

MAPPING THE CRYSTALS OF LIFE. THE RADICAL PICTURESQUE IN LARS SPUYBROEK'S THE SYMPATHY OF THINGS: RUSKIN AND THE ECOLOGY OF DESIGN

Rick Dolphijn

Things are not either wholly alive, or wholly dead. They are less or more alive.

John Ruskin

The details are not the details. They make the design.

Charles Eames

Writing architecture

Especially among architects and practitioners, Lars Spuybroek is known to be one of the radical forces in contemporary design, and since his earliest products he was praised by the major names in the field (Charles Jencks among others) and got awarded important prizes by the architectural institutions that matter (from Archiprix to the Cologne Thumper). And then, in 2010, Spuybroek closed his office NOX in order to spend his time 'more efficiently': he decided to devote his time solely to writing, to architectural theory. Not being bothered by a difficult clientele that came up with new demands again, inevitably slowing down the creative process, he could now devote his time fully to conversations with 'dead people', as he recently named his turn to theory in a lecture given at the AA in London. He added to this that closing his office was the best decision he made in his life and he advised all the architects present to do the same thing. Writing is simply a quicker way of experimenting with form compared to actually getting things built/produced. Over the past twenty years Spuybroek's main emphasis was designing objects (buildings, installations, artworks). He created fantastic surfaces like the *Maison Folie* in Lille, interactive artworks/statues like *D-tower* in Doetinchem, installations/houses like *Son-O-House* in Son en Breugel, and a vase called *Tommy*. Next to that, from 2001 he was appointed various chairs in architecture and consequently he became increasingly concerned with creating the concepts that architectural experiments give rise to, making timely books in which both his designs and his theories found their way (for instance Spuybroek 2004, 2009).

As such, an analogy with that other famous Dutch architect – Rem Koolhaas – is easily made

here, though it is also clear that they appear to be travelling in opposite directions: Koolhaas was very much into research at the start of his career (think of his magnum opus *Delirious New York*, Koolhaas 1978), whereas now he seems to spend most of his time designing buildings and urban areas. Spuybroek moves in the opposite direction. Another difference between Koolhaas and Spuybroek appears both in their designs and in their writings, though I will focus primarily on their writings here. Koolhaas' architectural innovations set out a cultural analysis in which a 'sociology of form' is being developed. Very much in line with how architectural theory, especially since the 1990's, went more cultural, Koolhaas too seems to practice a major critique of form always in search for those forces (potentially) active in the built environment that caused a new (emancipated) kind of people to emerge (Fraser 2005, 138). Major concepts he brought forward, such as 'the generic city' and 'BIGNESS', are proposing a tactics that are 'those of spatial transgression within different cultural contexts, as in the public right of way that is to snake through the CCTV headquarters in Beijing, or embedded spatial redundancy, as in the wastage of retail volume in the Prada store at Rodeo Drive, Los Angeles' (idem, 320).

Koolhaas' buildings and writings definitely continue to give a new impulse to theory (architectural theory, aesthetics) as he, in a Virilio-like style, *demands* that we think architecture or form in terms of an ongoing accident always in process at the margins of our (modernist) focus. Especially in his later written work, Koolhaas emphasizes the cancerous growth of the suburbs, the shopping mall, and the megalopolis (from Lagos to the Pearl River Delta). Koolhaas is the ethnographer whose observations confront us with uneasy conclusions, with a keen interest in the 'inhumanness' of business districts, of ultrafast design practices (I once conceptualized his theories on Shenzhen as 'photoshoppolis' (Dolphijn 2005)) and pop culture. Together with Sanford Kwinter, Saskia Sassen, Hans Ulrich Obrist, Stefano Boeri and Anthony Vidler, Koolhaas's new sociology of form delivered a sharp critique on the modernist heritage in architecture and the humanist logic that it (implicitly) preferred.

Spuybroek too has major issues with how the idealist or even 'fascist' ideas of for instance Bauhaus tend to push all design towards the undecorated empty white cube, a space that cannot be *felt* anymore, that refuses to become part of *a life*. Yet instead of opting for a sociology of form, in search for the inhuman to distort or rethink humanity, Spuybroek is much more interested in what we could call an 'ecology of variation', an *inhuman vitalism* that reminds us of a crucial concept that the postmodern Koolhaas and his modern predecessors banned from their theories: beauty. For rather than breaking up the opposition between the human and the inhuman, the city and the countryside, perhaps even between beauty and ugliness, and *using form* in order make this happen, Spuybroek's interest in beauty (and not in the sublime) not so much critiques but wards off all of the modernist oppositions in the first place. Much more a (non-)philosopher, in line with Laruelle, than a sociologist, Spuybroek's interest in beauty brings us to *rethink form itself*. Instead of focusing on how the objects act upon us and reinvent us, Spuybroek is in the first place interested in the much broader issue of *how matter happens*. Crucial in this, is the claim that *matter only happens beautifully*. This means that it is only in actualizing beauty one way or the other that 'something might happen'.

