DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.17939939
Original Scientific Article Received: October 20, 2025; Accepted: December 11, 2025

Filip Mattens*

Out of Love: Inviting *Plastik* into Architecture

ABSTRACT: The question of form in architecture remains a delicate and contested issue. Formal expression is frequently criticized for privileging visual display over architecture's disciplinary commitments. Contemporary discourse often responds by promoting the tactile and the atmospheric as alternatives to optical dominance. Yet our engagement with most buildings remains primarily visual. This essay therefore first distills a suggestion from J. G. Herder's *Plastik* on our perceptual relation to form and then mobilizes it toward a nuanced reappraisal of form at the scale of building.

KEYWORDS: vision, form, haptics, materiality, Herder, architecture

* Filip Mattens: Faculty of Architecture, University of Leuven; Filip.Mattens@kuleuven.be.

Preliminary Remarks on Phenomenon and Form, Touch and Vision[1]

Phenomenon, derived from the Greek *phainesthai*, means "that which shows itself." What shows itself is perceived under diverse conditions and from different vantage points, so that it seems to present itself in ever-changing ways—even when we know it remains the same. This difference, between what shows itself and how it shows itself, gives rise to the related notion of appearance. The appearance itself can be described as though it were something standing on its own. This difference also manifests in deceptive appearances, where we discover that something is other than it appears. At times, we seem to perceive something where nothing exists, and in such cases we say that it was a "mere appearance" or a "mere phenomenon." In this way, the term *phenomenon* is used both for what appears (as in the "natural phenomena" studied by science) and for its opposite: that which lacks reality and is mere semblance. Since an appearance in all these cases is relative to our experience of what shows itself, the term *phenomenon* is also employed to refer to the experience itself. The difference between what shows itself and how it shows itself has, consequently, been operative in philosophy in various ways. The idea that the world as we experience it differs from the way it truly is led, in scientific realism, to a devaluation of the sensuously appearing world. Yet this view was countered by the claim that the supposed material reality underlying every experience is an empty, unverifiable hypothesis, so that, for metaphysical phenomenalism, reality collapses into our phenomenal experiences.

Less dramatically, the appearance of things is also objectified in the traditional pictorial arts. The manner in which something presents itself—or how we experience it—is arrested in time within a painting. As with a photograph, we observe how the thing is shown, while ignoring the material presence of the medium, yet remaining aware that the thing itself is absent. This interplay between appearance and reality presupposes imagination. It is imagination that likewise enables us to look at ordinary things as though they were mere appearances. Our capacity to dislodge things from their contextual reality allows, according to Susanne Langer, even artifacts that represent nothing—such as buildings—to be called "images." This, however, presupposes, as Langer argues, that the

[1] I would like to thank Petar Bojanić for inviting me to contribute this impromptu reflection on form to the special issue of the journal *Khōrein* "Phenomenon."

building offers itself purely to vision: "If we receive it as a completely visual thing, we abstract its appearance from its material existence. What we see in this way becomes simply a thing of vision—a form, an image."[2]

Langer's statement should work as a red rag to a bull for today's critics of ocularcentrism in architecture, who claim that we have become entangled in an entirely visual architectural culture, reinforced by a thoroughly vision-oriented pedagogy. They repeatedly marshal a familiar litany of charges, portraying vision as an insidious hegemon that has rendered architects insensitive to users' actual needs while seeking validation through ostentatious design. Although the assertion that architectural education has become wholly visual is neither factually nor historically tenable, the claim nonetheless resonates widely. One must therefore ask why people seem to want it to be true. It appears that the problem is overstated because there is a strong desire to embrace the proposed solution—namely, the promotion of non-visual qualities as an antidote against building practices generating experientially impoverished living environments. While the negative component of the ocularcentrism critique raises eyebrows, many would likely agree with its positive counterpart. Ideally, a built environment could offer an experience akin to walking through a forest: scents, sounds, light, and the feel beneath one's feet merging into an atmospheric experience offering a heightened sense of bodily presence. One difficulty is that we mostly expect buildings not to emit odors and to dampen the sounds of others. Yet bodily interaction with our immediate surroundings is both inevitable and necessary, making the haptic dimension of architecture a legitimate concern and opportunity for designers. The early twentieth-century claim on space thus gave way to a plea for haptic architecture.

Buildings are, however, defined by the fact that we can enter them. As long as an inhabitable entity is not much larger than the human body, the experience of inside and outside remains organically linked—no one, after all, seems troubled by the photogenic yet cold exteriors of steel and glass in automobiles. Once the program requires a certain scale and height, the structure inevitably becomes something visible from a distance, and from afar, we have no direct haptic interaction with it. Most buildings remain for us, inescapably, visual objects; they are experienced more like a mountain peak than a forest. And, like mountain peaks, they

[2] S. K. Langer, *Feeling and Form: A Theory of Art Developed from Philosophy in a New Key*, Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, 1953, p. 47.

may invite contemplation—while conversely offering, from their heights, a detached panoramic view over the built surroundings.

Thus, the larger a construction, the more our visual and haptic relations tend to drift apart and become separate modes of engagement. It is therefore unsurprising that the plea for haptic or atmospheric architecture, alongside its reproaches of visuocentrism, offers little guidance for the design of larger structures and for how these present themselves from the outside—providing, ultimately, little more than a recipe for boxed atmospheres.

The fact that we can have any sensory relation at all with objects of considerable size is due to the nature of our visual apparatus. The eye functions as a *camera obscura* in which light reflected from the environment is gathered to produce a projection on the inner wall of the eye. The discovery of the retinal image, however, misled theorists for centuries, as it was assumed that the projected image mediates our representation of the world. Yet the mere fact that the *camera obscura* delivers an image does not mean that this image constitutes the object of perception. Nevertheless, the principle of projection is decisive for our visual relation to the world, since it enables us to perceive any object—regardless of its size—from an appropriate distance as a whole. It is thanks to this principle that every object, moreover, lends itself to aesthetic contemplation—from a minute crystal to an immense cloud.

