

# Making (Things) as Ethical Practice

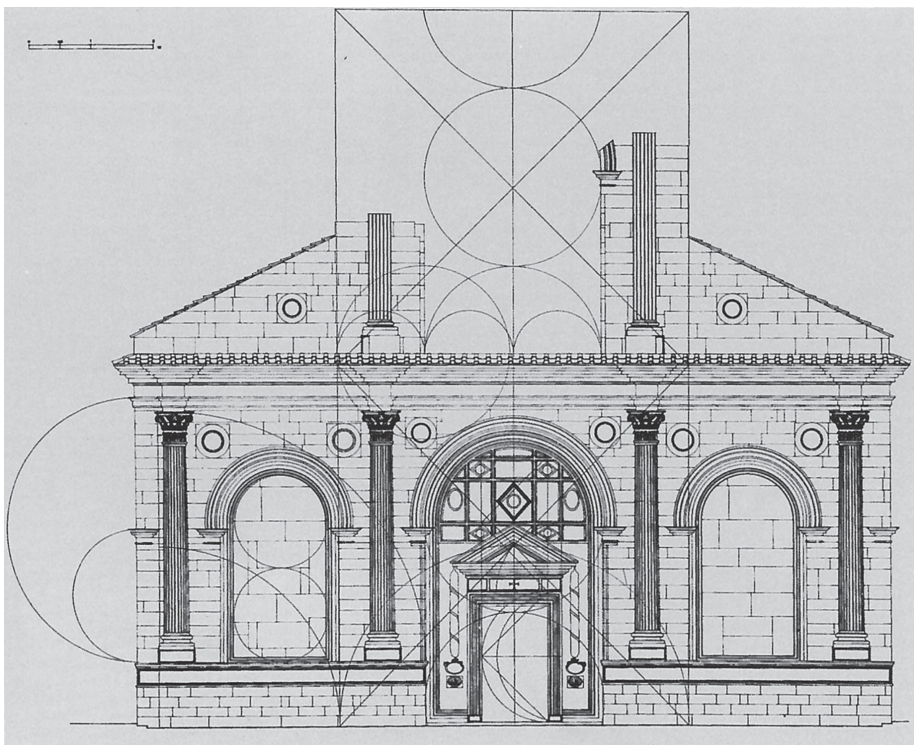
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# MAKING (THINGS) AS ETHICAL PRACTICE

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## Matter Matters: a Reconfiguration of Classical Design

The culture of making in architecture reconfigures classical architectural practice through its emphasis on being engaged with material – on doing instead of abstract thinking and planning. Its 'revolutionary' principle can best be demonstrated through a microanalysis of what the maker actually *does*, in comparison with the classical architect.



*Fig. 1. Geometric projection of conceptual image from Leon Battista Alberti, Study of proportions of the facade of Tempio Malatestiano, 1447-1468.*

Since the quattrocento, when the discipline of architecture diverged from the medieval crafts, it has been regarded as an abstract intellectual activity, a discipline of the mind, devoted to reason. In this way it was incorporated in the humanist movement, who saw man as determined by mind and language. The Renaissance architect and theorist Leone Battista Alberti (1404-1472) depicted the architect as a person with a 'developed intellect and imagination',<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Leone Battista Alberti, *On the Art of Building in Ten Books*, trans. Joseph Rykwert, Neal Leach and

one able 'to imagine whole forms in his mind without taking any notice of the materials'.<sup>2</sup> The special feature of architecture since then has not been so much its focus on the concrete building, (which was seen as the object of 'construction' industry), as the abstract drawing. The latter is considered the mere projection of an idea that has been developed by the 'genius', the 'ingenium' – that is to say, the creative spirit of the architect/engineer.

The core concept of architecture concerning the relation between creative spirit and drawing is 'design', derived from the Italian *disegno* and meaning 'the visual expression and clarification of the concept (of a building, W.N.) that someone has in her mind and that he imagines in her thoughts and builds up in the idea'.<sup>3</sup> According to this definition, *disegno* has an abstract and a material side. The abstract side, 'theory', is the way in which the representation is formed in the mind of the architect. This abstract image is subsequently directed to her hand, which in turn concretizes it in the drawing, the latter representing the more material aspect of *disegno*. Note that in this definition the hand is a pure mechanical implement, mediating between the creative spirit and the drawing.