Sympathy

Spuybroek has always been interested in the myriad of unforeseen ways in which beauty kicks in. Saving us from mechanicism and organicism that still dominates architecture, and both of which he detests (2009, 38), his designs have always been created around the idea of making-beauty-happen. This is never a single trajectory but rather asks for a radical opening

up of all possible form, since beauty might happen in many different ways. The *Son-O-House* for instance, is a house, with its different rooms, its different possibilities for usage. Yet it is a house gone mad. It is radically contingent housing. A schizo-house. Its multiplied surfaces (holey surfaces, multiple layerings and radical curvability) and the soundscapes entangled in it, un-organize 'the house' with every step we take, while it de-mechanizes each of our movements, proposing a different inhabitation, a different (and new) type of life even as it proposes its 'inhabitant' to be 'intermeshed and conjoined with all that surrounds her architectural surround' (Gins and Arakawa 2006, 28). It is a new unorganized, demechanized motor schema.

What his designs (like the *Son-O-House*) are calling out for, and what he now considers to be a crucial concept in understanding how beauty gives form to life, is 'sympathy'. His newest book *The Sympathy of Things* can be read as a manifesto for this old and beautiful concept that stresses the intra-action by dint of which the individual objects are. Sympathy, in short, 'is what things feel when they shape each other' (2011, 9). Sympathy aptly serves as the fulcrum of Spuybroeks vitalism.

In sharp contrast to Koolhaas' focus on the new, on the post-modern, implicitly and explicitly critiquing the old, Spuybroek does not critique but *rereads* the modernist bias thus uncovering a minor history of architecture that tells us a very different story compared to what the History of Architectural Theory has been telling us for the past two centuries. As the title of the book already tells us, the theories of the 19th century art critic John Ruskin are central to this project, but also William James, Henri Bergson, Wilhelm Worringer and Charles Darwin are crucial to Spuybroeks ecology. Rewriting their ideas on form, on matter, on difference and on human subjectivity, Spuybroek indeed shows us how 'sympathy' – revitalizing the way this concept was not yet 'humanized' at the end of the nineteenth century – gives form to us and to the world around us: sympathy might happen between us and a vase, between a wasp and an orchid, between the oceans and the moon.

Coming back to architecture, Spuybroek shows us how the undecorated empty white cube has always already been a false ideal, a deadly idea even, to speak with Arakawa and Gins: a transcendentalism that had very little to do with how *life* takes place. Finding his soul mates in Romantic aesthetics, rewriting their architecture, their ideas on design, as it was always involved with the sympathy of things (to come), can help us 'find our ways back to beauty', as Spuybroek promises us in the introduction, to the power of creation. Thus he works towards a genuine romantic aesthetics, rewriting Fichtes idea that aesthetics is the necessary starting point for the understanding of any 'spirit' (1992, 474), or turning back to Herder (from 1778): '[O]nly inner sympathy, i.e., feeling and transposition of our whole human self into the form that has been explored by touch, is the teacher and indicator of beauty' (Herder quoted in: Spuybroek 2011, 147).

Finding our way back to beauty equals finding our way back to life, out of idealism, and perhaps even out of modernism as a whole, as it dominated the twentieth century in architecture *and* society at large. Finding beauty/life means opening ourselves up (again) to the pleas of matter, to the creative forces of the unforeseen, and the ever changing imagery that it possibly produces. Spuybroek, like his nineteenth century predecessor Ruskin (whose writings on art history indeed show a similar need for embracing beauty/life, rejecting the horrors of idealism) thus puts great emphasis on Gothic design and the crucial role this myriad of styles played in the history of design as opposed to its contemporary idea of form, Roman Classicism (much more favored by modernism). Especially the Gothic ornament in that sense, needs our fullest attention.

We, modernists, all remember that it was by all means the ornament which was explicitly excluded from architecture by modernism. Spuybroek reminds us that in search for the purification of the object, it was in fact Adolf Loos who wrote '*Ornament und Verbrechen*' (Ornament and Crime), declaring the ornament the enemy of form, or, which comes down to the same thing, considering the ornament *that which disturbs the Cartesian Line*. Inspired by theories of William Morris (and not by Owen Jones), Spuybroek rereads the ornament to propose to us a wholly other history, claiming that 'Ornament is profoundly related to matter, to the way it structures itself as it undergoes forces, be they natural or technological, which is a complicated way of saying that ornament and texture share the traces of being made, of the constant reconfigurations of matter.' (2011, 77) In other words: 'Nothing passes through undecorated' (idem, 96). Ornament then, as Spuybroek conceptualizes it, is not 'added to' a structure, but rather creates the transversal movements that make structure in the first place. This is definitely the most thought provoking and radical outcome of Spuybroek's notion of beauty: beauty is both ornament and structure (or as he puts it: 'in the Gothic, *ornament acts like structure and structure acts like ornament* (idem, 44, emphasis in original)). It is beauty that works, beauty is use, and it simply cannot be isolated and condemned. His study of Gothic ornamentation proves this entanglement, showing us how tessellation (from two to one dimension) and ribboning (from one to two dimensions) make spatiality.