In his lectures, Benoît Mandelbrot liked to show a photograph of his camera lens cap on a stony surface, only to reveal in the next image that this was in fact a two-meter replica mounted against a rock wall, in order to illustrate how the same natural patterns recur at different scales. Yet the point I wish to stress is that the image of the lens cap, as projected on the lecture hall screen, was far larger still—and could have been enlarged indefinitely on a bigger screen, even beyond the size of any terrestrial object, projected onto the dark side of the moon if we had the means. But note that such enormous projection does not necessarily imply that the lens cap appears gigantic. Precisely because vision is *scale-free*, so to speak, not only is there no limit to the size of visible things, but their appearance is in no way bound to their real scale. This was one of the observations George Berkeley employed in his *New Theory of Vision* to persuade us that our visual representations of things are entirely independent of their tangible nature.

Touch, by contrast, does not operate through projection but through physical contact, and therefore never gives us the impression to present

things as larger or smaller than they are. The probing hand coincides with the surface it touches, leaving no room for distortion due to scaling or perspective. Yet Berkeley exploited not only the perspectival variability of visual objects to distinguish them from tangible ones; he sought to demonstrate that visually perceived objects are not the same as tactually perceived objects. He did so by pointing out that they are not where we take them to be. Objects seem visually to appear at various distances from us. But since every light ray reflected by those tangible objects *over there* projects only a single point on the retina—regardless of how far the light has traveled—the optical projection contains no information about the distance of things. The visual impressions we experience are, strictly speaking, at no distance from ourselves; they are not *out there*, but merely mental. In this way, Berkeley tried to convince us that from early childhood we have learned to interpret our visual impressions on the basis of simultaneous tactile spatial perceptions, so that over time we have come to understand our visual impressions as tangible objects.

Although Berkeley's analysis of vision—which was only a stepping stone toward his metaphysical phenomenalism—is profoundly misleading, his argument persuaded generations of philosophers that sight by itself cannot provide information about the distance of things or their three-dimensional nature. The alleged spatial incapacity of eyesight meant that touch was regarded as the true source of the spatial content of all our perceptions. Thus arose the idea that we owe our representations of the three-dimensional form of things to the sense of touch—a thought that eventually evolved into the conviction that we possess hands precisely in order to apprehend object form: "Nature seems to have given this organ only to man, so that by feeling all the sides of a body he could form a concept of its shape."[3]

The fact that in touching we stand in direct physical contact with a physical object might explain why we use the word "appearance" primarily in relation to vision, and scarcely—if at all—in relation to touch. As noted earlier, the notion of appearance is prompted by the difference between the thing that shows itself and the manner in which it shows itself. In tactile experience, there seems to be no room for the emergence of this difference. When we touch, we never encounter a mere appearance; on the contrary, we collide with material reality. When I touch the

[3] I. Kant, *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2006, p. 46.

wall, I experience its physical resistance; but when I press against it in a different place, I do not have the impression that the wall now shows itself differently. Nor does this difference arise with smaller objects: either I can hold it in my hand and have a full grasp of its solid form as it is, or the object is larger, so that I must move my hand across it; but in that latter case, I have the impression that I am feeling different parts of the form rather than that the form itself appears differently to me, as happens when we *look* at a form from different angles, which is probably also why the Latin *forma* meant both "form" and "appearance"; for an object could, in principle, become pure appearance by losing its materiality, though only if it retained its form, as in a picture, so that we could still see it as appearance of *that* object. "Image," "form," "appearance" are therefore, as implied in the passage from Langer cited above, philosophically related notions.

This is also why the sense of touch remained excluded from the consideration of art in modern aesthetics. As summarized in Hegel's *Lectures on Fine Art*: in the consideration of art we are interested in the sensuous presence of an object but the sensuous "should appear only as surface and as a pure appearance of the sensuous."[4] What the spirit seeks in the sensuously present artwork is not a materially present object as such, but a sensuous presence "liberated from the scaffolding of its purely material nature."[5] Art, Hegel explains, "deliberately produces only a shadow-world of shapes, sounds, and sights,"[6] while, in one way or another, "smell, taste, and touch have to do with matter as such."[7] The pleasures of these senses are directly related, not to beauty and art, but to our vital needs. Indeed, the expressions *it looks good* and *it feels good* tend to express a different orientation; the one object-directed, the other subject-related. The look of something is an objective appearance; its feel a bodily experience.

The exclusion of touch, smell, and taste required little argument, since it seemed confirmed by the fact that there is music and visual arts, whereas the pleasures of touch and taste remained relegated to the everyday realms of intimacy and appetite. In an attempt to ground this intuitive difference between true aesthetic appreciation and the sense pleasures of touch, taste, and smell more deeply, Sydney Zink distinguished

[4] G. W. F. Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1975, p. 38.
[5] *Ibid*.
[6] *Ibid*., p. 39.
[7] *Ibid*.

two points.[8] First, he argues that, in order to heighten pleasure, in sense enjoyment we must strive to immerse ourselves completely in the sensation itself, whereas the mind in aesthetic contemplation remains calm yet actively directs all its attention to a complex, external object. Second, he claims that, while the pleasurable impressions of taste, smell, and touch can only be experienced one at a time, aesthetic appreciation presupposes that various elements are apprehended in relation to one another—whether temporally or spatially. In the visual arts, this primarily concerns the spatial relations implied in shape and compositions consisting of multiple shapes.

Such divisions no longer correspond to the expectations we have of art today. Yet the point that concerns me here is that this leaves us with a strikingly paradoxical situation in eighteenth-century philosophy. On the one hand, virtually all philosophers after Berkeley adopt the idea that touch is the only sense capable of providing us with a direct perception of forms and spatial relations; on the other hand, touch is excluded from aesthetic appreciation, which is precisely a matter of grasping spatial relations and forms. These two discourses seem to unfold side by side. But if the plastic arts are a matter of the apprehension of spatial relations, one would expect touch to play a role in the philosophical reflection on art. There is, however, one work that stands exactly at the intersection of these two discourses: J.G. Herder's *Plastik* from 1778.[9] In what follows, I will first offer a selective, focused reading of this work, and then mobilize one of its core ideas for a reflection on our sensory relation to buildings.

