

## Tactile Affects

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*En poussant plus loin les récentes enquêtes menées dans les études culturelles et l'esthétique féministe, ce texte examine comment le sens haptique – le sens relatif au toucher, à la kinesthésie et à la proprioception – éveille l'appréhension sensorielle de façon à interrompre et remettre en question l'expérience esthétique purement visuelle. Rétablissant l'équilibre entre les préoccupations hégémoniques et le jugement esthétique, Fisher examine les implications politiques de l'affect haptique dans l'expérience esthétique, puis analyse la manière dont l'esthétique haptique est présente dans l'immersion sensorielle et les œuvres d'art relationnellement dynamiques de Wendy Jacob et de Sandra Reicho.*

Feminism shares with philosophical aesthetics the insistence on the primacy of experience in the production of knowledge. Yet feminist aesthetics characteristically rejects any notion of a totalizing, universalist aesthetic paradigm. Instead, it involves the struggle of coming to terms with the varieties and contradictions of lived experience: those hyphenated states of identity linked to class, race, sexuality and culture. This multiplicity pertaining to the aesthetic conditions of embodiment is distinctly non-hierarchical and non-transcendent and needs to be understood in terms of an everchanging dynamics of mediation.

A primary constituent of feminist aesthetics has been its project to theorize the *relational* in forms of experience. This recognizes that the results of any engagement are shaped by the point-of-view of the beholder, or, in other words, that there is a politics to the modality of connection itself. For example, Trinh T. Minh-ha posits a transformative, yet non-transcendent, aesthetic politics with her notion of the "interval" that neither assimilates nor separates, nor is reduced to a compromise, but rather enables an openness of "alert experience" that can sustain not only the positivist assurance of experience, but also embrace what she terms "critical not-knowingness" (234). The latter is aesthetically important precisely because it validates modes of pre-critical attention, enabling the unfolding of perception with-

out the immediate adherence to predetermined closures of judgment. This aesthetic ontology contrasts strongly with the prefigured certainties of connoisseurship that is predicated on the authority of "being knowledgable."

A second important intervention of feminist aesthetics has been in elucidating the implications of *sensory* mediation in experience. Considering the aesthetic as a means of cognition recuperates the premodern meaning of the term: *aisthisis*, or, perceptible by feeling (Buck-Morss, "Aesthetics and Anaesthetics" 125). Where sight is conventionally the dominant sense in the visual arts, exploring multisensory modalities of apprehension constitutes a pivotal site of feminist enquiry. In 1976 Silvia Bovenschen posed the question of a feminine aesthetic which activates sensorially based perception: "Is there a feminine aesthetic? Certainly there is, if one is talking about *aesthetic awareness* and *modes of sensory perception*. Certainly not, if one is thinking about an unusual variant of artistic production or about a painstaking constructed theory of art" (49). My purpose here is not to quibble with the terms of Bovenschen's singular feminist aesthetic as positional plurality is now commonsense in feminist discourse(s!). What is important about Bovenschen's assertion is her positing of embodied perceptual engagement. Following from this, I will explore a particular manner of sensory aesthetics, specifically that of *feeling*, whether perceived directly, through the sense of touch, or affectively, through the related haptic sense. My point is that focussing the feeling of relatedness between art and beholder works to destabilize habits of one-way consumptive viewing. And it is in this relational modality that the contingencies of the haptic may be deployed fruitfully in a project of rethinking aesthetic experience. I will begin by reviewing how haptic-touch, as the quintessential *relational* sense, figures in sensorial mediation; then I will go on to examine some examples of haptic artworks.