Making (things), on the other hand, is a physical affair. It does not occur between mind and drawing, but between hand and material. We might describe it as an activity in which physical and (in)organic entities of various kinds come together to take part in a complex process of metamorphosis that brings into being material things. As long as the activity of making endures, we can observe the appearance of a dynamic and variable *assemblage*, which is composed of material bodies such as wood, steel, stone, paper, textiles, clay, etc. – including tools – and also hands, eyes, and brains. Sometimes the latter series is extended with the mouth, the feet, the knees, the forehead, the ears, the nose, the back, and eventually the complete human body.

Compared with classical architectural design, we can understand making as a critical reconfiguration thereof. To be engaged with materials without thinking, i.e. without making a drawing beforehand, is crucial here, because to bypass the prominent position of the idea – which is the essence of design (read: *disegno*) – is a serious attempt to abandon the disregard for the material and to give it a voice. To be engaged with materials without thinking beforehand means to drop control and go along with matter.

The second element of the reconfiguration of design concerns the emancipation of intuition and the change of its nature. According to the humanist theory of design, intuition is bound to purely spiritual processes and feelings, which are limited to the inner space of the human body. Makers, however, understand intuition as a reciprocal faculty that is shared with matter, seeing making as an inimitable interplay of influences.

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Robert Tavorner, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1988 (1452), p. 63.

2 Alberti, *On the Art of Building*, p. 7.

3 Giorgio Vasari, *The Lives of the Artists*, trans. Julia Conaway Bondanella and Peter Bondanella, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998, pp. XI, XVI. Or: *Le Vite de' Più Eccellenti Pittori, Scultori e Architettori*, Firenze: Lorenzo Torrentino, 1550.

The third element of reconfiguration is the concept of creativity. According to humanist design theory, creativity is trapped inside (the space of) the human mind and considered to be the exclusive agency of all making. By assuming a different metaphysical position, makers can acknowledge non-human agencies like the active and semi-autonomous answer of matter or the counter-objection of the tool. In short: by breaking open the humanist subject of creativity, makers create space for a dual or even triple creativity principle.

Finally, the reconfiguration of design also affects the concept of vision. Through making, this internally-oriented spiritual faculty that enables the visionary person to see 'things to come', or 'things to be realized' is transformed into an externally-oriented capacity of observation, be it connected with sentience, intuition or fantasy...a real *art* of observation...with the eye and the hand...an observation that searches in the appearances of real substances for meaningful possibilities to continue the event of making...

To conclude: the typical design process follows a set sequence of brain > hands-tools > eyes > drawing. In making, this series is reconfigured, becoming material > hands-tools > eyes > brain. These two series characterize the difference between the thinker/drawer with her abstract planning, and the maker who participates in the material process of making, between the fixed controller with an overview and the traveling *explorer*; an open-minded sojourner, ready to make the most interesting discoveries along the whimsical paths of her journey.

## Making and Architectural Practice

Making is easier done in art than in architecture. The artist can dedicate himself to making by simply skipping the phase of mental concept development and letting the artwork come about through direct experiments with the material. Architecture is stuck here with a deep division of labour between the design of a building and its actual construction. Maker-architects have developed various answers to this problem. Some present themselves as artists and try to restore the broken link between design and execution. Often they quit architecture, temporarily or conclusively, and dedicate themselves instead to making as a sculptural exercise. Others prefer to integrate elements of making in their design processes by paying special attention to creative modeling and sketching. All recognize in making practices opportunities to experiment with design methodology.