Out of Love for Form

Without mentioning him by name, Herder makes it clear that he aligns himself with Berkeley's *New Theory of Vision* by opening *Plastik* with several testimonies concerning individuals deprived of sight—testimonies which, as in Berkeley, are intended to demonstrate that our visual and tactile relations to the spatial world are fundamentally distinct. But

[8] S. Zink, "Esthetic Appreciation and Its Distinction from Sense Pleasure," *Journal of Philosophy*, 39, 26, 1942, pp. 705–707.

[9] J. G. von Herder, *Plastik: einige Wahrnehmungen über Form und Gestalt aus Pygmalions bildendem Traum*, Riga, J.F. Hartknoch, 1778. I will refer to Jason Gaiger's English translation: J. G. von Herder, *Sculpture: Some Observations on Shape and Form from Pygmalion's Creative Dream*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2002, as well as to Gaiger's translation of Herder's earlier, unpublished version: J. G. von Herder, *Critical Forests: Fourth Grove*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2004.

unlike Berkeley, who sought to separate the spatial deliverances of vision and touch in order to draw out the epistemological implications of their heterogeneity, Herder is interested in this very difference for its relevance to the experience of the arts. Leaving aside Berkeley's portrayal of vision as a natural language, Herder instead begins with a descriptive analysis of vision, drawing an analogy with the painted image:

> What is light able to paint upon our eyes? That which can be painted: pictures. As upon the white wall of a camera obscura, pencils of light fall upon the retina of the eye from everything that stands in front of it. But they can only draw what is there—a surface, the most diverse visible objects ranged alongside one another.[10]

Herder here emphasizes the structural correspondence between the retinal image and a painted picture, which allows for nothing beyond the juxtaposition of colour patches. It is unclear whether Herder is aware that the retinal image should not be regarded as the object of vision; in any case, he reiterates his point concerning the phenomenal givenness of visually perceived objects:

> The sky that lowers to the ground and the wood that merges into it, the broad expanse of the field and the water close by, the bank of the river, the motif that dominates the entire picture—these are but an image, a panel, a continuum of things placed alongside one another.[11]

This example—clearly inspired by landscape painting—is masterfully chosen, for it requires no explanation that the sky does not in fact descend to the ground, even though we nonetheless see and paint it as such. With this illustration, Herder underscores that the visual world unfolds within an apparent, strictly two-dimensional field.

In this way, Herder introduces the well-known Berkeleian motif that vision, by itself, cannot disclose a spatial world of corporeal bodies and is therefore dependent on touch to gain a grasp of reality. The fact that our visual impressions are elicited by light reinforces the thought that eyesight cannot provide an original experience of solidity. Without the possibility of touch, visually perceived objects would, Herder claims, forever remain for us like the rings of Saturn—namely, "phenomenon, *appearance*"

---

[10] J. G. von Herder, *Sculpture*, p. 35.
[11] *Ibid*., p. 36.

(*Phänomen, Erscheinung*).[12] Nevertheless, in a lyrical description Herder praises this alliance between eyesight and sunlight, for it enables us to apprehend things clearly and distinctly, and to compare them—hence it is entirely understandable that we borrow so many terms from sight to designate our intellectual faculties. At the same time, the inherent capacity of ocular perception to let us experience the unity and diversity of things affords us pleasure, which, according to Herder, explains the kinship between the German words "*Schein*" (appearance) and "*Schön*" (beautiful): "According to its original meaning, the concept of beauty is a 'phenomenon', and thus to be treated, as it were, as an agreeable illusion, as a charming deception."[13] The gateway to a philosophy of beauty is, therefore, a "phenomenology"—a "theory of vision."[14]

Compared with the brilliance of sight, touch may seem a coarse and unrefined sense. While Berkeley devoted little attention to touch, Herder is keen to emphasize its distinctive character. As long as we merely gaze at a bodily thing, he suggests, we dream of what it might truly be; but when the hand takes hold of a body, it has a lively feeling—a genuine grasp (*Begriff*) of the thing.[15] In a passage that comes very close to the above-cited thesis from Kant's *Anthropology*, Herder asserts that only human beings possess concepts such as volume, form, hardness, and solidity because they have not only reason but also a hand capable of feeling and grasping. These most primary concepts—such as body, space, and form—cannot be taught or demonstrated; they can only be acquired through the experience of haptic exploration. Herder goes so far as to claim that the blind, who rely on slow manual exploration and cannot content themselves with fleeting visual appearances, develop an understanding of the properties of solid bodies that is far more complete than that of the sighted—a point he reinforces by citing blind sculptors who surpass their sighted colleagues.[16]

From birth, the tactile perceptions of the sighted are accompanied by visual impressions, so that in time these visual impressions suffice to evoke tangible ideas. We are so accustomed to this, Berkeley explained, that we believe we *see* the tangible world. Herder, however, wishes to stress that this development entails a flattening of our *experience*. We see so much

---

[12] *Ibid*.
[13] J. G. von Herder, *Critical Forests*, p. 204.
[14] *Ibid*., p. 206.
[15] J. G. von Herder, *Sculpture*, p. 37.
[16] *Ibid*.

faster and so much more than we could ever actually touch that our visual perception ceases to be a genuine perception of tangible bodies: "sight is but *an abbreviated form of touch*."[17] Because visual perception operates within a flat field, it works with great speed, and thus seeing becomes superficial—in both senses of the word: related to the external surface and lacking depth. The gaze skims the world as if it were a surface yet never grasps things as bodies. Herder's chief concern is that, in visual experience, corporeal forms lose their volume: "The rounded *form* becomes a mere *figure*, the *statue* a flat *engraving*."[18] The operation of eyesight is, hence, not merely superficial but potentially destructive. It is no accident that Herder signals this danger by invoking the decline of sculpture into picture.

