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Matt Teismann

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Anti-Haptic Experience

A Critical Analysis of the Role of the Sense of Touch

Matt Teismann

Beauty is no quality in things themselves; it exists merely in the mind that contemplates them; and each mind perceives a different beauty.¹

Does the tangible man-made object represent haptic experience or an illusion of it—what role does the object play in hapticity? A system of expectations tells us that the haptic experience is intrinsic to the object which instigates it; however within art and architecture this holds untrue: the physical object plays no role in hapticity. This is not to say that hapticity is irrelevant with art and architecture, rather that hapticity it is not a mandatory component of the artistic experience.

Art is not simply a device to express emotions; emotions of artists are completely irrelevant. Art is neither a device designed to evoke an emotional response. Art is a combination of a physical object and man's interaction with that object, which together evoke a *conceptual* response. By conceptual, I do not mean a concept or idea, rather conceptual response that is a reaction beyond that perceived by our senses—in this case the sense of touch. Therefore, a piece of art consists of two crucial components: the physical object and man's perception of it.

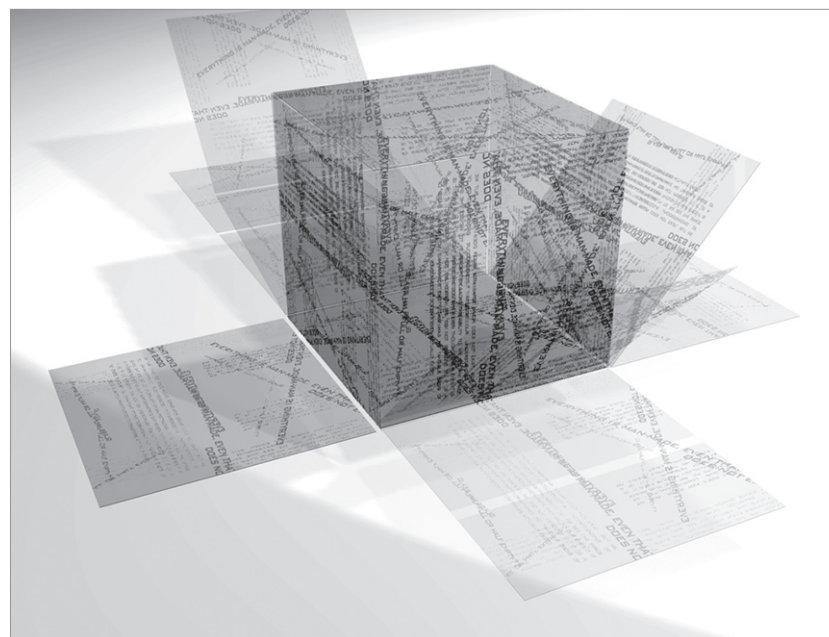
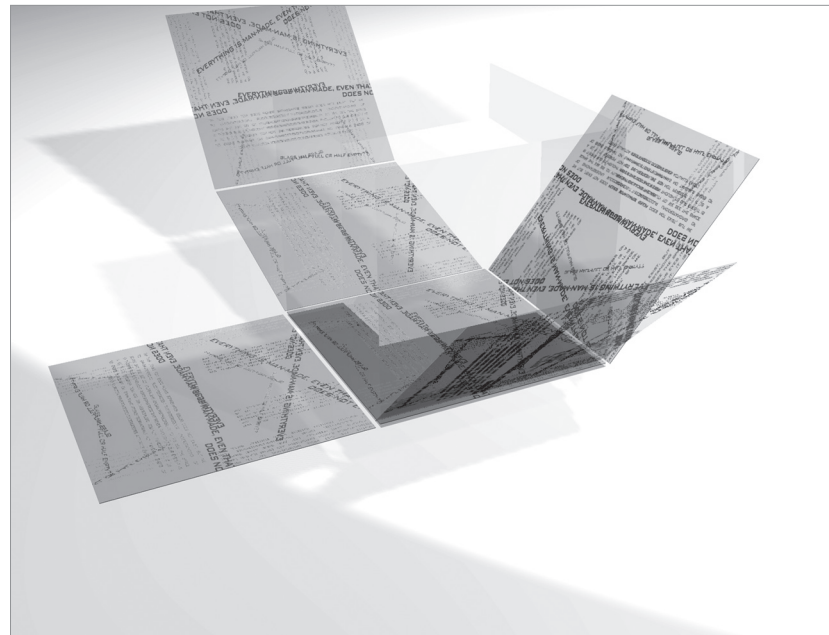
conception (n): The function or process of forming or understanding ideas or abstractions or their symbols; the sum of a person's ideas and beliefs concerning something; the origination of something in the mind.²

Conception is changed around, within, and between people of different ages, cultures, and knowledge. Different people “feel” different things in similar objects. Physical, tangible objects and their surfaces exist regardless of man or his ability to touch them, however these objects only become art when man interacts with them. What does this mean for objects that are not able to be touched, such as the space in between surfaces?

Space has taken a leading role in architectural theory, coming to the forefront after the development of Gestalt psychology and the Modern movement in the beginning of the twentieth century. What has been left, is a reversal of the typical understanding of the figure-ground relationship.³ The question then becomes, how does one experience sensory perception of space when it is unable to be perceived?