The haptic sense, as I am defining it here, extends from actual touch to include the autotactility of physical comportment and perambulation. The terminology of the nascent field of haptics is so mutable that diverse fields – including psychology, medicine, brain research, robotics, VR, critical theory and aesthetics – have defined the term *haptic* in radically different ways. In the context of art exhibitions, haptic engagement is distinctly performative and pertains to the actual enactment of art. This emphasis on practice must be distinguished from the haptic as defined by art historian Alois Riegl, who, writing at the turn of the last century, deployed the term

in his theorization of a stylistic hermeneutic. Riegl contrasts the *haptic* which discerns the texture and grain of a particular art object, the “palpably, or verifiably, real,” to the *optic* which focusses on outlines, linearity, and angularity suggesting the “mental, or . . . subjective” (Olin 297). While Riegl’s protosemiotic approach might help in distinguishing abstract expressionist iconography from that of pop, his notion of the haptic is ultimately reduced to a metaphor within what is primarily a visualist discourse. Haptic aesthetics, as I am conceptualizing it here, must be differentiated from stylistic considerations. Rather, it involves actual practices involving contiguous touching, bodily mobility and perceptual comportment. Because the haptic sense requires interaction, it is inherently relational. And it follows that because haptic artworks require interaction, they cannot be reduced to objects.

Beyond actual contiguous touch, haptic cognition encompasses the senses of proprioception and kinaesthetics. Artworks entailing proprioception engage the corporeal awareness of dimensionality, volition and location. In some instances – such as in the case of VR artworks – a haptic interface also has an impact on the vestibular system which senses balance, movement and acceleration. While the analysis of proprioceptive engagement yields ground for examining the epistemological significance of the body in proxemic space, an examination of kinaesthetically enacted artworks pertains more directly to gesture and posture. In turn, kinaesthetic insight is signalled by the body’s joint, tendon and muscle receptors. Kinaesthetic awareness determines the psycho-physiology of instinctual ‘gut feeling’ which provides the basis for response before meaning is established (Buck-Morss, “Aesthetics After the End of Art” 39-46). Kinaesthetic embodiments of affect are also clearly evident in the idiomatic expressions “being crestfallen” or “walking on air.” Such bodily intelligence is not merely reactive, but has been formalized in forms of physical training where knowledge is embodied through systemic movement series, such as *kata* in the martial arts or instruction routines for aviation. Additional corporeal epistemologies are evident in psychotherapeutic re-experiencing procedures that direct attention to sensations of pressure or tightness held unconsciously in the body which are released in the disengagement of trauma.

Because the haptic sense is simultaneously relational and sensorial, it can play a critical role in articulating the extra-visual modalities of aesthetic experience. As distinct from the spectatorial distancing of a ‘disin-

terested' visualist aesthetic, a haptic aesthetic accounts for the immersive engagement of beholders involving perambulation, balance, acceleration and the sense of dimensional space. Movement, as well as vision, are crucial to display rhetorics that require enactment to mobilize their significance. Haptic mediation occurs through the sensing of architecture and its climates, the presence of objects and other beholders, and the reflexive awareness of assuming particular postures. Without perambulation, an aesthetic experience would be reduced to a static, immobilized view because without the synaesthesia of proprioception and vision there is no third dimension. Importantly, the haptic as a morphology of feeling is not limited to its proximal function at the boundary of the skin. Because it also extends the human nervous system beyond the body, it is the distal aspect of haptic sense that perceives the affective climates of exhibition contexts.

### **The Problematic of "How to Feel"**

Where visualist aesthetics largely governs the discursive, representational and textual paradigms, a haptic aesthetics can serve to illuminate those dimensions of the "non-discursive" and "non-representational" so long overlooked in critical theory (Barrett). Recent theorizations in cultural studies have made provocative arguments for the relevance of affect in the production of knowledge outside of the visual-textual paradigm. Contemporary theories of affect can be traced to Freud's use of the term to describe "fluctuating bodily states, feelings and moods" (Seigworth). This notion of affect describes the energy with which people relate to the world through passion, pleasure, desire or pain. Greg Seigworth makes a lucid argument for locating affect in the realms of pre-signification. Affect, he asserts, occurs *outside, before* and *in-between* discourse. In terms of human awareness, affect exists before identity becomes fixed, in the passage between bodily states, and in the transformations of becoming something else. Seigworth locates a curious lacunae in Freud's method, questioning why *mood* – admitted by Freud to be a key catalyst to his writing – does not play a more substantial role in his theory which tended to move rapidly from *affect* to *representation* (Seigworth). A similar urgency-to-signification persists within cultural studies theorizing in the visionary project of Lawrence Grossberg, whose "theory of affect" conceptualizes the political effectivity of sensibility. Where Freud's affect occupies the interstices of unconscious and conscious processes within a discrete individual, Grossberg's notion of affect links an individual to socially articulated

