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Lars Spuybroek. *The Sympathy of Things: Ruskin and the Ecology of Design*. Rotterdam: V2 Publishing, 2011. 400 pp. $45.00.

This is a dazzling, provocative, baffling, and sometimes vexing manifesto. Simultaneously sympathetic and confrontational, *The Sympathy of Things* is a book of paradoxes. It is at once panoramic in its range of reference, and strangely narrow; rigorous in its analysis of the past and deliberately, explicitly ahistorical; generous, yet curiously dogmatic; discriminating yet prey to unexamined metaphors that allow resistant meanings in; self-confessedly Ruskinian in spirit and yet deeply, almost at times perversely, anti-Ruskinian. *The Sympathy of Things* is an unforgettable book, with a sense of mission that is humane, even as it is also strangely mechanistic and technological—strangely un-humane. As a study of what the "Gothic" might mean for the present, *The Sympathy of Things* embarks on a recuperation of John Ruskin as a writer on Venice and on that un-substantiated and even partly fantasized category of his early writing: the northern Gothic. Yet it is also, at the same time, a puzzling misconstrual of how to connect the past to the present, and of how to find a path from the author of *The Stones of Venice* to today. It is easy to think that a substantial intellectual edifice is raised here in the service of a claim for nothing more significant than the nature of digital design software. And it is easy to think, too, that such a claim is almost overwhelmed by an assertion of the moral-but-not-moral capacity of such design to "redeem" us. There is some truth in both these views of *The Sympathy of Things*, yet they obscure the bravery with which Spuybroek wrestles with huge cultural troubles, inspiring with a project that always feels on the verge of being ampler and—indeed—nobler than his prose will admit.

Lars Spuybroek is a practising designer and architect. He is also Professor of Architectural Design at the Georgia Institute of Technology. His central case in this weighty, surprising book is that we should recognize the potential of Ruskin's conception of the Gothic as an art of life to guide a new conception of contemporary "vital" design in digital form. The Gothic cathedral, Spuybroek suggests, is a kind of digital template and Ruskin's definitions of the nature of Gothic in *The Stones* can—with Spuybroek's characteristic and openly-confessed ahistoricism—be taken as a fresh map for contemporary digital design that brings life because it brings individuality and connectedness. Digital technology would allow us properly to recover a notion of the sympathy of things, Spuybroek claims: that is to say, digital "Gothic" design would acknowledge and acclaim the mutual modification of everything in the presence of everything else, and this would necessarily result in the production of harmonious, coherent, sympathetic, and connected forms. Sympathy, in this book, is not a feeling in any straightforward sense. And, like a number of key terms here, "sympathy" is not used in a familiar or even consistent way. Most of the time, Spuybroek refers to the "sympathetic modifications" of one thing in relation to another, as a branch might sway in the presence of a breeze, as a person's mind or feelings might be modified in "sympathy" with the decoration of a room in which he or she stands. "[Every] approach to another," Spuybroek observes, "starts with a feeling-into, followed by a feeling-with." Such feelings will always, he thinks, contribute to our "own well-being" (311), even as they encourage us to vary and adapt our actions. Such feelings, indeed, are everywhere in the world, and they are the starting point for this book's idea of what good new digital design could be. Sympathies are even the reason, Spuybroek notes, why swans live in pairs, and wolves in packs. *The Sympathy of Things* looks everywhere for evidence of the connectedness that needs to be returned to human lives. And, to paraphrase T. S. Eliot on *In Memoriam*, if the robustness of this study's argument is sometimes poor, its faith is a very intense experience.

Ruskin's definitions of the Gothic—including his emphasis on variation, redundancy, ornamentation, roughness, individuality-within-order, vitality, abundance, freedom, and

collaboration—are transmutable into the digital world. In fact, Spuybroek thinks the digital is the *only* domain, or certainly the only domain *of design*, where such Gothic values can be recuperated in a way that both re-interprets them for the present, and retains their original integrity. And this is not a strange form of antiquarianism. Such "vital"-Gothic-digital-design is a counter to nothing less than the empty soul of twentieth-century design. That is characterized, in Spuybroek's perception, by a preference for the image, surface, and sameness; by the abolition of ornament; by *smoothness*. And it is overwhelmed by the sublime. This modernity is, as Ruskin might have put it, Death. Digital Gothic design will be a new Life. Yet *The Sympathy of Things* would use such expressions with very considerable reluctance.