In architectural schools, making always implies the direct tactile contact with concrete materials like wood, clay, foam, steel, stone, twigs, etc. For that reason, it is seen as an activity through which much-needed material knowledge – which designs often lack – is developed. In addition, the junior architects are highly sensitized to material reality, a reality that for most of them is troubled by the rising pressure of what might be called real-life surrealism, spread through the professional world by electronic communication and the use of half-automated design software such as AutoCAD.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Makers in architecture know that in daily practice they cannot avoid electronic, computerized design-tools, but they resist them becoming the unique method of design. They insist on enriching the design activity with the processing of concrete materials. Note that hacking and manipulating electronic tools

According to some makers, architectural education should be one big exercise in making. It should function as a research tool to investigate the way in which architecture manifests itself through its materials. The architect who integrates an episode of working with materials into her normally rather abstract design method learns to understand that architecture can very well have poetic expression through the play of material, space, and light. Students come to realize that these poetics are the result of the way in which they have organized their working method and not the outcome of the implementation of such a thing as style, be it historically or theoretically motivated.

To illustrate what making means in architectural practice, I will describe one of the workshops that were held around 2007 and represent the first manifestations of the culture of making in Architecture in the Netherlands.<sup>5</sup> The participants were students of the Academies of Architecture of Amsterdam and Arnhem.

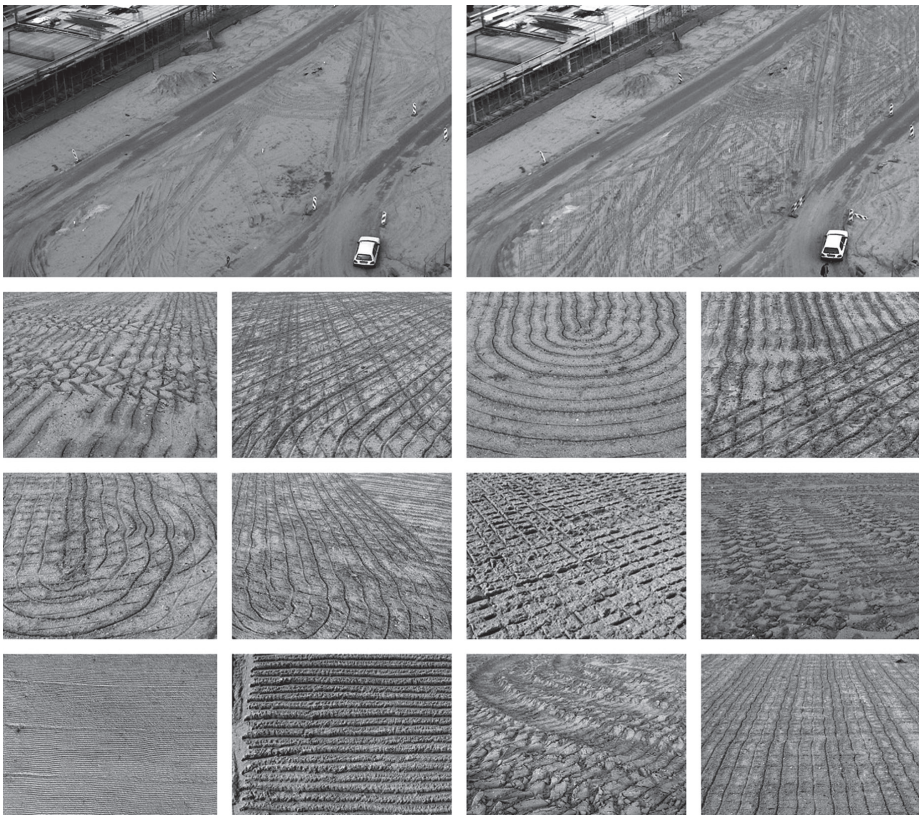


Fig. 2. Machiel Spaan and Jan Peter Wingender, *making with sand in a sand plain*, 2007.<sup>6</sup>

by means of active programming was already an activity of blob-architects in the nineties.

5 Machiel Spaan and Jan Peter Wingender, *The Temporary Expert*, Amsterdam Academy of Architecture and Arnhem: ArtEZ Academy of Architecture, 2008.

6 Reprinted with permission of the creators.





*Fig. 3 and 4. Michael Spaan and Jan Peter Wingerder, making with sand in a sand plain, 2007.<sup>7</sup>*

<sup>7</sup> Reprinted with permission of the creators.