moods and feelings in the external world. For Grossberg, affect is not reducible to emotion but rather defines a quotidian “politics of feeling . . . whether good, bad or indifferent” (191-92). In his view, affect qualifies the nature of concern, caring or passion. This notion of affect can be fruitfully employed to describe the charge and intensity of an exhibition space or a particular enactment of display culture. Yet it carries a sensorial blindspot. While Grossberg is careful to situate the conjuncture of moods, desires of emotions within particular historical, political or social structures, his accounting of perceptual processes appears to operate somewhat transparently, especially given the question of agency in apprehension. As with Freud, a leap is evident in Grossberg’s concern to qualify “feeling” in terms of a signifying sensibility (“good, bad, or indifferent”), that is, in terms of a judgment. My point is that the evaluation of sensibility must be distinguished from a politics of feeling considered in terms of more immersive sensory processes. The rush to signification evident in the above theorizations of affect may be seen as symptomatic of how the habits of textual discourse – habitually driven to the closure required to produce meaning – elide a more sustained relational politics, a politics that accounts not only for the evaluation of sensibility, but that can interrogate *how* feelings are felt. And it is precisely at the level of sensorial praxis, I would like to suggest, that a haptically nuanced aesthetic can help clarify the *unspeakable* realms of the non-discursive and non-representational. Seigworth’s analysis sustains affect’s extradiscursive aspects which are crucial to recuperating the aesthetic as a modality of precritical cognition.

The question, then, becomes one of elaborating the sensorial and relational intensities of affect’s politics of feeling. It is here that the power of feeling can be disarticulated from interrogations into sensibility and reframed in terms of a haptic morphology. An initial step is to inquire into ideological implications of tactile aesthetics. On a purely physical level, the politics of touch can be coercive, hegemonic or emancipatory (Eagleton). Coercive deployments of touch typically rely on the pain end of the pleasure-pain continuum activated, for example, in the certain effects of force or torture. In turn, tactile hegemony – how we *ought* to touch – pertains to social conventions of touching or not touching – whether firmly shaking hands or refraining from touching one’s genitals in public. Finally, the politics of emancipatory touch encompass a range of touch-generated epistemological “shocks” which, in Walter Benjamin’s

terms, fracture habits of rationality to enable other kinds of knowledges: the *coup de feu* kiss, the spontaneous healing, those becomings of touch. On a more subtle level, a haptic morphology of proprioception and kinaesthetics can define relational attunement of dimensionally charged space. Haptic aesthetics work primarily on the level of epistemology: how we know. While haptic knowledge-as-affect can contribute to the production of meaning, it is never reducible to representation.

### **Allegories of Touch**

Now I will immediately engage a contradiction. While touch cannot be reduced to representation, as I have just argued, historical allegories of touch *can* give us a sense of how sensorial ideologies have been conventionalized. Tactile impressions are perceptible, as pleasure or pain is, only in the present tense. Touch thus resists the closure of discourse and the necessary death of experience submitted to discourse. Carl Nordenfalk has noted that of all the senses, historical representations of touch foil simple depiction by an easily understandable attribute (“The Five Senses” 9).

Before the Enlightenment, portrayals of the five senses proliferated in paintings, prints, tapestries, tableaux vivants and ceremonial architectures. Touch, as with the other senses, was represented according to three basic typologies. The first type was synecdochal where the hand – the chief organ of touch – appeared either iconically, or gesturally engaged handling objects, such as playing cards, dice or chess. Human figures would also be shown counting coins, performing medical procedures, such as pulse-taking or surgeries, or engaged in fortune-telling. Gestures involving the haptic perception of the blind were common, as well as an epiphanal touch found in the parable of Christ healing the blind man. The second representational strategy for touch was symbolic. Allegorical cycles of the senses often featured creepy-crawly zoomorphic forms such as spiders, tortoises, or scorpions as emblems of touch. But it is the third type, the performative personifications of touch, that I find the most fascinating. Allegories of touch frequently depict the symptomatic expressions of pain or pleasure. On the one hand, figures react in pain to being scratched, bitten or stung by creatures or pricked by sharp objects. On the other, erotic charades portray scenes of kissing or caressing. A popular premodern portrayal integrates the pleasure-pain polarity in the presentation of Touch as sensuous goddess whose flesh is pecked by a bird, the simultaneous representation of carnal promise and the pain of deflowerment as a moralistic caution against sexual excess.