The key passage of *Plastik* seems to suggest—or so I read it—that the art of sculpture carries the promise of breaking the normal relationship between seeing and touching. For the confrontation with sculpted forms unsettles the habitual operation of eyesight. In a description of a spectator's behavior in relation to a sculpture—clearly inspired, as the corresponding passage in *Critical Grooves* indicates, by the well-known description of the *Apollo Belvedere* by J. J. Winckelmann—Herder observes that the spectator restlessly circles around the sculpture because it prescribes no proper viewpoint, as a painting does. Yet even a thousand viewpoints prove insufficient, since each one separately reduces the beautiful volumes to pitiful figures. Precisely because spectators sense this intuitively, they continue to change position. In this way sculpture frustrates vision, and the spectators, Herder remarks, would give anything to transform their seeing into touching, which feels in the dark. But precisely because Herder's spectator finds no satisfaction and therefore keeps searching, "his eye becomes his hand" with which his soul can feel the work.[19] Because sculpted forms make us aware that vision affords no real grasp of bodies, our physical mode of looking changes, and our way of seeing assimilates itself to the operation of feeling. Where Berkeley had demonstrated that vision first relied on touch and then emancipated itself from this dependence, Herder seems to suggest that sculpture has the power to reverse this relation of service: the sense of feeling makes use of the eye for its own operation.

This description evokes a strikingly similar passage from Charles Baudelaire's critical essay "*Pourquoi la sculpture est ennuyeuse*" ("Why

[17] *Ibid*., p. 38.
[18] *Ibid*.
[19] *Ibid*., p. 41.

Sculpture is Tiresome"), in which he laments that "the spectator who moves around the figure can choose a hundred different points of view, except for the right one;" painting, by contrast, "has but one point of view; it is exclusive and absolute."[20] Consequently, the painter exercises greater control over the spectator, endowing the work with superior expressive force. Other voices—such as Boccioni's characterization of sculpture as mummified art—suggest that nineteenth-century sculpture elicited little appreciation. Be that as it may, from Herder's perspective it is evident that Baudelaire's analysis stems from his tendency to conceive sculpture by analogy with painting, as a picture: that is, as something presented frontally, to be apprehended from a prescribed vantage point, rather than as an art form that fundamentally exploits its full spatiality. Most strikingly, this outlook on sculpture is explicitly prescribed by Adolf von Hildebrand—himself a sculptor—in his influential treatise *The Problem of Form in Painting and Sculpture*, first published in 1893. Although the artist may elaborate multiple viewpoints, there must, Hildebrand insists, be one viewpoint that "is representative of the total plastic nature of the object, and, like a picture or relief, expresses it all in a single two-dimensional impression."[21] Failure to achieve this entails the risk that the spectator feels compelled to shift position: "Thus we are driven all around the figure without even being able to grasp it once in its entirety."[22] In such a case, Hildebrand argues, the artwork is no better than an object of nature. "The purpose of sculpture is not to put the spectator in a haphazard and troubled state regarding the three-dimensional or cubic aspect of things. … The real aim is to give him instantly a perfectly clear visual idea and thus remove the disturbing problem of cubic form."[23] Hildebrand's expectation stands in diametric opposition to that of Herder:

> So long as the chief effect of any plastic figure is its reality as a solid, it is imperfect as a work of art. It is only when the figure, though in reality a solid, gains its effect as a plane picture, that it attains artistic form, that is to say, perfection for our sense of vision.[24]

---

[20] C. Baudelaire, "Why Sculpture Is Tiresome," in *The Mirror of Art: Critical Studies by Charles Baudelaire*, Doubleday Anchor Books, Garden City, NY, 1956, p. 120.

[21] A. von Hildebrand, *The Problem of Form in Painting and Sculpture*, G. E. Stechert & Co., New York, 1907, p. 94.

[22] *Ibid*., p. 95.

[23] *Ibid*., pp. 95–96.

[24] *Ibid*., p. 96.

Viewed through Herder's lens, Hildebrand's conception and Baudelaire's complaint appear distorted—indeed, even inverted: the art most essentially defined by spatiality is deemed problematic precisely because of that spatiality; more specifically, because its three-dimensionality unsettles the spectator, who is culturally disposed to consume the world as visual images. In my reading of Herder, this very property constituted sculpture's unique power: its capacity to disrupt the natural reduction of the spatial world to a flattened realm of visual presentations. Anticipating the risk of a pictorial understanding of sculpture, Herder argued that sculpture should restrict itself to individual figures, since we spontaneously perceive groups as scenes—that is, as images. Sculpture, by contrast, must present solid volumes and therefore avoid distracting details such as veins, wrinkles, or folds of clothing—a point Baudelaire himself later also made.

Like any theory that expects artworks to exert a determinate effect on the spectator, Herder's view may seem little more than wishful thinking. Yet his ambition was primarily theoretical. Following Lessing's influential distinction of music as an art of temporal relations from the visual arts as primarily determined by spatiality, Herder sought above all to demonstrate that it is a fundamental error to subsume sculpture under the so-called "visual arts." Purely from the visual, he argued, no art of corporeal form can arise. Hearing, sight, and touch are each distinct modes of disclosing the world, and to each belongs its own art form. Hence every art must be purified of what properly pertains to a sense foreign to it. Accordingly, sculpture should renounce colour and resist optical effects.

Herder's separation of the arts according to the laws arising from their proper mode of perception seems to anticipate the modernist impulse to reduce the arts to their medium-specific features. Nevertheless, Herder's view is more than an expression of theoretical rigor. Charles Taylor has characterized Herder as a "deeply innovative thinker" who, owing to his lack of philosophical discipline, was easily ignored once his ideas were appropriated by more systematic minds.[25] Whether this judgment applies to *Plastik* is debatable; yet Herder's argument concerning sculptural form merits renewed attention, for beneath it lies a curious—indeed, audacious—movement of thought.

---

[25] C. Taylor, *Philosophical Arguments*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 1995, p. 79.