Elsewhere Spuybroek put it in different words claiming that '[i]t is not only a changefulness of columns, vaults, or traceries in themselves, but also one in which *columns transform into vaults into traceries*' (idem, 25). In more mathematical terms, praising variability, he adds to this that: 'Variability *within* an element leads to variability *between* elements. This makes the Gothic more radical than any other architectural style up to the present day.' (idem, 26) In the end then, he comes up with a term that nicely links the Gothic to contemporary practices, talking of the *digital* nature of gothic, where the digital not necessarily refers to electronically computed but rather to the type of variation that forms the flexible rib. Referring to Bergson's idea of variation both in terms of difference in degree and in difference in kind, Spuybroek emphasizes that the simple behavior of individual elements (the smallest geometrical modulations that practice a difference in degree) leads to complex and irreducible collective behavior (with a new and unique beauty that reveals a difference in kind).

Aesthetics

Rewriting the notion of the ornament as the transversal key to Gothic vitalized geometry, necessarily converting physical movement into abstract structure, allows Spuybroek in the second half of his book, to create a general theory of aesthetics, or, 'a radical picturesque' as he would call it. Still emphasizing 'sympathy', which he prefers over Worringer's 'empathy' (as

is too antropocentric, or as he puts it: 'Sympathy is abstraction and empathy unseparated.' (idem, 177)) Spuybroek searches for new concepts for his vitalist aesthetics. Showing us that there is thought in matter, the second part of his book naturally builds on the forms developed in the first part, that has already *indicated* the aesthetic theorizing to come, that is, the speculative aesthetics that comes with the artificial forms and processes from which life happens.

Building on an analysis of variation and difference in form (from the Gothic to the ornament, from snowflakes to 19th century wallpapers and from his own contemporary designs to old fashioned hingework), Spuybroek – following mainly William James – is able to extract the concepts that deepen out this *Romantic* emphasis on feeling. On top of that, and contrary to contemporary historiography, Spuybroek shows us that Romanticism is in itself always already a materialist philosophy especially if we filter out the Kantian and the idealist heritage that blurred (or overcoded) its history. Similar to how scholars such as Birgit Mara Kaiser (2011) from a Deleuzian perspective, and Ian Hamilton Grant (2008) from a speculative realist perspective, reread Kleist and Schelling respectively today, Spuybroek's analysis of form shows us a radically different Romanticism. It is a Romanticism that first of all refuses the interference of a God and its aftermath (i.e. its humanism) when it comes to setting up an aesthetics:

In the two hundred years since Paley, we have slowly surrendered ourselves to the opposite aesthetics, that of the sublime, which became the sole norm of the twentieth century. After taking God out of the equation, we seemed occupied more with the void he had left behind than with things (Spuybroek 2011, 270).

Crucial is the role the body plays *with* the mind (after God), as this case shows us:

When I walk through a field and my attention is suddenly drawn to a few stones lying next to each other with a small plant growing between them, and I like what I see, what is that liking? [...] I am with the stones and the plant immediately, fitting into them [...] All relations are felt relations. The transitions are felt and the substances connected to us by feeling become known to us (idem, 152, emphasis added).

Isn't it fascinating that, after a meticulous analysis of form – thus in the first place moving away from William Paley (who, in 1802 kept looking for the absent designer responsible for design) – Spuybroek now writes us a *speculative realist* aesthetics warding off Immanuel Kant who told us that the object (after God?) can be *thought* but not *known*?

This claim that we can think the object in itself but cannot know it, is crucial to Kant's concept of beauty since it is *in this void* that he (Kant) develops his Subject ('I think') oriented idea of beauty. As Meillassoux puts it: '... the unknowability of reality-in-itself permits us to "think" that it is actually directed by a divine finality. Kantians see in beauty the sign of a possible existence of God, an existence that we cannot know but only suppose, and which we ought to require in such a way as to lend meaning to a universalist morality' (Harman 2011, 219). Spuybroek's materialist concept of beauty, which refuses to speak of a God, is profoundly different from that of the Kantians, and, with that, of its dominant conceptualization in Romanticism (strongly influenced by Kantian transcendentalism and German Idealism), since

it refuses to accept the existence of this gap and the subsequent idea that beauty comes with it. Spuybroek's abstract materialism is Meillassouxian yet not starting with (seventeenth century) rationalism, but rather with beauty, when he time and again shows us that we do have full access to things, *but only aesthetically*.