Perhaps the clearest practical example of Spuybroek's vision for the new nature of design—in a book as oddly restricted in examples as it is in illustrations—is derived not from Ruskin but from William Morris. Morris (whose distasteful practices as a company director are hidden away behind a view of idyllic hand-labouring in the service of quality design) is another peculiar kind of digital hero *avant la lettre* or, so to speak, *avant le site*. Spuybroek's concept here is of a website that has absorbed the principles of Morris's and Dearle's designs, and through "sliders" enables customer-designers to configure their own particular "Morris & Co" pattern on their computer by varying key components of the originals according to their own preferences. This might be taken as representative of all the creative practices that this study seeks to bring into being. A paragraph is worth giving in its entirety not least because it provides a glimpse of both the thrill and the enigma of *The Sympathy of Things* altogether:

> Infinite numbers of identities, of free individuals—can we produce such wild things? / The answer will not be an easy shift from a hylomorphic, fixed-mold technology to a morphogenetic, variable-mold technology; that would merely take us from a Greek ontology to a Baroque one. As the *Tangle Carpet©* [software] shows, we will need a digitally Gothic, configurational ontology that allows for things as much as continuity. Let us imagine a website equipped with the aforementioned sliders for (1) entangling, (2) tendriling, (3) bifurcating and (4) sprouting, perhaps extended with a color generator

> based on Morris's natural dyes. One would be able to set the object size, generate several patterns, make a reservation, perhaps print one pattern out in order to get used to it and see if the carpet suits the room, and then purchase it. With the purchase, the software's settings would become yours alone; no one would be able to reproduce your carpet. It would take a while to produce, but it would not be impossible, since the Jacquard loom of the early 1800s, with its punched cards, was one of the first computed systems. The carpet would be 'printed' in wool and then sent to the buyer. Since the software would be based on the expertise of William Morris and his office, it would absorb the existing, historical carpets as instances in a much larger number of virtual carpets. Though the design system would be open to accident and amateurs, the result would never be either accidental or amateurish, since the potential buyer would be able to manipulate a single parameter at will, but one or more of the other three would immediately adjust their positions to make it a Morris & Co. product. Each carpet would be grown, or generated—we could even say bred—parented by four main attributes, to become a singularly unique individual. (267)

Sometimes, it seems as if this whole rich and demanding study, with its animated gestures against the blindness of the modern world and denunciations of modernity's seemingly fatal investment in the value of the repeated image, is moving towards a new way of designing carpets. Yet Spuybroek believes that the "life" of the new digital design will, in a quite literal manner, save us: it will restore human beings back into their own lives and reconnect them with the world around; it will privilege variation over bland sameness and revive connectedness with everything that is Not-Us. Here will be an affirmation of the "fundamental reaching out of things to things" (132), he says. There is the weighty burden of an unstated, and often frankly denied, moral argument behind Spuybroek's conception of how the internet might develop, even in a book that is impatient with ethical arguments about digital design, and with arguments about the *meaning* of design or of art as a whole, at all.

Many readers, in fact, might wonder why Spuybroek needs Ruskin. Why, in other words, does this text need to

conceptualize digital design as a Gothic practice through John Ruskin instead of articulating its values plainly and confidently—and without him? Ruskin's "authority" is not part of the way in which Spuybroek will make his case more persuasive to the contemporary world of designers and architects. Indeed, I might guess the opposite. Part of the answer is simply that Spuybroek is being fair to the origins of his own inspiration. He finds the links between "The Nature of Gothic" and the creative potential of digital design personally compelling, and his book lays out the history of his convictions. Yet, amid Spuybroek's probing of abstract philosophy, sociology, Shoowa-Kuba cloths, and the work of the picturesque and sublime in the twentieth century, *The Sympathy of Things* also endeavours to ground its words in a prophetic discourse that it cannot construct without Ruskin, a language of moral dignity and wide cultural reach. Spuybroek *needs* Ruskin, even if he will not quite admit it, for more than 'just' his ideas about how to design.