At first glance, Herder seems merely—like so many philosophers across time—to repeat Berkeley's theory of perception uncritically, and then extend it to the arts so that the allegedly natural distinctness of our sensory modalities dictates a strict separation of art forms—a position rather unappealing today. Yet within his account of the encounter between sculpture and spectator lies a conception of aesthetic experience that diverges both from contemporary interest in tactile aesthetics and from the dominant historical narrative, according to which the arts elevate us above our animal impulses and material reality. Joyce expressed that narrative succinctly: "Desire urges us to possess, to go to something; loathing urges us to abandon, to go from something. These are kinetic emotions. The arts which excite them, pornographical or didactic, are therefore improper arts." The proper emotion, consonant with aesthetic contemplation, is static: "The mind is arrested and raised above desire and loathing."[26] Herder, by contrast, does not hesitate to describe the relation to sculpture by analogy with the attraction felt by a lover: "the more vital our feeling for an object *from afar*, the more we sense the space that intervenes and the more everything in us surges forward to meet it." And: "Pity the lover who gazes upon his beloved from a distance as if she were an image on a surface and for whom this suffices!"[27] That same traditional conviction—that aesthetic experience, unlike sensory pleasure, requires static, tranquil contemplation—was precisely the reason why, according to Zink, tactile perception could not qualify as a source of aesthetic delight. Tactile experience, moreover, was thought not only incapable of grasping spatial relations but also, as Hegel argued, fatally entangled with materiality itself and, accordingly, too deeply stirring.

Herder's advocacy of touch, however, does not simply invert the ideal of a distanced aesthetic relation, as we often find in recent tactile aesthetics that seek contact with materialities through the reversibility of tactile sensation. Herder's aesthetic experience is an experience of the hand, not of the skin. What Herder does, rather, is describe the experience of sculpture as an almost erotic longing—yet one that does not culminate in pleasure but leads instead toward a "truth:" not a rational truth bathed in light, but a truth nonetheless. This truth is relative to the untruthfulness of any situation in which eyesight pretends to offer what properly derives from touch. Painting embodies this untruthfulness, making it

[26] J. Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Penguin Classics, London, 2000, p. 222.
[27] J. G. von Herder, p. 42.

at once a wondrous "dream" and a "magical deception."[28] Nowhere is this untruthfulness more evident than in its complete reversal, when the "dream becomes truth"[29]—namely, when the painter succeeds in making a child reach out to grasp an image. Sculpture, by contrast, represents the "living, embodied truth of three-dimensional space of angles, of form and volume;" the "physically present, tangible truth."[30] This truth is that of the naked presence of solids, which as such elude incorporation into the visually driven processes of cognition.

Out of Love with Form

The thought I distilled from *Plastik* is the suggestion that the encounter with a sculpted corporeal form transforms our mode of seeing. An art connoisseur entering the Belvedere Courtyard can instantly identify the figures by their visual silhouette: *that is Apollo, that is Hermes, Dionysos...* Yet the art lover, if Herder is correct, would be drawn to a single piece and become enthralled by its forms, so that ordinary, rapid categorical seeing no longer suffices. The customary functional duality of seeing and knowing gives way to an alliance between the eye and the feeling hand. The figures that demand our cognitive classificatory powers recede into the background, while we willingly devote all our attention to the physical presence of a tangible form.

But *Plastik*'s suggestion likely came too early. The direct comparison between the lover and the art lover, together with the erotic connotation implied in the title's allusion to the myth of Pygmalion, clashed too strongly with the principle of disinterestedness that dominated philosophical aesthetics from his time onward, and may well have invited an overly literal reading. The suggestion that a desire to touch, provoked by form, can lead to a heightened awareness of the bare presence of corporeality, in fact, seems to resonate more naturally with the abstract work of Constantin Brâncuși, Henry Moore, or Barbara Hepworth, for whom "sculpture is a three-dimensional projection of primitive feeling: touch, texture, size and scale, hardness and warmth, evocation and compulsion to move, live, and love."[31]

---

[28] *Ibid*., p. 38.
[29] *Ibid*.
[30] *Ibid*., p. 40.
[31] B. Hepworth, *Sculpture: Process and Purpose*, Studio Vista, London, 1970, p. 11.

There is, nonetheless, a feature of the Apollo Belvedere—*not coincidentally* lost to the eye in photographic reproductions—that I wish to exploit in the following: the statue is much larger than life. This did not impede Winckelmann's rapturous experience, precisely because the feeling gaze operates through the ocular apparatus and is therefore not confined to the true scale of things, as is the touching hand. Consequently, it is just as possible for the feeling gaze to move across a life-sized figure as across a colossus, over Brancusi's *Birth of the World* as over Genzken's ellipsoids, a public work by Moore, the strange volume of an oil tank, or an upturned fishing boat. Although Brâncuși, Moore, and Hepworth repeatedly allude to the importance of the tactile relation, they progressively worked on a larger scale, as if nonetheless expecting greater aesthetic efficacy from volumes beyond tactile reach. Hence, the feeling gaze can likewise traverse a bunker as easily as a vault or a slate-covered dome, a silo as readily as a tower, a capsized vessel, or an airship. This implies that Herder's suggestion not only aligns more closely with the abstract plastic arts of the twentieth century but even applies to forms on the scale of architecture.

One particularly instructive example—because it is nearly as familiar to philosophers as to architects—for discussing form in architecture is the chapel at Ronchamp. Although the building as a whole constitutes an assemblage of sculptural forms, I wish to focus specifically on the way the roof manifests itself from the east, where the open-air church is located.

Standing at the eastern side of the building, one sees a semi-open space formed by a frontal, planar wall, a rounded volume to the right, and, to the left, a much higher, massive wall that seems to disappear behind the frontal plane. Resting atop these three walls lies an elongated concrete volume, which is in fact more like a shell, appearing not quite to touch the walls but separated from them by a narrow slit. Although this volume hovers obliquely above the walls, it does not seem in danger of sliding off, for it lightens toward its highest side, where it tapers to a sharp point. This apparent volume functions simultaneously as a roof and as a sculptural element; the building could just as well have had a flat roofline, like the organic volume that houses the crypt at La Tourette. As a roof, it belongs to the familiar elements that form the backdrop for the activities around the altar; as a sculptural element, it seizes attention—but not as a picture does. Where the gaze loses itself in a picture, here it wishes to coil around the form. The form holds the gaze because it invites a more engaged viewing; it occupies the spectator, who seeks to grasp the

volume visually. One captivated by the volume might, as Herder said, long to hold and explore it by touch. That it is far too large for this does not diminish the desire.