Without God, without the finity of thought, without the entrapment of the human in its consciousness and its language, in its ability to think but not know (architectural) form, Spuybroek, like some of his other classical sources (think especially of Bergson, Worringer and perhaps to a lesser degree James and Darwin) *starts* with beauty, with the power of creation that, like a gush of air, *breathes life into all matter*, giving it form, making it beautiful. Beauty or, as we could call it, 'sympathetic action' gives rise to All, including thought. It vitalizes thought to the pure potential of thinking as Whitehead would say. This time thought *cannot be* limited or obscured (by possibilities and impossibilities, by God and by Kantian Subjectivity). Thought can now go in any direction, it can travel any dimension (for instance through tessellation and ribboning), it can entangle in any type of surface (for instance through mosaic and fabric). And it will. This is what Deleuze means when he states: 'The pure positivity of the finite is the object of the senses, and the positivity of the veritable infinite is the object of thought' (1990, 279). *An aesthetics is thus ontology*.

This is why the Gothic, with which Spuybroek starts his book, is thus not just practicing a freedom of form with its infinite differences in degree and thus differences in kind. It is all about a freedom to think. Much more so than the Baroque (as Leibniz and Deleuze studied this) the jerking and jolting style of the Gothic, Spuybroek argues, with its infinite curvability, with its craftsmanship, its configurational variation, its perpetual novelty, *installs* the radical picturesque. Its variability between elements '... makes the Gothic more radical than any other architectural style up to the present day' (2011, 26). The Gothic, more than any other architectural style, gives rise to a radically different kind of thinking. And this thinking does not start where knowledge ends, it happens *with creation*. Thus Spuybroek notes: 'It is not the case that the theories of Ruskin and Worringer apply only to the ornament (although they seldom articulate this themselves); rather, the behavior of the lines, however small and thin they are, displays a structural and connective logic' (idem, 25). What follows then is a true Romantic aesthetics: 'I think we should view ecosystems as architectural interiors, as designed entities of feelings and spaces, furthermore, we should frame such a concept within Gothic ontology: is the interior capable of sustaining and structuring itself?' (idem, 326).

Deleuze and Guattari once stated 'Art begins not with the flesh but with the house. That is why architecture is the first of the arts' (1994, 186). Architecture, they state (with Cache) creates the frames which are not coordinates but part of the compound of sensations in which we are, in which thought takes place. Architecture, as Dubuffet also claims, is the first *art brut*. Spuybroek after Ruskin, calls this the *savageness* of the Gothic: '“Savage” describes the workmen, the rough northern laborers, with their hands freezing, their heads in the mist and their feet in the mud, inevitably making 'mistakes' in their carving because of their 'rude' nature but also because of the open design system of the Gothic, which at certain points leaves them to decide what to do, or to hesitate suddenly, and ultimately present us with 'failed, clumsy' ornament' (2011, 13/4). The Gothic is the first of the architectures, is the very first of the arts.

This general ecology of design in the end then shows us that even nature, still a necessary point of departure for Kant's aesthetics, is now just as constructed as the arts. Paul Klee already noted that both are compositional realities and, somehow, have to be given rise to. By life. Ruskin himself knew this all too well:

And in all things that live there are certain irregularities and deficiencies which are not only signs of life, but sources of beauty. No human face is exactly the same in its lines on each side, no leaf perfect in its loves, no branch in its symmetry. All admit irregularity as they imply change; and to banish imperfection is to destroy expression, to check exertion, to paralyze vitality. All things are literally better, lovelier, and more beloved for the imperfections... (Ruskin 1854, 14)

To be created, to be given form or beauty, that is the ecology of design. In the 'patterns of interaction', as Gregory Bateson called them, all comes to be. To get rid of these patterns, to deny their existence, as Loos proposes, equals fascism, equals death. Gins and Arakawa's manifesto *Making Dying Illegal. Architecture against Death: Original to the 21st century* stresses a similar vitalism, claiming that '[c]hoosing to live within a tactically posed surround/tutelary abode will be counted as an all-out effort to go on living (2006, 25). This call for infinite variation, this plea for the radically unforeseen is also Spuybroek's wish, when he concludes the book stating that: 'I long for the day when I can see objects forming, like pools of mud, flowers on a wall or clouds in the sky, as pure products in context of pure productivity...' (2011, 333). It is a call for life itself.

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