Some of Spuybroek's questions and concepts are certainly Ruskin's. One of the most striking relates to the question posed in that most quirky of texts, *The Ethics of the Dust* (1866): "What is it to be alive?" (*Works* 28: 237): Ruskin's inquiry, in his school-room discussions of dancing, pyramids, and chemistry, arises from a consideration of the minute patterns of crystals. These suggest to him the hand of a designer, and in turn are evidence—visual more than analytical—of a vital force shaping the natural world. *The Ethics* was written in one of the most uncertain periods of Ruskin's relationship with Christianity. But it is a reconfirmation of his lasting commitment to the testimony of Natural Theology, which in all sorts of ways never left him. A spirit of life is discernible within the natural world and that spirit—expressed through varieties of religion or myth, Ruskin could now admit—is a creative force with intention, generosity, and love. And, as far as Ruskin sees it in *The Ethics*, that force really is *alive*. But what is really "living" in the Gothic? And what is "alive" in the organic growth of designs in a Gothic-internet? Spuybroek draws on the language of "vitality," of the operation of life, in a way that seems to fuse the metaphorical with the literal. He is sure that he is not returning to the "old vitalism," to the older sense that the aesthetic involves the expression of living forces and where the organic inter-relation of elements

in art is like the inter-relation of really living elements. Yet his vocabulary keeps returning to that past. Spuybroek admits that his plan sounds "a lot like old-school organicism" (311), and he offers a little clarity about how he differs. Yet the fundamental connections remain, secreted behind metaphors that tempt vitalism back into the machine. The connections are noticeable not least in the final line of that paragraph just quoted: "Each carpet would be grown, or generated—we could even say bred—parented by four main attributes, to become a singularly unique individual." The language of actual life, the imagination of digital design as actually growing or breeding, creeps in as if *The Sympathy of Things* is unable entirely to leave behind a quasi-theological sense of a *mystery* in art and design. Spuybroek's conception of the future is secular and human-centered. Yet his visions flirt, against themselves, with other and stranger possibilities.

This all might seem of minor importance. But the challenge of those metaphors is part of a more substantial difficulty for readers who respect Spuybroek's visionary commitment to, and passion for, John Ruskin, and yet are puzzled by how two thinkers on the same subject can have so little in common. How closely does this book approach Ruskin? In the Gothic as a template for labour relations, or with the politics of work more generally, Spuybroek has no interest. And "meanings" in either the practice of design or in the interpretation of the designed are irrelevant to him—at least, he declares as much. "If there is one thing that cannot be cast in stone," he says, with a curious confusion between iron and rock, "it is an idea" (69). This reveals, in a book that has learned deeply from Ruskin's quirky energies, a profound resistance to Ruskin's fundamental conceptions. In turn, Spuybroek dismisses—so it seems, at any rate—Ruskin's sense that human creativity is legible in moral terms. Art, architecture, and design are not forms of national autobiography, as Ruskin thought they were in the "Preface" to *St Mark's Rest* (1877–84). "There is no meaning," Spuybroek asserts, "just construction" (69). Spuybroek dismisses, dramatically, any theological meaning, revelation, or resonance in Ruskin's writing or in his understanding of what work the arts might now do. Any association between Ruskin's celebration of the Gothic as an expression of reverence for the natural world

and a celebration of God who designed the natural world is not for *The Sympathy of Things*. The book derives its alternative understandings from entirely secular modern philosophers. "Nowadays," Spuybroek says, "you would have to travel the planet to find a single artist claiming to be trying to create something beautiful, and probably that artist would lack talent or be extremely religious" (211). Eccentric and peculiar, the "extremely" religious are as valuable to art and design as an artist without any gifts. This is a curious frame with which to approach the legacy of John Ruskin and his understanding of the Gothic for the twenty-first century. Spuybroek's argument, in this respect, seems merely to confirm the ethical and indeed theological void that Ruskin himself thought the Gothic resisted. Again, many readers might feel that this kind of issue does not matter. Spuybroek's intentions, after all, are to promote a new conception of digital design, not to think too carefully about John Ruskin. Yet "Ruskin"' is in the title of this book, and an integral part of its case. The man who sat down to express the importance of Christian faithfulness in the formation of great design, the writer who began as an art critic endeavouring "to declare and demonstrate, wherever they exist, the essence and the authority of the Beautiful and the True" (*Works* 3: 4), is in some ways an antagonist of the very premises of this book, which is dedicated to his celebration. It is a secular, de-intellectualized, technologized, and unRuskinian conception of the Ruskinian Gothic that animates *The Sympathy of Things*. Ruskin, in fact, should hardly be in it at all.

