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**DESIGN FOR  
SENSORIAL  
BEINGS**

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The belief that we see through our eyes is inaccurate, as is the idea that our perception of surrounding reality mainly happens through the eyes.

We think that we see through our eyes but it is the brain that elaborates the rays of light perceived by the eye and translates them into an image we do indeed see – through our brain and mind. We often associate the idea of seeing with the idea of understanding or acquiring knowledge, unconsciously placing sight above the other senses. We say ‘I see’ when we understand the situation; or ‘Do you see what I mean?’ to check we are understood. The heritage of the Modern Era and its glorification of the sense of sight weighs enormously on our shoulders and even if numerous scientific studies state that perception is a complex process entailing the integration of all the senses in the cerebral cortex, we still rate seeing more highly than the other senses. Yet our eyes are mainly just a conduit for transmitting visual input to the brain. This input is just one of several other inputs – coming from all the other activated senses – that simultaneously reach the brain, ending up in what we call the process of perceiving. To quote Merleau Ponty: ‘It would seem that we can fathom [the external world] simply by opening our eyes and getting on with our lives. Yet this is a delusion.’<sup>1</sup>

The world as presented to human beings is far from being a fixed and definable set of data, but more likely an aggregate of sensations and perceptions that forms the foundation of experience. According to the early Buddhist realizations, human beings are assemblages of five aggregates (*skandhas*), which include all bodily, perceptual and intellectual qualities and can be listed as follows: form (*rupa*), sensations or feelings (*vedana*), abstract ideas or perception (*sanna*), tendencies of mind or formation (*sankhara*), and mental powers or consciousness (*vinnana*).<sup>2</sup> Thus the complexity of human existence is carefully examined in all its various aspects. Buddhist ‘realizations’ can be said to have anticipated Edmund Husserl’s phenomenology and studies in perception and cognitive science.

<sup>1</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The World of Perception* (1948), London: Routledge, 2004, UK, 2004, p. 39.

<sup>2</sup> Davids Rhys, *Buddhism*, London: The London and Norwich Press, 1912, p. 90.

## Mind as a Sense

In Buddhism, the Aristotelian five-fold division of the senses is extended to six: vision, hearing, olfaction, taste, touch, and 'mind'. Mind is thus another organ or faculty with which to perceive the external world – like the eyes or the ears. As Iain McGilchrist says, 'We are not sure, and could never be sure, if mind, or even body, is a thing at all. Mind has the characteristic of a process more than a thing; a becoming, a way of being, more than an entity. Every individual mind is a process of interaction with whatever it is that exists apart from ourselves according to its own private history.'<sup>3</sup>

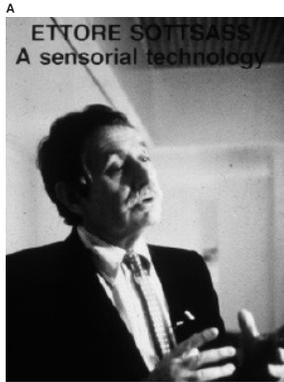
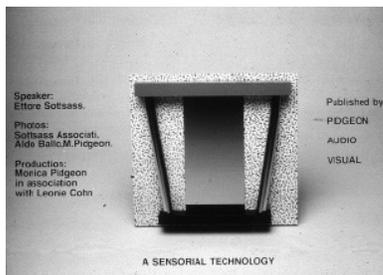
Many centuries ago, by associating mind with the other five senses, Buddhist philosophy dealt with the perception of both the visible and invisible world, the last of which is constituted by thoughts and ideas. Bodily senses give rise to emotions, which in turn provide the basis for rational thought. When the five aggregates are united in one body, they bring into being a living existence. None of them can be disregarded when examining the human being in relation to the world. Perception, appreciation, comprehension and the experience of objects are all relevant parameters for its creation, allowing the construction of forms with content which can enrich human life. With this in mind, Satyendra Pakhalé sees the true nature of phenomena as based not on rules, dogmas or beliefs, but rather on direct experience and perception. He explores the connections between the early Buddhist realizations and contemporary studies on behavioural science, phenomenology and cognitive science.

## Sense Spheres

This understanding of experience as an aggregate of reception, sensation, perception, mental formation and consciousness describes the human being as a sensorial being gifted with six main senses, or receptacles of experience (sight, hearing, touch, smell, taste, mind) alongside many others (sense of life, movement, balance, temperature, speech and so on). There are six *internal* sense bases (six sense organs: eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, mind) and six *external* sense bases (six sense objects: sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, mental objects). Thus, there are six internal-external (organ-object) pairs of sense bases. These constitute twelve 'sense bases' or 'sense spheres', called *āyatana*. These are instruments

<sup>3</sup> Iain McGilchrist, *The Master and His Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World*, Yale University Press, New Haven, Conn. and London: Yale University Press, 2009, UK, 2009, p. 184.