The chapel at Ronchamp was once praised as an answer to the cold geometry of early modernist machine aesthetics—owing largely to its formal expressiveness, not merely to its program. Yet sculptural formality is among the most problematic issues in architecture, precisely because it detaches itself from program and draws attention to itself. The expectation that form and function coincide is deeply rooted in the intellectual tradition the West inherited from the Greeks. Socrates, in Paul Valéry's *Eupalinos ou l'architecte*, recounts how a strangely shaped stone on the beach led him to wonder whether it was of animal origin, crafted by a human who imposed an idea upon matter by carving it with a specific purpose, or merely shaped by the accidental play of natural forces—forces that, in principle, might even have produced a form resembling the head of Apollo.[32] Unable to discern the cause or the end of its form, Socrates flung it back into the sea in frustration. Yet the unusual shape continued to trouble his mind, prompting him to imagine how a completely uncivilized person, washed ashore here, might determine whether a table, an amphora, or a house was made by nature or by humans. Where the forms of natural objects suggest that all parts are bound together by hidden relations, Socrates reasoned, in human artifacts matter, form, and function are only loosely connected. This is because humans, who seek to live, unlike mathematicians and philosophers, have but one practical aim in view and impose it externally upon matter, whereas in natural things the maker and the made are one. The forms of natural objects therefore radiate necessity. Yet Phaedrus remarks that in some artifacts the form is almost miraculously adapted to its function, so that the object gives us a sense of kinship between beauty and necessity: "Nothing in these fortunate creations occurs but what is useful (*utile*); they contain nothing beyond what can be derived from the requirements of the intended effect."[33] This, Socrates explains, is because "thousands of experiments of thousands of men gradually converge toward the most economical and the surest figure;" they have "in a certain sense made themselves; the use of centuries necessarily found the best form."[34] In this respect, they

[32] P. Valéry, *Eupalinos ou l'Architecte – L'Âme et la danse – Dialogue de l'arbre*, Éditions Gallimard, Paris, 1995, pp. 79–80.
[33] *Ibid*., p. 91.
[34] *Ibid*., p. 92.

resemble things shaped by time and chance—like a stone from the sea—that, despite its strangeness, seems to have been formed by some inner or external principle. Chance or not, a brief time later, the young Corbusier was prompted to let the character Paul Boulard in *L'esprit nouveau* speak of the curious forms of stones on the beach at Trégastel, which reminded him of an exceptional stone he had once found. That large flint bore a striking ridge caused by wind erosion, just as the winds of the Sahara shape dunes with profiles, he writes, one might have thought only marble sculpted by human will could achieve. Boulard discerned a rule behind the production of these forms that "our mind can recognize," that gives rise to a "*jouissance* of a mathematical order," and he advanced this purity of forms produced by natural forces as a model for an architecture that must cast off traditional ornamentation.[35]

When Baudelaire claimed—to illustrate that, compared to painting, sculpture stands closer to nature than to culture due to its material presence—that "our peasants [...] are enchanted by the sight of an ingeniously-turned fragment of wood or stone," while remaining unmoved by the finest painting, he likely did not have the likes of Socrates and Le Corbusier in mind.[36] We know why Plato's Socrates could not appreciate painting, yet it is clear that Valéry's Socrates' fascination for physical forms has nothing to do with their material presence—there is nothing solid about the *Platonic solids*. Socrates, like Le Corbusier, looks at the form of natural objects as the product of an intelligible principle. For this reason, Socrates seems incapable of appreciating the remarkable shape of the stone itself, as in certain Eastern traditions; the form serves merely as the occasion for a philosophical reflection on forms in general, for an exercise in categorization—and ultimately, the reason the form can set Socrates thinking is that it appears to have a purpose, as if it were made *for a reason*. The expectation that a form must possess an internal cause or an external end prevents Socrates from contemplating the form itself. Forms are deemed beautiful only when they appear as the necessary product of a determinate principle.

The mind that delights in the form of things because it perceives a harmony between organization and cause or purpose, in fact, takes pleasure because it encounters its own image in the material world. The inner domain of intellect—the realm of reasons—appears reflected in the

[35] P. Boulard, "Jouissance d'ordre mathématique," *L'Esprit nouveau*, 28, 1925, p. 2330.
[36] C. Baudelaire, "Why Sculpture Is Tiresome," p. 120.

external order of things. Here, objective beauty is, in truth, a narcissism of the intellect. Herder's *éloge* of form deserves renewed consideration, in my view, because it moves in an entirely different direction. Herder's praise aligns not with the mind's eye, but with the hand and the heart. It concerns not the content or structure of forms, but the very nature of form in contrast to the figure as we visually perceive it and represent it in pictures. This *éloge* is ultimately motivated by resistance to the attitude of mind that arises from the nature of vision. Vision and the life of the intellect are indeed closely related. The eye is not only a powerful instrument of knowledge by virtue of its vast range—from detail to overview—facilitating both analysis and synthesis. In visual imagination, moreover, the mind is traditionally thought to experience and express its freedom, its unbounded spontaneity. When the eye gazes upon a marble wall, the mind loses itself in the intricate veining and transforms it into figures; it delights in its capacity to deny material reality by creating its own universe, reducing the material to a mere backdrop for the emerging spectacle.

This spontaneous act of imagination is what is celebrated in traditional figurative painting, as it creates a new, unreal universe that comes into being as the image. The material canvas is ignored in the imaginative act of looking into the image. By contrast, the materiality of sculpture always remains present—so much so that Baudelaire called sculpture "as brutal and positive as nature herself."[37] In sculpture, the creative aspect of looking is less explicit, precisely because the material support is already three-dimensional and the *Bild* inhabits our bodily reality, whereas the negation of materiality in figurative painting is a necessary achievement of the mind. The drawback of this convergence—between the spontaneity of imagination and vision's capacity for detachment from the physical through projection—is that the reflective mind must forever doubt the deliverances of vision. Vision, as Berkeley persuaded us, makes no contact with the material world as such; it is, in reality, an immanent sphere to which nothing material need correspond. For this very reason, vision requires touch as "the solid foundation and guarantor of seeing."[38] Ever since the modern awareness of the subjectivity of sensations, epistemology relies on touch—on the experience of resistance to voluntary movement—to anchor our mental representations in the material world. To

[37] *Ibid*.

