

A L V A R O M A L O

The Hand: Organ of Knowledge

I start to write with hesitation. The doubt is provoked by the fact that the proclamation of the rights and virtues of the hand may not be done properly in language. I think that this advocacy must be done by presenting the evidence of the hand's own making. Yet, as the writing progresses, I sense the proof beginning to appear on the movement of the hands across the keyboard, the shape of the script, and the precise rectangle of whiteness of the paper. Still indecisive and seeking support, it is my hands that open a book and I read, "through his hands man establishes contact with the austerity of thought."¹ I close the book and set it on the table. I open another and I read:

Thinking is too easy. The mind in its flight rarely meets with resistance. Hence the vital importance for the intellectual of touching concrete objects and of learning discipline in his intercourse with them. Bodies are the mentors of the spirit, as Chiron, the centaur, was the mentor of Greek heroes.²

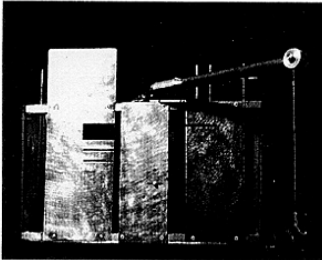
My project now is the pursuit of this paradox (and I will continue writing), that there are two kinds of knowledge: One is the knowledge of matter, which belongs to the notion of instinct, and is encoded as a system in the sensor-motor memory of the body; the other is the knowledge of form, which belongs to the notion of intelligence, and has a seat in the affective-imaginative memory of the mind.³

1. Henri Focillon,
The Life of Forms in Art, Zone Books,
New York, 1989,
p.157.

2. Jose Ortega y Gasset,
"Man the Technician,"
History as a System,
W.W. Norton, New York,
1941, p.166.

3. Henri Bergson,
Matter and Memory, Zone
Books, New York,
1988, p.78-131.

The knowledge of matter is instinctive, it is part of the natural order. It is the awareness of the world by which every living organism, plant and animal, is in continuous exchange with its surroundings. It rises spontaneously out of physical necessity and has an effect on matter by integrating it into the body, or arranging it as a direct extension of it. In this order, time is not a separate category of awareness, but it is a mode of simultaneous coexistence of matter, a presence forever certain in the present. The knowledge of form is intelligent, operating within the datum of nature, deliberately rearranging matter to set up a new kind of order, the artificial order. Intelligence, which gains complete instrumentality in the human being, fabricates by abstraction, and is separable from the physical act of making. The sense of time as pure possibility, as a reversible category of representation, and as an abstract measure of virtual or real work, is the transcendental sign of intelligence.⁴



Intelligence and instinct, if highly specialized, may represent two divergent solutions of the same problem: the problem of being aware in the world. But in the human being they are necessarily cooperative capacities: "There are things that intelligence alone is able to seek, but which, by itself, it will never find. These things instinct alone could find; but it will never seek them."⁵ The cooperation between intelligence and instinct is best represented not in *Homo sapiens*, but in *Homo faber*, who is the being in complete self-possession of his own instrumentality. The project of the *Homo faber* is the reform of nature by the construction of the artificial world, a supernature interposed between the human being and original nature. Because the human being is made of such paradox as to be natural and extranatural, his whole being is fulfilled only in the *Homo faber*, "a kind of ontological centaur, half immersed in nature, half transcending it."⁶ Because he lacks all the necessary instruments to satisfy his extranatural being, to earn his life metaphysically, he fabricates them out of outlying matter in order to become a master of his own destiny. The dialectical project of the *Homo faber* is found in "the concept of nature as 'the inorganic body of man': the naturalization of man and the humanization of nature."⁷

When I consider the system of things which I call the natural world, my body is one of them. But the distinction is not so simple. My body is also the boundary, perhaps shifting, between what is interior and what is exterior to myself. It is the ever advancing boundary between the future and the past, the exact position of the present. It is the place of passage between intention and extension, "a hyphen, a connecting link between the things that act upon me and the things upon which I act."⁸ In the *Homo faber*, the body has a tendency, a favorable disposition

4. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, St. Martin's Press, New York, 1965, p.74-91.

5. Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, Henry Holt, New York, 1911, p.151.