Equipped with tools such as measuring tape, construction wire, pickets, and a shovel, student/makers were asked to work on an empty sand plain near Amsterdam. Nothing had been built here yet and only the geodetic indications of the plots, a few bridges, and a park could be seen. The actual material they were assigned to work with was the sand, tangible, visible, and changeable sand. Though a seemingly monotonous landscape, uneven terrain, tire tracks, sunken places, and all sorts of other details encouraged exploration.

The students were instructed to look for an inspiring location and start working there. They had to take into account the topography of the area and the texture of the surface, and were expected to improve the relationship of these features at the spot they had chosen to develop. They also had to organize their work in a cycle of doing, contemplation, and anticipation, which had to be repeated several times in each session. It was explicitly forbidden to make a drawing first. Instead, they were asked to intuitively begin, and then iteratively improve through a cycle of constant reflection and modification.

The work was carried out in four sessions of half a day. All actions were recorded with photographs, films, and sketches. Afterwards the experiences were presented at an evaluation meeting with all participants. Ultimately, 21 locations were worked. Together they provide multiple impressions of the sand plain that testify to the potentialities of the sand material and the topography of sand plain – including the confrontation of the makers with the sun, the wind, and the water.

## The Miracle of Making

The material and the location, which the participants of the workshops of 2007 called *poetic seducers*, were crucial factors of inspiration for them. Because the participants stayed as close as possible to the respective locations during the time the workshops were held, the events assumed the quality of a *retreat*, intensifying the focus on material and location. The multiple cycles of repeated activities they had to go through in a short time minimized the influence of theoretical considerations. Short working periods of three to four hours created the need to hurry in order to get results, leaving no time for thinking. Working in groups subsequently compensated the reduced capacity for production and improved the perception of the material and the situation due to the verbal and non-verbal consultations by the group members.

Each workshop ran according to a cycle of assignment, execution, and presentation. Documentation of the process with photos, film recordings, and sketches created a mode of perception that was mediated by multiple information carriers. It sharpened gaze and thought, and created a productive distance that helped to keep the overview. By repeating the cycle, skills were developed and a proficiency emerged regarding the different working methods. Through all these features of the process, the makers gained a rich knowledge of the potentialities of the location and the materials.

The participants were not allowed to seek guidance in scientific knowledge, be it of a technical or an architectural historical nature. No one was allowed to start working with a final image in mind. The purpose of this was to learn to accommodate the *unforeseen*, whether it came from

the material or from the location or the circumstances, and to develop the ability to respond by *improvisation*. In fact, the participants discovered that the resistance of the material against its treatment quickly subverted any pre-planned idea. In the end, the workshops promoted the insight that the final outcome was not controlled by the human mind. The result did not derive from an idea beforehand, but from an unconditioned interplay of hands, eyes, brains, materials, and tools, where ideas only could pop up and play a role from the sidelines, insofar as they were connected to the action in the moment.

In a mysterious way the interplay of the material, the location, the hands and brains, the contemplative perception, the interim (re)presentation and reflection – all these depend on the working method. Complicating the working structure through repeated cycles – which could, in principle, be continued indefinitely – often provided a surprising result, a result that struck makers with *amazement*, as if they had contributed to the creation of a *miracle*. Why? Because they had outsourced the subject of initiative, the 'creative spirit' to the *assemblage of making*, to a set of physical connections in action, to a true 'dance' of the agencies of materials, locations, tools, and human hands, eyes, and brains.

## The Integration of Making in the Classical Design Process

So far we have discussed making as being engaged with materials, putting the creative spirit aside and aiming for the production of miracles through complex working procedures. In spite of its different configuration, making can be integrated into the classical design process by including special phases dedicated to creative model building and sketching. Using deliberately vague instructions, some architects ask their employees to produce a large quantity of models made of styrofoam, clay, or wood – the most appealing of which are selected to serve as inspiration for the actual design. Others collect readymades in nature and use them as inspirational models for their design (Fig. 5).<sup>8</sup> To emphasize the contrast with the fancy demonstration models of classical designers, makers improvise more, and use organic models in order to play off the intrinsic expression of the materials against the imagined forms of their traditional opponents. For instance, in their architectural models for an apartment in Pratteln, Switzerland, the architects of Christ und Gantenbein used a pile of irregularly sawn pieces of wood that could hardly be distinguished from firewood for the stove.