While the history of art gives us a rich range of tactile enactments, a lithograph by Charles-Joseph Traviès entitled *Les cinq sens* (1828) is particularly compelling to a discussion of gender and the senses. Where the personifications Taste, Sight, Hearing and Smell are signified by men in full dress who soberly assert their faculties, Touch alone is female and nude, modestly covering herself with a slight piece of fabric. Interestingly,



Charles-Joseph Traviès, *Les cinq sens*, 1828, lithograph

while the sense organs of the men are distorted to comically aggrandize the mouth, eyes, ears or nose, the woman-as-Touch remains in-proportion, poised to reveal herself in a tactile burlesque. Does Touch's smiling demeanour here portray her as the deferential *object* of spectatorial desire or its joyous *subject* as she senses acutely through all her skin's surfaces? This engendering of touch as feminine resonates with Luce Irigaray's claim that women take more pleasure from touching than looking, and her assertion that the predominance of the visual is foreign to women whose auto-tactile sensuality is diversified in complex ways throughout the geography of her body (351-54). Yet Irigaray's distinctions resist essentialism. She cautions that the simple inversion of patriarchal hierarchies ultimately maintains separatist agendas that merely perpetuate a binarist logic. It follows, then, that in challenging ocularcentric hierarchies there exists the inherent danger of merely denigrating vision. To advocate touch

as an alternative to vision is to remain trapped in the pendulum swing of alternating hierarchies. What is necessary, rather, is to expand the terrain of sensorial aesthetics with the impetus to bring sensorial knowledges into balance in art and theorizing as generative cultural practices. I prefer to consider the senses in constellatory terms, what Susan Buck-Morss has termed “the synaesthetic system” (“Aesthetics and Anaesthetics” 129), in which the intensity of each sense is known *in relation* to the others, rather than as a sensory hierarchy, the linear terms of which preserve the privilege of what is essentially a visualist logic.

### *Vital Signs*<sup>1</sup>

I now want to turn to examine some sensory artworks in the exhibition, *Vital Signs*, which invited beholders to experience fifteen sensorially resonant works by nine artists. In contrast to the tactile prohibitions characterizing the purely visualist conventions of the white-cube exhibition space, all the pieces required interactive engagement. This exhibition was conceptualized explicitly to foreground the non-visual senses within a visual art context. The architectural collaborative Bosses installed proximally triggered architecture. Naomi London’s gigantic forty-six foot marmalade wall presented a flavourful neo-abstract-expressionist nod to Riegl’s notion of visual touch. Nathalie Jeremijenko’s *VoiceBoxes* tracked the vocal index of their handlers, recording and relaying sound impressions when manipulated. Jean Dubois’s touch screen presented intimate body surfaces on a quotidian ATM haptic interface. Vision, sound and kinaesthetics combine in Kevin Ei-ichi deForest’s *Disco Tatami* and *Karaoki Bench* which suggested a pop Japanese garden. The invisible was presented through Claire Savoie’s configuration of domestic sounds and Chrysanne Stathacos’s aura photographs, and smell was integral to Stathacos’s *Wish Machine* and Sandra Rechico’s olfactorily resonant *Distended*. While all of these works were evocative of the nonvisual senses, I will tighten my focus here and very briefly discuss two works which implicate a haptic aesthetic in innovative ways.