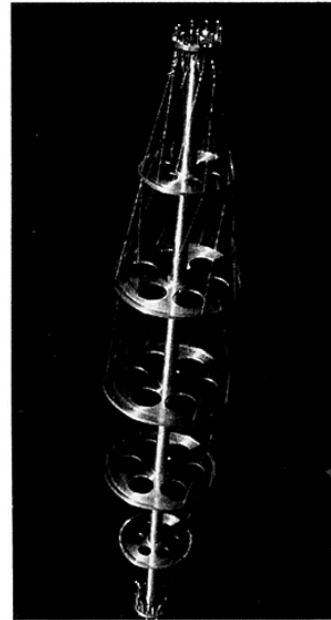
6. Ortega y Gasset, p.111.

7. Jean Baudrillard, "The Mirror of Production." *Selected Writings*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1988, p.106.

8. Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, p.151.

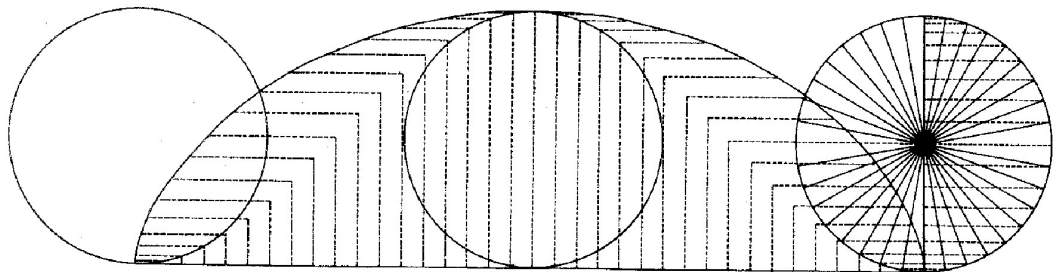
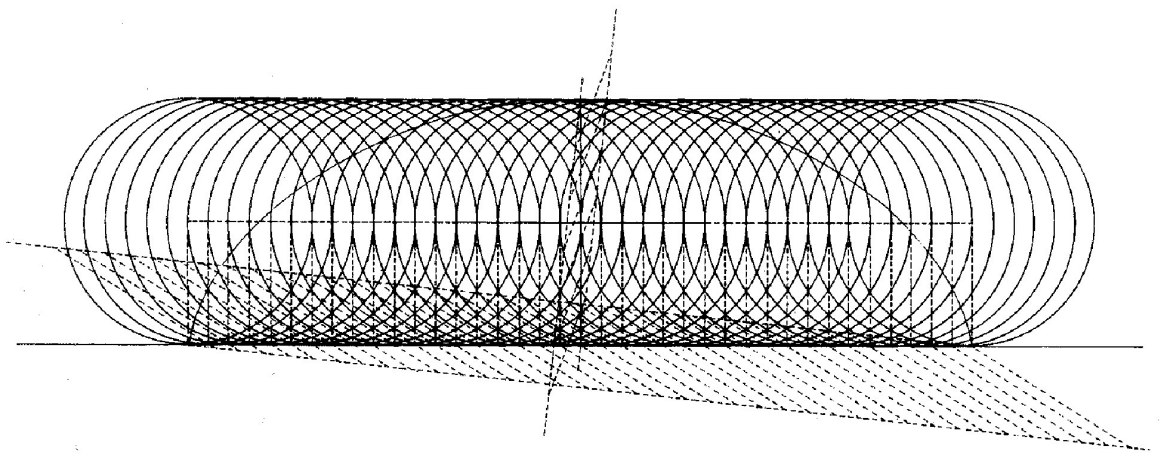
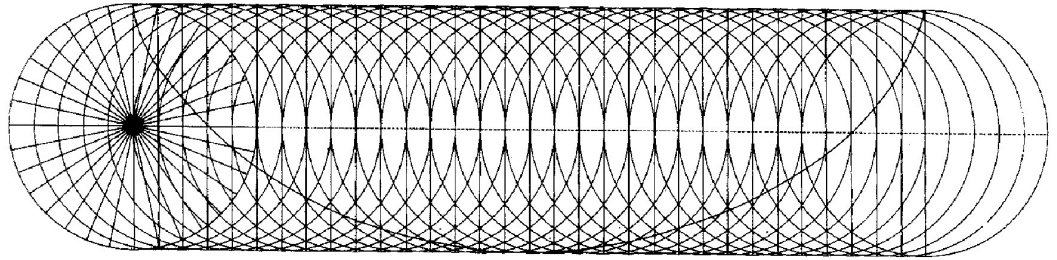
towards action. Already sensing the weight of earthly gravity, it must play its muscles and joints and direct its movements to the task of surmounting the resistance of materials, making them malleable, pliable, and carvable at will. It is most effectively in the hand where energy converges and leaves the body in the process of fabrication. All kinds of fabrication must be at the beginning, essentially, manufacture: that is, they must start with the intentionally directed movement of the hand. Initially, the hand may move across materials by direct contact, such may be the rudimentary movement that leaves on the sand the drawing of a circle, imprecise though it may be. If the movement must become more precisely measured, or if the hand is by itself insufficient for the task, the hand must then manufacture an artificial instrument to make its action more efficient. The manufactured instrument, the tool, multiplies the capacity and efficiency of the hand that constructs it. In one sense, the tool is the “congealed outline of an operation,” and the objective memory of movements already executed. In another sense, it is a “finality without end,” soliciting the free and ordered play of the mind in its project of fabrication.⁹ Tools are occasions for further work of the hand; they are the precise locus of a dialectical experiment of knowledge that neither mind nor sight can conduct alone. The human being patiently creates his own hands by gradually freeing them from the animal world. “The hand that is in his mind is at work,” liberating the human being from animal bondage and turning him into recognition of his own aspiration, his own project of life. Like the Centaur, he has transferred into reality the program that is his own transcendental self. Though my hands make other things, they can also make that ‘thing’ which is myself: “They are the instrument of creation, but even before that they are an organ of knowledge.”¹⁰