As for sketching, architects are looking for ways of drawing that can be regarded as manual work, working a material until it amazes the drawer. In his *Notebooks*, the painter and Bauhaus professor Paul Klee (1879-1940) defined the line as material, noting that a sketch drawn by hand is not so much a mental projection as the *trace of a movement*.<sup>9</sup> More materialistic still is the following thesis: the lines of a sketch launch themselves from the pencil where they originate, recording their own sinuous path in the wake of the drafter's moving hand. In short, every line drawn by hand is material by nature, because every line is the trace of a gesture.

<sup>8</sup> Ready Mades as elements for the model of a city, Alex van der Belt, 2013, photo Wim Nijenhuis.

<sup>9</sup> Paul Klee, *Paul Klee: Notebooks, Volume 1: The Thinking Eye; The Notebooks of Paul Klee*, Jürg Spiller (ed.), trans. Ralph Mannheim, London: Lund Humphries, 1961, p. 105.





Fig. 5. Alex van de Belt, *Readymades as elements for the model of a city*, 2013 (photo Wim Nijenhuis).<sup>10</sup>

In architectural practice, we can distinguish two types of lines: expressive (or gestural) lines and non-expressive lines. They can be distinguished on the basis of their intention. The purpose of expressive lines is to express the movements from which they originate, while in the non-expressive lines expression is an accidental side effect. Non-expressive lines form technical drawings, mere propositions about what needs to be made. Expressive lines exceed proposition because of their explicit determination by physical gestures. In other words, their state of 'being made' is more significant than their capacity for representation. What these lines share with the material of making is their ambiguity and ability to indicate paths that the maker can follow. That is why sketches require careful observation, one tailored to their specific appearance.<sup>11</sup>

The sketch is of great importance for architects in developing ideas. It can only amaze the drawer, however, when she no longer regards the hand that draws as the obliging implement of the projective mind, but as an active and disobedient organ that cooperates with other organs such as the eyes and the brain. She may not longer conceive the brain as the origin of the initiative, but as the organ of following, perceiving and inner projection. What is surprising is how quickly – after the activity of the hand has created the play of lines on the paper – the

<sup>10</sup> Reprinted with permission from the photographer.

<sup>11</sup> Tim Ingold, *Making: Anthropology, Archaeology, Art and Architecture*, London and New York: Routledge, 2013, p. 50.

mental representation arises through seeing it. John Berger (1926) nicely summarizes this dialectic between external and internal reality: 'Every line that I draw changes the figure on paper, and at the same time, the figure is traced in my mind as a result'.<sup>12</sup>

Just like the event of making, impulses from outside – visual, tactile, muscular, or physical impressions, or even just vague feelings – inspire the sketch, because the drawing hand converts all these sources into a set of lines. In order to do justice to this conversion, the Finnish architect Juhani Pallasmaa explicitly situates the creative principle of the sketch in the *dynamic assemblage*, in the very act of drawing itself. To him it seems 'as if the drawing draws itself and uses the human hand as its instrument [...] Often it is the drawing itself, the intense involvement in an "unconscious" act that causes an image or an idea to arise'. Pulling lines is like working materials because ideas are merely pulled out, or pulled up from the play of lines as if it were a play of materials. Some architects say that in sketching, the hand that draws 'feels' the forms to come. The drawing hand as a haptic, amazing 'trigger' of ideas is making culture's retort to the always-controlled hand of humanism, the mechanical slave that merely implements the ideas of the mind.

## Anthropological Repercussions

Architects may turn to making with the expectation to develop new forms, but as we've seen, making also implies anthropology, another definition of man. Makers question the humanistic thesis that our intellectual faculties such as thinking, speech, and technology determine our humanity, replacing it with a more physical, materialistic, and non-anthropocentric vision.