### **Sandra Rechico: *Shards II***

Conventionally, exhibition participants trace a path through space negotiating their bodies in relation to visible objects. Sandra Rechico dissolves the distanced view by making the beholders’ actual tactile participation integral to the work. In *Shards II*, participants are invited to walk on a

wedge of ankle-deep, crushed glass cullet. What one sees is the razor-edged beauty of a sparkling white surface that appears to be most cer-



Sandra Rechico, *Shards II*, 1997-2000,  
installation with crushed and broken glass 4" thick, 15' x 10' x 10'

tainly dangerous. Here the gallery floor, usually a benign medium, becomes fraught with potential risk. Participants sign a waiver, accepting responsibility for their decision to step onto a shimmering expanse of broken glass. One immediately becomes intensely aware of one's weight, how one's movement displaces the shards, and particularly by the astonishing sounds of the crunching, popping and clinking underfoot. With each step, the intensity of proprioceptive subjectivity increases and one becomes more mindful of balance. This, in turn, impacts kinaesthetic awareness – the gestures and posture – of the participant. As Rechico relates, "the work changes people's sense of physical being. They hold their bodies in a different way" (qtd. in Penalzoa). This foregrounds the significance of trusting in one's sensory knowledge as distinct from how the piece appears. There is a sense of achievement, of crossing a boundary of visible danger, of evading almost certain laceration. This aesthetic experience incorporates the shift from doubt to exhilaration because the proprioceptive experience is qualitatively different from how it appears visually.

**Wendy Jacob: *Squeeze Chaise Longue***

Wendy Jacob's *Squeeze Chaise Longue* comprises one work in an oeuvre of what the artist has termed "somatic sculpture." She has intervened into the customary rigidity of the white cube by making gallery walls breathe, or by embedding nipple-like adornments at chest height which are warm to the hand. In terms of the haptic sense, Jacob's works engage both tactility and postural kinaesthetics. In her contribution to *Vital Signs*, beholders become performers as they are invited to sit in a plush red velvet chaise longue. An air pump is operated by another participant, forcing the arm rests to enfold the sitter's body from the top of the shoulders to the hips. This firm embrace is most often experienced as calming and therapeutic. Jacob developed this work out of a three-year collaboration with Temple



Wendy Jacob, *Squeeze Chaise Longue*, 1998,  
mohair, wood, hardware, pneumatic system, 86.4 x 111.8 x 152.4 cm

Grandin, a scientist who has designed restraints using a similar principle for the humane slaughter of livestock. This kinaesthetic technology has also been used successfully to soothe autistic patients. In the art context, *Squeeze Chaise Longue* foregrounds a kinaesthetic touch – the relative organization of the posture, position and pressure – playfully disciplined through the gesture one assumes: a comfortably erect spine, the arms pressed close to the ribs, the right angle of the torso to straightened legs.

In turn, the plush velvet upholstery texture greets the surface of the body, and the overall pressure on the rib cage intensifies one's awareness of breathing. I have found it interesting to observe the way in which beholders explore the limits of the squeeze and often exclaim that they would like to prolong the experience, or even bring the chair home. *Squeeze Chaise Longue's* experiential aesthetic is presented in the sensing of pressure as latent and applied intensities play against each other. These works by Rechico and Jacob implicate the body in its corporeal processes and fluctuating states.

To conclude, then, conceptualizing a haptic aesthetic can reveal some of the blind spots of a dominantly scopic art discourse by showing how the embodiment of tactile affect plays a crucial role in aesthetic experience. Rethinking aesthetic awareness and sensory perception in terms of haptic sensorial mediation necessitates moving beyond a hierarchical conception of the senses. Where the visualist logics of a sense hierarchy rely on distance and proximity, those of a haptic epistemology engage the space in-between: those loci of affect and becoming. A haptic aesthetics, likewise, does not totalize. It is multiple, pre-critical, immanent and inseparable from the plane of experience.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> The exhibition *Vital Signs*, presented at the Leonard and Bina Ellen Art Gallery, was co-curated by the curatorial collaborative Display Cult, comprised of Jim Drobnick and Jennifer Fisher, with Colette Tougas joining us for this show. A related performance salon, *Sentience*, was co-curated by Jim Drobnick and Jennifer Fisher. Both art events were produced in conjunction with *Uncommon Senses: An International Conference on the Senses in Art and Culture*, co-directed by Constance Classen, Jim Drobnick, Jennifer Fisher and David Howes, and hosted by Concordia University, Montreal, April 27-29, 2000.

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