Holding a compass, and supported by it, the hand can bring its movement into greater control and draw the outline of a more precise circle. Here is the beginning of a systematic geometry, which records the abstract choreography of movements, as lines constructing the basic scaffolding of space. In this ordered space, subtending and reflecting the conceptual capacity of the mind, the hand may continue the production of measured work. In the act of drawing itself, we can establish a gradual passage from intention to extension, identifying at least three stages: first, conceptual drawing as a precise abstract of a form in space, without regard for material; second, pictorial drawing, displaying in light and shadows an object capable of embodying such form with articulation and detail; and third, construction drawing as a mode of transfer of the object into its material stereoscopic body, reciprocally measuring the object and a possible material, and their coherence, in anticipation of manufacture. Representation or imagination is the evoca-



9. Jean-Paul Sartre, *What Is Literature?* Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1988., p.55.

10. Focillon, p.166.



tion of objects in their absence. Distinct from that, perception is the knowledge of objects resulting from direct contact with them, through the manifold of the senses. In the act of drawing, both intelligence and instinct are brought into a precise oscillation and correspondence, making the opening on a plane through which the perception-image going towards the mind, and the imagination-image launched into space, rebound from each other in proper synchrony. Writing is a peculiar kind of drawing that does not aspire to become a material object. It is rather the drawing of words, or calligraphy, which in themselves may be abstract representations of things. Yet, calligraphy itself has a particular kind of materiality that is lodged in the widening gap between words and things. In the calligram, where the arrangement of the script plays with the visible resemblance of the thing represented, the quasi-materiality of the writing is further enhanced, and the text becomes tautological, or redundant as words.¹¹

While I remain intuitively skeptical of our tendency to use words to explain our understanding of things, for intuition is silence, and the name is inessential in the face of the thing which is essential, it is inevitable that we must speak. We are within language as within our body, and words are prolongations of our senses, which articulate the structure of the external world. The hand's action defines the cavity of space and the fullness of the objects that occupy it. For the poet, the movement of the hand, with the permanent mark of humanity on the inside and outside of all objects, has a metaphysical equivalence to a whole life of literary production:

That is the kind of poetry we should be after, poetry worn away as if by acid by the labor of hands, impregnated with sweat and smoke, smelling of lilies and of urine, splashed by the variety of what we do, legally or illegally.¹²

I think that the poet would agree if I modify the proposition, and say, "I make, therefore I am." Now I am comforted and less apologetic of the fact that lately I have been frequenting hardware stores, and avoiding the local libraries.

11. Michel Foucault, *This is Not a Pipe*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1983, p.19-31.

12. Lois Poirot, *Pablo Neruda: Absence and Presence*, W.W. Norton, New York, 1990, p.38.