What are these anthropological repercussions? Does this shift entail that makers make themselves when they make things? Theorists and practitioners say yes and distinguish between two types of making: the formation of character and the improvement of physiological aspects. Through making, the maker acquires specific skills, but also develops character traits: enthusiasm, observational attitude, familiarity with uncertainty, an ability to improvise, self-discipline, self-confidence, and humility. On the physical side making improves body parts like the hands and brain – or at least saves them from further regression.

Typical for making is its energy-generating effect. The German art historian Oliver Zybok relates this energy to the obsessive person, who is 'extremely focused on something and shows an excessive energy that is spent on one specific interest'.<sup>13</sup> Here, the negative characteristics of this syndrome – the emotionally charged field of tension and the additional, often unproductive urge for perfection – are restrained by the 'steady rhythm for work' of the maker and her focus on 'concrete objects and procedures'.<sup>14</sup> Thanks to the self-discipline acquired by the nature of her activity, the maker succeeds in transforming her enthusiasm into a fruitful

12 John Berger, 'Berger on Drawing', in Jim Savage (ed.) *Berger on Drawing*, Aghabullogue: Occasional Press, 2007, p. 112.

13 Oliver Zybok, 'Lust und Zwang der Obsession; Betrachtungen in Kunst und Gesellschaft' [Pleasure and compulsion of the obsession; Reflections in art and society] in: 'Obsessionen I [Obsessions]', *Kunstforum International*, Bd 225, März-April 2014, p. 63.

14 Richard Sennett, *The Craftsman*, London: Penguin Books, 2009 (2008), p. 254.

and healthy variant that Richard Sennett has labelled *constructive obsession*.<sup>15</sup> Because of this self-discipline, obsession loses its pathological traits and becomes *enjoyable*. Constructive obsession, self-control, and pleasure become character traits of the maker, because a well-defined working process allows her to escape from herself.

Secondly, making encourages the acceptance of imperfection, pushing us to go along with accidental slip-ups and failures, or better yet, to perceive them as *salutary*.<sup>16</sup> To make this happen, the maker needs to recognize that slip-ups point the way to a free and personal attitude towards the basically unbeatable quality standards and paragons of perfection that are imposed on us today by the industrial production and the circulation of electronic images. Making helps us avoid the depression that often results from slavishly following the paragons of visual culture, teaching the maker to rely more on herself. The lesson of *salutary failure* is: 'Discover your own way; innovate, don't imitate!'<sup>17</sup>

These character traits have their origin in working materials. That is why making also has repercussions on human physiology. It is clear that, through working materials, we train the hand. In doing so we improve proficiencies, proficiencies comprised of individual expression. Do we not say 'the master's hand'? Faced with the continuing regression of the hand and the loss of its expressiveness caused by the degradation of the fingers when operating the computer mouse, working materials restores some qualities the hand possessed in the past when it was still a highly sensitive organ with spiritual repercussions. French anthropologist Leroi-Gourhan put it this way: 'that we don't have to "think with our fingers" is equal to the lack of a part of someone's normal phylogenetic human mind'.<sup>18</sup>

In his book about the craftsman, Richard Sennett concludes that anyone who has learned from working with materials to be patient, to control herself, to observe the materials sentence, and to move with them, also has the skill to avoid the counterproductive use of reckless and brutal violence in daily life.<sup>19</sup> Working with materials enables people to govern themselves and so become good citizens.<sup>20</sup>

## Ethical Practice

Being good is an ethical matter. Our culture understands ethics as something close to morals, i.e. a set of rules that tells us what to do and not to do in daily life. We experience morals often as restrictions. Character also determines behavior. However, its mechanism is not prohibition but building a set of habits, of fixed behavioral patterns that we internalize through constant repetition over a longer period. We know this mechanism

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15 Sennett, *The Craftsman*, p. 254.

16 Sennett, *The Craftsman*, p. 97.

17 Sennett, *The Craftsman*, p. 102.

18 André Leroi-Gourhan, *Gesture and Speech*, trans. Anna Bostock Berger, forw. Randall White, Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1993, p. 90. Or: *Le Geste et la Parole*, Paris: Albin Michel, 1964.

