

Ulla-Maija Alanen

IMAGES OF THE EMBODIED MIND AND THE MINDED BODY

We continue to assume that the world and space are outside and around ourselves. We also take it for granted that our mind is located in our brain. Yet, an increasing body of philosophical investigations and neuroscientific research suggests that these views are misguided. "The world is wholly inside, and I am wholly outside myself", Maurice Merleau-Ponty argues, and his writings have created the philosophical foundation for the understanding of our embodied existence as well as artistic phenomena.¹ The philosopher's formulation suggests that the world and the self, the physical and the mental, body and mind, are not separate entities, but form an intertwining entity. Indeed, these seeming oppositions constitute a continuum, somewhat like the mysterious Moebius strip, which has two sides but only one continuous surface.

In all artistic phenomena this fusion of categories and apparent oppositions – consciousness and unconsciousness, thought and dream, intention and chance, as well as past, present and future – is essential. Salman Rushdie, the writer, points out this crucial fusion of the world and the self in creative work: "Literature is made at the boundary between self and the world, 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."²

Our material and mental constructions are similarly continuations of our bodily and mental capacities; they are all part of the "flesh of the world",³ to use another significant notion of Merleau-Ponty. Art and architecture arise from human embodiment, and they address the human body, its movements, actions, and desires, as well as its relationships and interactions with the material world. At the same time, art structures our perceptions and understanding of the world, and eventually, of ourselves. Our buildings and art works are fundamentally projections and extensions of our bodies as well as of our sensory and neural systems. We both externalize ourselves and our faculties, and internalize the world; the external and the internal, the physical and the mental, become thus fully intertwined.

The primary task of architecture was the mediation between macrocosm and microcosm, the realms of the gods and the mortals. As a form of spatial choreography, architecture guides movements and intentions, both in the physical and the mental realm. Architectural images and experiences are essentially acts or verbs, as they derive from and guide action. Buildings and their parts are promises and invitations. They are unavoidably in a continuous dialogue and interaction with the measures and dynamics, as well as the metaphoric and symbolic connotations, of the body. The human body is a house, and the house is a body.

From its earliest manifestations, architectural structures and their elements have been metrically, proportionally and metaphorically related with the human body. Along with the emergence of the scientific understanding of the world, our buildings have withered into mere instruments of utility and aesthetics. The human figure as the central reference point of architecture is concretized in the Vitruvian Man, an image that is known as the much later drawing by Leonardo. But the centrality of the human figure in architecture is also re-

enforced by Michelangelo's belief that architectural elements should always derive from the study of the human body. Indeed, his architecture and details seem to express human emotions as subtly and deeply as the human body conveys feelings. Michelangelo's buildings are muscular architectural bodies, which have fallen in a deep metaphysical melancholy.

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The architect-artist Ulla-Maija Alanen's current works merge and fuse images of the interior of the human body and its motions and interactions with the material substances of water and air, as well as the ephemeral waves of light. As a former dancer, she intuitively grasps the essence of gravity and the space-time-body-mind-self continuum, and she expresses this fluid merging in her art works. She juxtaposes images of the human body and its skeletal and muscular structure with images of architectural elements, such as the classical rendering of the column. Ulla-Maija Alanen's work relates images of art with those of science, images of the human body with architectural elements, and the hidden interior structures and cavities of the body with its external manifestations. Images of matter are fused with virtual shapes of movement. Material and mental imageries become integrated in the sensuous flesh of the world, our true life world.

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1 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1962, p.407.

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

3 Merleau-Ponty describes the notion of "the flesh" in his essay "The Intertwining - The Chiasm" in *The Visible and the Invisible*, ed. Claude Lefort, Northwestern University Press, Evanston, 1969.