[38] J. G. von Herder, *Sculpture*, p. 38.

mark this decisive moment, Fichte introduced the notion of *Anstoss*. The experience of a check upon one's voluntary movement signifies both the end of the mind's freedom and the beginning of the external world. Yet in the theory of perception, its primary role is to ground the separate universe of visual representations. This grounding, however, seems little more than a security check—a mere touchstone—whose function is to link our visually acquired knowledge to the world, without itself offering any refined knowledge of that world. One might already suspect this from the bluntness implied in the term *Anstoss*, which means little more than "bump." It is because sculpture, positive and brutal, stands in the physical world, whereas painting withdraws into its own imaginary space, that sculpture presents itself to touch like any other thing—allowing Barnett Newman to define it with as much disdain as Baudelaire: s*culpture is what you bump into when you back up to see a painting*.

Yet the very physical positivity of sculpture, which Baudelaire and Newman regarded as a brute presence in the bodily world we happen to inhabit, is interpreted quite differently by Herder, through his characteristically modern epistemological distrust of vision, spilling over into the world of pictures. That same brute presence becomes for Herder a matter of truth, not a rational, but a material one—a truth that belongs to sculpture which, unlike painting, offers no illusion; it is *Darstellung*. Herder's notion of truth is therefore bound up with the way the sculpted object reveals that it eludes the eye. Any perceivable object we know or understand we recognize by its form, and thus it is already incorporated into our cognitive framework. Yet, in principle, it cannot be fully incorporated into consciousness. Time and again, Edmund Husserl described the perception of a thing as an unfinishable process: from every standpoint we see only one adumbration of the object, and even if we were to move completely around it, an open multiplicity of views would remain possible. Precisely for this reason, the object is an *external* object that resists reduction to our mental representations of it. Even an absolute mind, Husserl argued, would have to experience a thing in this necessarily incomplete way if it were to be experienced as a thing. To be an external object, it must appear as inexhaustible to perception.

However this is not how things appear in our everyday visual experience—otherwise we would not need Husserl to make this insight explicit. The pen, the telephone, the book on my desk does not manifest itself to me as something visually inexhaustible. The book seems a block with six sides and contains, within, three hundred and twenty-four pages, and

thus one hundred and sixty-two sheets. But Husserl points to the infinite number of possible viewpoints on any part of the object and clarifies that every exploratory series of perceptions remains forever an approximation; the thing can therefore be characterized as an "*Idee im Kantischen Sinne*"—a philosophical allusion apt for an observation that flows from theoretical reflection yet eludes everyday perception.

The plastic artwork, however, stands among other physical things, yet it possesses the capacity to elicit this very insight—not through reflection, but through lived experience. Herder's suggestion anticipates the familiar twentieth-century trope according to which artworks have the power to disrupt our perceptual habits and allow us to experience a thing as though for the very first time. In Herder, however, this is not a process of alienation but, quite the contrary, a removal of estrangement—a recovery of tangible reality achieved by breaking the developmental process of habituation that had absorbed feeling into seeing. But just as this insight escapes everyday vision, perceptual inexhaustibility likewise fails to impose itself upon *feeling* in the ordinary handling of things—perhaps even more so. What facilitates the awakening of this heightened awareness of the object's naked presence through its perceptual inexhaustibility is precisely the peculiar status of the sculpture as an object we wish not to reduce optically, yet we are not permitted to touch. It is within this seductive yet prohibitive situation—neither purely optical nor simply haptic—that form manifests itself as something for which, in Herder's words, a thousand viewpoints will never suffice: something irreducible to any number of views. The shift in perceptual attitude is provoked not by matter but by form itself. Form is no longer *forma*; it no longer functions as an appearance aiding the identification of the thing. Rather, form becomes something that shows itself.

Which forms are capable of this? Probably least of all those sculpted forms available to Herder—namely, the forms of classical sculpture that we visually recognize as representing human bodies; possibly better, then, are the structural elements devised by architect Mark West, which evoke corporeality while remaining indeterminate. Nor is it the forms of classical geometry, which we need not view from every side because we comprehend them at first sight—hence also not those forms that repeat themselves as patterns. Rather, it may be forms that generate tension precisely by disturbing the expectations of our geometric understanding. Consider the tension produced by Isa Genzken's hyperboloids, whose extremities disclose mutually divergent logics, compelling the spectator to scan the

object in search of clarification of their formal connection—an experience Lisa Lee describes as follows: "But satisfaction remains elusive, for the transformation is too subtle and incremental to be mapped by sight. Furthermore, the longer and closer one looks, the less conviction one can feel about what one knows."[39] And ultimately, as she concludes, "The viewer's frustrated pursuit for clarification, insofar as it produces a state of heightened perceptual and cognitive alertness, is also the substance of aesthetic pleasure."[40]

Perhaps, however, it is above all plastic forms that solicit our attention without ever fully yielding themselves. Not the organic geometries of Saarinen or Utzon, but rather those that refuse any allusion to a *natura naturans*. Somewhere after Paul Boulard's reflections relating forms shaped by cosmic forces with the need for pure mathematical forms in architecture, yet still before the design of Ronchamp, Le Corbusier began incorporating found objects—remarkable stones and pieces of wood—as central elements in his paintings, with titles such as *Premières recherches d'une sculpture monumentale* and *Recherche de sculpture architecturale*. These paintings, however, compelled him—entirely intelligible from Herder's perspective—to translate them into sculpture. In these works, Le Corbusier claimed to recognize Père Ubu, the character from Alfred Jarry's 1896 grotesque play *Ubu Roi*, a usurper king whose untempered desires lead to burlesque violence. This figure, beloved by the Surrealists and appearing in works by Dora Maar, Max Ernst, Picasso, and in sculptures by Miró, was often represented as a bloated, distorted figure with disrupted or missing sense organs. In Le Corbusier's paintings, Ubu first appeared as a stone, then as an animal-like being, and ultimately its various sense organs seem enlarged and isolated, scarcely connected, detached from any body, "as parodies of the body itself mocking higher values of ideal beauty."[41] These organs without a body are body parts larger than the body itself, and thus seem deliberately to violate Valéry's Socratic law, according to which natural bodies are always more complex than their parts. Le Corbusier's representations of Ubu have been linked, via the works of other authors, to a turn toward anti-intellectualism and an acknowledgment of the physicality of the body. Whatever their significance