19 Sennett, *The Craftsman*, pp. 169- 171.

20 Sennett, *The Craftsman*, pp. 268- 269.

from sports. It teaches us that people can become dedicated to repetition because it is immediately rewarding. When the maker experiences an improvement in performance, she is drawn into the steady training scheme that is needed to acquire skills and to change habits.

In his popular masterpiece *You Must Change Your Life*, the German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk highlights this mechanism, calling it 'anthropotechnics', techniques of individual and collective self-transformation.<sup>21</sup> Making is anthropotechnic because it is rooted in the convergence of manufacturing and practicing. Making is tantamount to the acceptance of learning through repeated physical exertion, including its slow pace enforced by working materials. Going a step further than Sennett, Sloterdijk proclaims that through techniques such as targeted training, (relative) isolation – be it alone or together with others – and *Bildung* (spiritual education), we can develop our own, preferably socially deviating, way to a superior performance that is determined by ourselves, including our bodies.

Sloterdijk sees an opportunity here to promote the formation of alternative personalities, people who are willing to acquire good habits like care for the environment or extend courtesy towards their fellow human beings. Since the Enlightenment, we consider personality to depend on an inner regime that consists of a combination of innate and learned ways of responding and acting. We now understand that the maker – through the conscious repetition of certain activities and developing self-discipline by working materials – also acts upon her own inner regime of behavior. When she changes her existing regime (e.g. sitting in front of a computer, or watching television, or hurriedly acting) through making, she changes her personality in an active way. Making is then a means of personality transformation: by working materials, the maker remakes herself.

Being a good citizen means having good habits. Good habits presuppose that humans have a certain degree of control over their affections and passions. This 'ability to govern yourself' can help to make a stand against being governed by the many subliminal effects of advertising on classical and social media. Making can help you to become a consciously trained world citizen, fit to face the disasters of the Anthropocene.

Becoming a good person through training, however, requires a new understanding of ethics. The link between character formation and mental-physical training is an unjustly forgotten dimension of ancient Greek ethics that we need to rediscover. The philosopher Aristotle argued that 'excellence of character (*êthikê*) is the result of habit (*ethous*)'.<sup>22</sup> In his statement, he plays with variations of the word *êthos* and connects them with related terms like character and personality. It follows that doing good is being excellent and being excellent is only possible because of good habits. In order to develop good habits now, it is necessary that reason persuades the irrational part of the soul and makes it obey.<sup>23</sup> This mechanism, which

21 Peter Sloterdijk, *You Must Change Your Life; On Anthropotechnics*, trans. Wieland Hoban, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2014. Or: *Du Musst dein Leben Ändern; über Anthropotechnik*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2009.

22 Aristotle, *Ethica: Ethica Nicomachea*, trans. Christine Pannier and Jean Verhaeghe, Groningen: Historische uitgeverij, 1999, p. 55.

23 Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. W.D. Ross, Stilwell, KS: Digireads.com Publishing, 2005: I, 13 - II, 1.

I referred to above as 'governing yourself', can only become a character trait by training. As a result, the ancient Greeks understood *êthos* (ethics) as a set of practices meant to develop good habits, but also more broadly as a capacity for action and a moral resilience. The result of these practices is the excellent and good personality that – we would say today – knows how to take care of nature and how to be polite to fellow humans.

The Latin concept for good and excellent behavior is *habitus*. Etymologically it derives from *habēre*: 'having' – hence 'habit' also for something annoying yet fixed – and the frequentative *habitare* or 'dwelling'. In various modern languages, there is an intrinsic connection between 'dwelling' (to habit; habiter), 'habitude' or 'habit' (French: *habitude* and *habitudes*: 'tradition, morals'). Along this path, too, we arrive at a point where the practice-based transformation of habits – until they have become part of our character – is an ethic. This ethic, however, sincerely differs from obeying tables of rules that are prepared by others. In the first place, it is an activity, a training scheme, hence the expression: *ethical practice*.

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