelle’s soft materiality raises an interplay of forces by which the weight of the oil paint becomes tangible. The materiality of both substances comes to the fore through this contrast. Painting becomes a plastic event in which the colour reveals it’s ‘plastic potential’. Vischer: “The perception registering the optical circumstances, fail if colour put into action as a substance, cannot be perceived.”<sup>5</sup>

In the sculptural work this plastic process finds further development. Beuys adds several materials such as fat, felt and honey to the traditional materials used in sculpture. Freed of form-principles the materiality of these expressive

3 Vischer, Theodora: *Joseph Beuys Die Einheit des Werkes – Zeichnungen, Aktionen, Plastische Arbeiten, Soziale Skulptur*. Walther König, Köln, 1991, S. 181–185.

4 Vischer, Theodora: “Zum Kunstbegriff von Joseph Beuys.” In: Bastian, Heiner: *Joseph Beuys Skulpturen und Objekte*, Schirmer/Mosel, München, 1988, p. 39.

5 See note 3, p. 103.



*Architektur mit Zinnen aus Kohlestaub,*

means attracts immediate attention. But, besides reducing this expressive means to their materiality, Beuys developed several principles of arrangement by which he elaborated the materials' 'plastic potential'. Through the work's structure, through the relationship between the expressive elements, certain of the materials' qualities come to light. The principle of contradiction will be illustrated with a work of Beuys called 'Plight'.

In this installation the acoustic qualities of felt as a material are revealed through the structuring principle of contradiction. The gallery's walls are covered with rolls of felt up to the ceiling. Because of the size of these rolls, the passages between the spaces are lowered to below eye level. In the middle of the space there is a grand piano.<sup>6</sup> The piano is not played; it is closed and the player's chair is missing. The sound material, which is latently stored in the instrument, becomes perceivable through the presence of the felt rolls. Silence reigns, and in this silence the felt's muffling acoustic quality comes to the fore.

### **Herzog & de Meuron: Sensory tectonics**

In the text accompanying the book "*Herzog & De Meuron: Zeichnungen Drawings*"<sup>7</sup> Vischer writes about the marked sensory qualities revealed in the architect's drawings. "Architecture with merlons of coal dust" can be read on one of the drawings. About this drawing Vischer writes that it is really the materiality of the charcoal, the metallic density of the lead pencil, and not the representation of a possible piece of architecture, that lend the drawing its plasticity and spatiality. At the same time some of the annotations to the drawings make it clear that Herzog & de Meuron specifically look for sensory qualities and the material's plastic potential at a very early stage of the design process. "*A reddish orange handmade tex-*

<sup>6</sup> The installation 'Plight' contains a thermometer and a plate which I leave aside.

<sup>7</sup> Peter Blum. *Herzog & de Meuron: Zeichnungen Drawings*, Peter Blum Edition, New York, 1997, Drawing suspends thinking, Text by Theodora Vischer.

*tile surface that radiates warmth*” one of the notes says. According to Vischer in these drawings not only visual but also tactile and acoustic qualities are present.

Similar to Beuys’s art, the provocative effect is not just explained through the material’s presence but is grounded in the work’s structure as a whole. In Herzog & de Meuron’s tectonics, perception is activated by the relationship between the building’s elements through which concealed properties become visible. In an interview with Vischer, Herzog states that a concrete image, which often constitutes the point of departure for a project, transforms into an idea about structure. During the design process of the house in Therwil their image of the shed slowly was reduced to the form of wooden boards. The image of the shed fades to the background, giving way to the idea of the relationship between the constitutive elements. According to Vischer the shift from the anecdotal image to an architectural structure itself evokes no immediate associations. However, the relationship between the different elements thus becomes more important. Herzog & de Meuron’s tectonics create a system of sensory relations and establishes a straight and immediate experience with the spectator.

Herzog: *“It is not a matter of reproducing what is already known, but expanding again a reduced culture of sensual awareness” and further on: “It should be such an unmediated language that it is comprehensible to everyone, so that it is elementary, not precoded.”*<sup>8</sup>

Comprehensive in this context must not be conceived as grasping the meaning through a process of reasoning, where meaning is transferred from building to user. It works the other way around: it is my body that comprehends the building’s tectonics and brings about the synthesis between my perception and my body’s latent knowledge which remains forever anterior to my perception.

### **To conclude**

Herzog & de Meuron’s contribution to the Fifth Architecture Biennale in Venice in 1991 was entitled: *“Architecture is not only the original idea, nor is it what is built, but rather it is the infinite variety of perceptions.”* The exhibition consisted of photographs of Herzog & de Meuron’s buildings taken by three artists and an architectural photographer. The Architects and their actual work were absent. The photographs on the biennale do not show architecture like it is designed or seen by Herzog & de Meuron. It is another architecture that is exhibited; it is the architecture in the way that the photographers perceived and experienced it.

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8 Widder, Lynette: *Für eine intuitive Verständlichkeit, Towards an Intuitive Understanding*, Daidalos, special issue, August 1995, pp. 56–63.

To induce a sensory experience is not Herzog & de Meuron's primary aim. Their attitude expresses a conviction that fits in with the principles of phenomenology, that is, that meaning comes about in our relation with an object and is not implied in the object itself. Architecture is perception. Sensory perception, as the most private relation between user and building, constitutes the basis for this architecture's meaning to me.