[39] L. Lee, *Isa Genzken: Sculpture as World Receiver*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago / London, 2017, p. 37.
[40] *Ibid*., p. 39.
[41] A. G. Read, "Le Corbusier's 'Ubu' Sculpture: Remaking an Image," *Word & Image*, 14, 3, 1998, p. 217.

may be, it is evident that these forms—degenerate rather than cosmic—emerge everywhere in his later architectural realizations.

Whereas in Marseille these forms provoked little resistance, appearing as playful curiosities in the rooftop leisure zone, at Ronchamp they were perceived as standing in tension with the chapel's function. The building was reproached for diverting attention from the liturgy, for presenting itself rather than serving—a cardinal sin within the architectural community. The moment a design ventures into a form that clamors for attention at the expense of its humble function, it is taken to commit something unforgivable. As long as the building remains safely nestled within the fabric of its context, the likelihood of transgression is limited. Yet once a structure stands free, the temptation of sculptural form looms large—against which the innocent box-shape offers itself as an easy and virtuous self-restraint. Alternatively, one may feign, not without hypocrisy, that a spectacular form flowed necessarily from the program, if only to justify the indulgent use of the latest, and most unchaste, form-finding toys.

Just as Le Corbusier once dreamed of a built sculpture—not modeled but assembled and cast in concrete, "where the formwork can provide shapes as noble as those of shipbuilding"[42]—so today it is again technology, in direct relation to construction, that offers architects a sense of liberation. Yet the price paid for such liberation is that of disapproval and disdain. Never has architecture attracted so much attention from the general public, and yet that attention is suspect—tainted, even derisive; for it is the optical attention of the tourist, lured by the cheap appeal of expensive, ostentatious forms. But even where Frank Lloyd Wright believed he had achieved an organic unity of form and function with his concrete logarithmic spiral, criticism oscillated between reproaches concerning the sacrifices imposed upon the artworks for the sake of architectural presence and ridicule of the form itself—usually through nicknaming, which in effect amounts to a recuperation of an indefinite form within existing visual-cognitive registers, a fate sculptural buildings share with the rocks at Trégastel. Wright's Guggenheim Museum is now lumped together with the works of Utzon and Saarinen, and even the chapel of Ronchamp—once praised for disrupting the cold geometric language of early functionalism—as a frequently cited precursor of today's trend toward architecture that primarily seeks to capture optical attention.

---

[42] Le Corbusier, "Unité," *L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui*, numéro hors-série, 1948, p. 57.

The conception and realization of plastic forms in architecture has never been easier; paradoxically, it has never been more difficult to appreciate them. One factor is that we seem unable to see—or architecture seems unable to make us see—a working of form itself beyond its casing functions; and yet even evolutionary biology, the domain of natural forms, acknowledges *roles* alongside functions. Revolving around polished marble, *Plastik*'s aesthetic materialism—despite its erotic undertone—remains dry and clean, perhaps too clean for the taste of today's trends. Yet it offers an avenue toward a reconsideration of haptic aesthetics that need not contradict but rather address a blind spot in current approaches. Its philosophical take on form, then, might at least provide us with a lens through which to discern the difference between gimmicky display and forms that mobilize attention, thereby eliciting a perceptual attitude that is the very opposite of rapid visual consumption.

References

Baudelaire, Charles (1956), "Why Sculpture Is Tiresome," trans. Jonathan Mayne, in *The Mirror of Art: Critical Studies by Charles Baudelaire*, Garden City, NY: Doubleday Anchor Books, pp. 119–123.

Boulard, Paul (1925), "Jouissance d'ordre mathématique," *L'Esprit nouveau*, 28, pp. 2328–2330.

Hegel, G. W. F. (1975), *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, trans. T. M. Knox, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Hepworth, Barbara (1970), *Sculpture: Process and Purpose*, London: Studio Vista.

Herder, Johann Gottfried von (1778), *Plastik: einige Wahrnehmungen über Form und Gestalt aus Pygmalions bildendem Traum*, Riga: J. F. Hartknoch.

Herder, Johann Gottfried von (2002), *Sculpture: Some Observations on Shape and Form from Pygmalion's Creative Dream*, trans. Jason Gaiger, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Herder, Johann Gottfried von (2004), *Critical Forests: Fourth Grove*, trans. Jason Gaiger, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Joyce, James (2000), *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, ed. Seamus Deane, London: Penguin Classics.

Kant, Immanuel (2006/1798), *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, trans. Robert B. Louden, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Le Corbusier (1948),"Unité," *L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui*, numéro hors-série "Le Corbusier."

Langer, Susanne K. (1953), *Feeling and Form: A Theory of Art Developed from Philosophy in a New Key*, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons.

Lee, Lisa (2017), *Isa Genzken: Sculpture as World Receiver*, Chicago / London: University of Chicago Press.

Read, Alice Gray (1998), "Le Corbusier's 'Ubu' Sculpture: Remaking an Image," *Word & Image*, 14, 3, pp. 215–226.

Taylor, Charles (1995), *Philosophical Arguments*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
Valéry, Paul (1995), *Eupalinos ou l'Architecte – L'Âme et la danse – Dialogue de l'arbre*, Paris: Éditions Gallimard.
von Hildebrand, Adolf (1907), *The Problem of Form in Painting and Sculpture*, trans. Max Friedrich Mayer, Robert Morris Ogden, New York: G. E. Stechert & Co.
Zink, Sidney (1942), "Esthetic Appreciation and Its Distinction from Sense Pleasure," *Journal of Philosophy*, 39, 26, pp. 701–711.