A contemporary artist exploring the relationship between space and sensual perception is London-based artist Rachel Whiteread. Whiteread may be best known for her casts of space, in particular her concrete cast of a Victorian house in London in 1993, titled “house.” The volumetric space inside a house nearing demolition, was cast in concrete and displayed as a temporary exhibition.

Architecture schools since the 1930s on have employed similar methods to teach space—the art of the impalpable—by means of palpable models. In these terms Whiteread's house simply takes its place in the tradi-



tion, recognizable to architects, if not to artists or the general public, as a didactic illustration of nineteenth-century domestic space.⁴

Taking the space, which is unable to be touched, and casting it into a tangible object can be used as an illustration to us that, whether or not you can see or touch it, the space does exist. If Whiteread's "house" is an exploration into house' is an exploration into the definition of undefinable space and its meaning, her similar cast of George Orwell's Room 101, from his famous dystopian novel *1984*, relates the space inside to an association with the sense of touch. The sense of touch, torture, and physical pain, can be brought about in our minds based on a conception of an object, or in this case an object representing the impalpable space and the fear that you "dare not give a name to" corresponding to it.⁵

When one experiences a Whiteread cast, it is the experience of what the space inside means, whether it be a mere house or torture chamber, we feel something from the presence of a tangible representation of an otherwise imperceptible object. This artistic experience of objects is intrinsically dependent upon man's value accredited with the "artness"; a man-made phenomenon through the means of sensual perception.

It is convenient to divide our environment into 'physical,' 'social,' and 'cultural' objects. Together, these make up the world: the classes of objects that are logically interrelated. The cultural objects (ideas, works of art) are known through their social or physical manifestations, while social objects are known through the study of behavior (physical manifestation), the physical objects, finally, are known through observation, and may be reduced to sense-data or phenomenon... This does not imply that the higher objects consist of the lower ones.⁶

Therefore, works of art and architecture do not consist exclusively of physical objects, nor the ability to touch them. Although the art cannot exist without the physical object, the physical object in itself is not art.

An example of a piece of art which may confirm the anti-haptic experience is this sculpture I presented to the Royal Academy Summer Exhibition 2008, titled "man-made": a clear, empty cube occupied with a void transparent volume of space. The physical components of the piece are six square glass panels that form a cube. Inscribed on each of the panels in various orientations is the text from this essay, with the phrase "everything is man-made, even that which does not exist" repeating itself in large red letters. Acting as a container that is simultaneously the exterior of the interior and the interior of the exterior, the glass cube contains the space within; space which we conceive because our sensual perception, including the sense of touch, lacks the ability to.

With the "man-made" sculpture, we transcend what we denote as void, but the contained space within becomes the vessel of creation. Although similar to Whiteread's "house" in that the transformation and definition of an undefinable area becomes the intention of the art, this project differs from Whiteread's because we do not perceive this inverse reaction of time or place or how. Pessimistically we declare to accept that the cubic volume contains nothing capable of being touched, but optimistically we conceive the notion of a defined volume through our subliminal ability to interpret definition between surface and void. The entity presented, the space within the cube, obscures the actual haptic experience and our conception of it.

At the Swiss Expo 2002, we were also presented a project that is a subliminal interpretation of surface and void. Following the growing trend of ambiguity of sensual perception, Diller and

Scofidio's *Blur Building* was an elimination of the senses in a white cloud. The viewer, wearing what was ostensibly a raincoat, walked through a constantly shifting cloud of moisture that was pumped from the lake as a fine mist through high pressure nozzles.⁷ Depriving the visitor of their senses, the white cloud of moisture erased visual, acoustic, and haptic references, illustrating that artistic and architectural experience is not dependent upon the haptic experience.

If this argument is to hold true, what role does haptic beauty play in artistic/architectural experience? By haptic beauty I mean the beauty experienced by the sense of touch. Haptic beauty is the quality or aggregate of qualities that pleurably exalts the mind or spirit, regardless of the object that initiates the response. The difference between artistic and haptic experience, is the basis of their interaction with man. Artistic and architectural experience is the relationship between man and the object, a subject-object codependency; whereas haptic beauty is entirely subject based. The physical object and surface is not an inherent necessity to haptic beauty; it is entirely based upon man's sensual perception of it.

Haptic beauty's lack of role in artistic experience is no better illustrated than in the imperceptible cubic volume of

space of "man-made." The fact that we still conceive it although it is unable to be touched, as a result of its lack of substance and surface, shows that although haptic experience is not irrelevant, it is also not mandatory.

Art consists of two components: the object itself and man's experience with that object. The possibilities of the form of the object are infinite, including impalpable space. Each man's experience differs based on his perception of the object, leading to a distinct and disparate conception based on the individual. The object only becomes art when man conceives it in his mind, forming an inseparable, codependent relationship between object and man. Affording the ability for man to perceive this connotation between tangible: real, physical; and non-tangible: boundless, limitless; "man-made" has brought us to understand what it means to have an anti-haptic experience.

Notes

¹Christian Norberg-Schulz, *Intentions in Architecture* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1968) 92.

²*Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary* (Springfield, Mass.: G. & C. Merriam Co., 1972) 171.

³Anthony Vidler, *Warped Space* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002) 144.

⁴*Ibid.*, 144.

⁵BBC, *Real Room 101*, 225.

⁶Norberg-Schulz, *op. cit.*, 55.

⁷Bernard Tschumi, *The State of Architecture at the Beginning of the 21st Century* (New York: Rizzoli, 1993) 111.