And so it is that *The Sympathy of Things* moves towards its exhilarating yet strangely dreary conclusion, which Spuybroek offers as the apogee of his best hope, a vision of a new world, and of a future that will be redeemed by the Web when it acknowledges its own Gothic heritage. These are Spuybroek's last words:

> I long for the day when we can see objects forming, like pools of mud, flowers on a wall or clouds in the sky, as pure products in a context of pure productivity, without any intermediaries. There will be no desires, no opinions, no critics, no designers, just pure flourishing. (333)

Here is a world in which an ideal principle for software design has taken over human nature ("we create our own nature," Spuybroek says unblushingly on p. 332, answering a question

about what human nature is that for everyone else remains an unsolvable puzzle). Neither feelings nor thoughts, neither ideas nor creators, will seemingly be admitted into this digital Gothic world to which *The Sympathy of Things* aspires. All that will be known is "pure flourishing" and that notion, whatever precisely it means, stands as the new good. This state will be the as-yet-unachieved goal obtainable through the refinements of digital programs that will allow humankind to produce ornamented designs that retain individuality while being rooted in stable principles of order and arrangement. Such a conclusion is perhaps the most surprising, provocative, and limited that ideas ascribed to John Ruskin have ever produced. "Will we ever be able," Spuybroek had asked earlier, "to restore the feelings and care we had for things?" (143). It is a profound question, a humane and, in its way, a Ruskinian one. The whole business of the re-enchantment of the West after the birth of industrial modernity has absorbed thinkers and writers from the end of the nineteenth century to the present. But *The Sympathy of Things*, for all its bravura expositions, feels more assuring and attractive in intention than achievement. It feels as if it wishes to diagnose modern malaise and contemporary philosophical failings yet ends with a new way of thinking about how we might use the computers on our desks (and it does so, furthermore, in a way eccentrically without any consideration of markets, or of the economics of design more generally). How *do* we restore the care we had for things? Spuybroek's study provides a peculiar, local, and, in some ways, an exceptionally bizarre answer. Yet that is no condemnation of his ambition to confront the question in the first place.

If readers may wonder whether *The Sympathy of Things* always means what it says (the author notes that he has needed some help in phrasing written English), the prose is often stimulating. Spuybroek is not short of ideas. Owen Jones' pattern books based on the Alhambra and the eloquent shapes formed in cracked mud; Bergson, William James, Deleuze, Theodor Lipps, Kant: all are topics. Spuybroek's examination of the dominance of the sublime in the twentieth-century experience, including from design, is spry and compelling: the modern sublime creates merely awe, he says, and deprives us of relationships of sympathy with things. Individual sentences stand-out

in their suggestiveness. Here are a few: "what needs to be established in ornament is simply a relatedness between us and things, *a fundamental sympathy*, which all design starts from. Such sympathy is *only* possible because of ornament. Ornament is an absolute condition for all things to be felt with the same immediacy as they are seen" (128); "There is nothing personal about sympathy. It is an objectivity focused not on inert matter but on matter as part of time, on matter as something transformable and ever-changing" (170); "We orient ourselves by feeling, either in space or in time, and as [William] James says, we are with, next to, in, over, against, towards things. *All relations are felt relations* and therefore relations of sympathy" (171); "Gothic things exist *only* in relation" (242); "We do not live among Ruskin's veiled things but among unthings we are conditioned to see as veiled" (259). There is penetration and a prophet's zeal behind Spuybroek's best writing. This is prose dedicated to finding a solution to the alienation of our times, an answer and a cure for human beings' distances from their own selves and the things that they see, feel, and touch.

Ruskin, with the Oxford Museum, endeavoured unsuccessfully to put Gothic principles of architecture into practice in an effort to reveal that the nineteenth century could *build* like the Middle Ages, even if, as yet, it did not *believe* like them. But the central project of *The Stones of Venice* was to insist on things the other way round. And that was more consistent with Ruskin's habits of mind in general. Mere design, the adopting of particular styles and principles, could not really change lives, alter beliefs, or modify feelings. Changes in the former would only follow from changes in the latter. Heart, faith, and mind must come first. Spuybroek longs for a change in design to transform us as human beings, so that we are in sympathy with things. And that sense of sequence is, I think, the last of his peculiarly un-Ruskinian uses of Ruskin in a remarkable book which, like the remains of the un-built cathedral at Siena, seems to reach towards more grandeur than it can ever obtain. What remains for *The Sympathy of Things* is disappointment—and something that is uncomfortably, uncertainly, but also authentically inspiring.

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