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FIVE SENSES

“MI (*Embodied mind or Soul-Flesh*)
and the Sense of Tuoch”

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“International Symposium”, Royal College of Art, London, 28 November 1989.

Other participants are Toshio Hosokawa, Composer; Yujiro Nakamura, Professor at Meiji University; and Marcus Weisen, Co-ordinator and Chair of “Five Senses” symposium.

This symposium is a first opportunity for a European audience to discuss these theme with thinkers and creators from Japan.

For many European artists, musicians, composers, dancers, architects & philosophers, this discussion will give a chance to reconsider it once more, and then narrowly defined professional--boundaries may be broken, at least become more flexible.

English translation realized with the help of Marcus Weisen.

Mi (embodied mind) and the Sense of Touch

Hiroshi Ichikawa

Ladies and gentleman. It is a pleasure for me to spend this afternoon in your company. As announced in the programme, I chose to talk about “Mi” (that is ‘embodied mind’) and the Sense of Touch’.

There is a Japanese proverb which goes as follows: ‘a group of blind people touches an elephant’. The proverb implies that blind people are incapable of understanding the whole shape of an elephant, even if they co-operate and exchange their impressions. They cannot figure out the whole shape of an animal which is as big as an elephant, because they can only touch isolated parts of it.

Although this expression is only a metaphor, I discovered how misleading it is when I saw the powerful works created by blind pupils. I could not but acknowledge my surprise.

Despite their visual disability, the pupils grasp and create volume and depth by ways of bodily sympathy with their object. Is it space they have created? Yes, but more than that, they have captured 'lived space', not only the space outside themselves, but also the space inside, which they experienced through their own body and through all their senses.

It is not the children, but we ourselves who believe that we see the entire elephant, when we only perceive it through sight.

Did Adam and Eve see God himself? No, they only heard his voice. I don't mean to say that the sense of hearing is superior to the sense of seeing, or to other senses. But if we give priority to one single sense, we unconsciously oppress all other senses. In modern society, sight is thought to be the most important of all the senses and we even experience some sort of tyranny of sight. We thus run the risk of impoverishing our whole sensitivity and of losing many abilities of our five senses and of a unified sense like the so called "sixth sense".

In Japanese, "sixth sense" ('KAN') can also mean a high level of intuitive sensitivity, especially when speaking of artisans.

Now, let's focus on the sense of touch (you may look at the summary of my talk). Gibson, a psychologist shows that active touching is very different from passive touching. Active touching makes it possible to grasp something more clearly than passive touch. For example, when we touch something in an active manner, even without seeing, we can comprehend what it is, at the probability of 80% or more. On the other hand with passive touching the probability drops down to 50% or less.

Generally speaking, this example shows that there are two modes of knowing, that is, the passive mode and the active mode.

Traditional theory of knowledge emphasises the passive mode of knowledge. Our expression “data” or “Sense-data” comes from the latin word “data” which is the plural form of “datum”. It means “the Given”.

However I think that of the two modes of knowledge, the active mode is the most important. Because we can understand something more clearly and more deeply through the active mode, as the distinction of the English words “listening” and “hearing” shows.

Most of us think that it is enough to “open one’s eyes to see”. In a sense that’s true. But even in this simple case, I am already “intending” to the world at a subconscious level. When I open my eyes, consciously or unconsciously, my eyes focus on some object. We are ready to see, generally speaking. We take an attitude or a posture to see, to look, to hear, to listen etc.

We can call this active mode “the Taken” as opposed to “the Given” The word “the Taken” is introduced by the artists Shusaku Arakawa and the poet Madeline Gins in their joint work “Mechanism of Meaning”, which proposes to reconstruct the theory of knowledge.

In reality, understanding comes through the alteration of these two processes, or through their circulation at the unconscious level. There is a mutual penetration of these two processes.

In this context, it is meaningful that the French word “sens” means both “direction” and “sense”. “Direction” reminds us of the active orientation of the subject and “sense” reminds us of the receptive processes.

These two modes or processes are unified in a body-scheme or corporeal scheme. The British psychiatrist Head was the first to use these terms and later the French philosopher Merleau-Ponty used them in the broader sense.

This scheme does not only include the more receptive sensation-process, but also the more active movement process.

We cannot, of course, separate these two processes. The union of them was called "sensory-motor scheme" by the French philosopher Bergson. He pointed out that the sensation-process could not be separated from the movement-process. Because the sensation is always "open" to the world and by movement, that is, by action, we act upon the world. The circulation of these processes forms the foundation of our lives.

When a blind child, or indeed, any person, touches an object, his hand may feel touched by it at the same time. A blind child will touch the object more actively than a sighted person, because of the lack of sight. He will investigate the object through all other available senses (provided this active attitude has been encouraged).

An object may respond more actively to such an investigative attitude. For example, consider the sponge. How do we know what nature sponge has? Sight? No. When we press the sponge, we apply pressure to it and the sponge responds to this active question (that is, grasping) by the elastic restitution. Without the process of asking and responding, we could not know the nature of sponge.

I want to call these mutual processes 'knowing by "Mi"'. "Mi" means approximately 'an embodied mind' or 'a soulful body', that is 'united being of mind and body'. In these mutual processes, the active mode and the passive mode of understanding are unified in "Mi".

In the concept of "Mi", there is no atomism, no separation of each sensation, no cutting of ties between sensation and active movement. Above all, no dualism of mind and body as absolutely separate entities.

We feel and know “the world” through “the world” through all sensations. They are co-related to each other through our “whole existence (Mi)”, which unifies mind and body, subject and object.

Our body-scheme tunes in with things and with other persons. In other words our “Mi” resonates with, and sympathizes with them. In this way our “Mi” induces and realizes the structural accordance with others. This is the fundamental basis of understanding “the world” and understanding each other. This accordance, however, does not mean substantial identification, but structural identification.

Such accordance by “Mi”, or “syntony” as Minkowski (a French psychiatrist) would say, underlies our understanding of everything. This accordance can be progressively deepened through shifting our pre-established framework of thinking.

Our intellect itself is founded on this basis. Nowadays unfortunately there is a deep split between the senses and the intellect and in most cases, the intellect is regarded as superior to the senses. Nevertheless, if the routes of sensations were broken down, our intellect itself would fall asleep and could not work.

To overcome the present situation of our intellect which brings many splits to our mind and to our civilization, and to make our intellect flourish, our hidden sense-possibilities must be liberated from deep down in ourselves.

Sculptures by the blind pupils remind us of our forgotten abilities and possibilities of sensation. We are therefore not only surprised and moved by these works, but also deeply refreshed in our “Mi”, refreshed in our embodied mind and we can find hope for the future of our civilization.