<sup>4</sup> Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, *Mind in Indian Buddhist Philosophy, 3.2 Sensation and Perception*, 2009, reviewed in 2012.



or mediums that join together the external spheres of sensory activity with the internal spheres of perception.<sup>4</sup>

This expanded idea of the senses and human experience represents the very core of Pakhalé's design work. Having grown up in India, a culture evolved from a strongly tactile, sensorial enthusiasm and rooted in the celebration of human experience as a complex multi-sensorial phenomenon, Pakhalé invests design with a positive, warmly sensorial feeling that humanizes the objects that we use every day. His projects are conceived to resonate with our senses. He is constantly in search of those forms, materials, colours and tactile textures that offer an experience that goes beyond the act of seeing, acknowledging the utility of the object or appreciating its general appearance.

Ancient Indian culture with its roots in early Buddhism, its negation of rituals and religious dogmas and its pondering of the human condition touched the imagination of many artists and creative minds around the world, such as Costantin Brancusi, Isamu Noguchi, Ettore Sottsass Jr., James Turrell, Bill Viola and many more. Nevertheless, the essence of the Buddhism that originated in India remains undiscovered, being frequently (deliberately) misinterpreted in later centuries in India and (more recently) in the world. Today, major misunderstandings of Buddhist insights have arisen due to mystification and deification, as well as the post-Buddhist decline of India and the social and political conditions resulting from it.

### Sensorial Technology

Satyendra Pakhalé draws on India's cultural origins with a deep understanding of its realizations, shining a light on its distorted and ambiguous interpretations, and directing attention to the notion of 'secular humanism'. This has nothing to do with questions of either ritual or theology,<sup>5</sup> and is simply about promoting human welfare by rejecting any conventional notion of religion, animism or mysticism. Indeed, secular humanism encourages mental and emotional, as well as social, economic, and above all moral and ethical human development.

Early Buddhism probes human sensibilities and aptitudes in an effort to understand the truth about life and the universe. It is concerned with the human mind of the external order of things, seeing them as they are through focused sensitive experience.

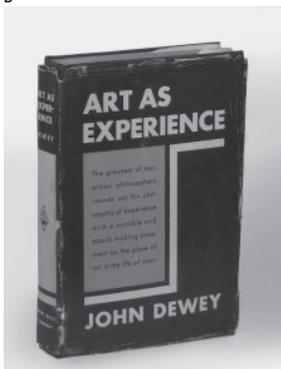
A,B Ettore Sottsass Jr., *A Sensorial Technology*, Pidgeon Audio Visual, London, UK. Sottsass illustrates the idea that the environment can be read through the senses, emphasising the sensorial rather than the structural aspects of design, 1984. Courtesy: Hong Kong Polytechnic University, HK.

5 T. W. Rhys Davids, *Buddhist India* (1903), Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, IN, 1993, p. 292.

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Pakhalé believes very deeply, therefore, that every created object embodies an act of making – a refined process representative of humanity’s ability to work with materials and tools in order to build its own environment – as well as all the senses activated at the stage of creation. A ‘sensorial technology’, as Ettore Sottsass Jr. would have named it, reaches objects, furniture and the whole environment not only through the brain and purely structural processes, but most of all through the senses. Being as free as possible – politically, professionally and linguistically – with the understanding that design is a cultural and not a technical event, as articulated by Ettore Sottsass Jr.,<sup>6</sup> finds a new expression in the work of Pakhalé.

### Experience is the Core

Pakhalé’s objects are charged with powerful sensorial energies. The form of the piece KUBU (2009)<sup>6</sup>, to mention just one example, is so elegant and essential that it seems to have come about naturally without any effort at all. But that simplicity and essentiality comes from his tireless investigation of all the details, his control of form, his attention to the techniques used, both digital and artisanal, and the sensorial process of designing. In the end, the result is an object that is a compound of suggestions – visual, sensuous, tactile and kinetic – offering an experience that resonates with human perceptual aptitudes. It is then evident that when Pakhalé talks about ‘sensorial design’ he is not attaching any label to the act of making, which for him is the most universal and perhaps indefinable human act meant to manipulate and transform nature and make it accessible to human senses; rather, he is bringing our attention back to ‘experience’ (to paraphrase John Dewey), as the core of art.<sup>7</sup>

c Kubu at the Designers' Lounge, Art Fair Cologne, DE, 2009. Curated by Gabrielle Ammann, ammann // gallery, Cologne, DE. Courtesy: Satyendra Pakhalé Archives, Amsterdam, NL.

d Surface of Kubu with texture specified by Pakhalé being carved by an artisan living in the Italian Dolomites. Courtesy: Satyendra Pakhalé Archives, Amsterdam, NL.

e John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (1934), rounds off his philosophy of experience with a notable and epoch-making statement on the place of art in the life of man: ‘Since the actual work of art is what the product does with and in experience, the result is not favourable to understanding. In addition, the very perfection of some of these products, the prestige they possess because of a long history of unquestioned admiration, creates conventions that get in the way of fresh insight. When an art product once attains classic status, it somehow becomes isolated from the human conditions under which it was brought into being and from the human consequences it engenders in actual life experience’. Courtesy: Satyendra Pakhalé Archives, Amsterdam, NL.

6 Ettore Sottsass Jr., *A Sensorial Technology* (1983), recording produced by Monica Pidgeon in association with Leonie Cohn, London: Pidgeon Audio Visual, UK, 1984.  
7 John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (1934), New York: TarcherPerigree, 2005.

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