

Haptic Aesthetics

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Lead session: Transimage Conference, Plymouth UK 2016

“To touch is the beginning of every act of possession, of every attempt to make use of a person or thing.”

This paper is not about Haptics vs Optics. Or the hand as opposed to the eye. Or vice versa. It is not about feeling instead of seeing. And I am not going to be focusing on multisensory experiences, or artworks that invoke smells and sounds as well as spectacles.

What I do want to speak about today is touching. About haptics... not in opposition to optics, but rather, as suggestive of something that pushes the limits of optics. As a build-up of tension. An arousal. An uprising against the regime of the visual. A call to touch.

“The hands want to see, the eyes want to caress” – Goethe

That was a clip from ‘The Day of the Doctor’: the 50th anniversary episode of *Doctor Who*. The Doctor and his companion – Clara – walk into the National Gallery and are presented with a 3D oil painting of an impossible scene: a scene from the future. One of the given titles of the work is *No More*. Clara’s outstretched hand reaches out to touch the skin of this painting that has no surface, only depth. She can’t believe her eyes. She reaches out to touch, to touch *no more*.

The desire to touch beneath the surface in order to believe in something is the subject of Caravaggio’s *The Incredulity of Saint Thomas*, also known as *Doubting Thomas*. It shows the Apostle Thomas, who as the story goes, had missed out on seeing one of Jesus’ post-resurrection appearances. He refused to believe that the resurrected Jesus had appeared to the eleven other apostles, until he could see and feel the wounds received by Jesus on the cross.

From the tip of Thomas’ finger, to the eyes of each subject, to the folds of Jesus’ shroud – everything in this painting is pointing at the cut, at this act of penetrating the skin – and the dramatic tension that surrounds this puncture.

Mieke Bal writes:

Caravaggio’s *Doubting Thomas* is an entangling work, and it represents entanglement. The ‘most copied of all Caravaggios in [his own] period’ displays flesh and skin as well as the rupture of skin, a wound whose shallow depth is frighteningly, painfully, probed yet gently endorsed.

It is not enough for Thomas to see the marks on the flesh. He wants evidence: he wants to touch. And the skin of this painting, this argument of faith, is covered with suggestions of openings, folds and flesh for us to see. See, but not touch.

One generally isn’t allowed to touch paintings. Even if they show signs of touch, are about being touched, or are touching... Paintings should not be touched. They should

be looked at. And there's nothing wrong with looking. Look but don't touch. Touch me not.

Touch me not. *Noli me tangere*. Some of you may be familiar with this famous phrase. For those, like me – who are not that well versed in Christianity... it is described in Chapter 20 of the Gospel of John that a meeting takes place between Mary Magdalene and Jesus at his empty tomb. A conversation starts up between them, in which the mysterious words are spoken: “*Noli me tangere*”.

The scene begins when Mary Magdalene, wanting to embalm Jesus' crucified body, arrived to discover an empty grave. As she stood there weeping at the tomb she saw two angels sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying. She then turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but did not realise that it was him. Jesus asked her why she was weeping and who she was looking for. Mary, thinking that he was a gardener, responded 'Sir if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him and I will take him away,' Jesus said to her, 'Mary!' She turned and said to him in Hebrew, 'Rabboni!' Jesus said to her, 'Touch me not (*Noli me tangere*), because I have not yet ascended to the Father.

Noli me tangere. Touch me not. This episode has often been taken up in painting. And it is always known by these words, by this uttered phrase. Mary is on her knees, reaching out almost blindly in this version by Giotto, while Jesus puts out his hand as if to say, stop, stop right there.

She is up on one knee now in Fra Angelico's *Noli me tangere*. She reaches out as if to embrace his legs and Jesus, in a similar pose to the Giotto, holds one hand out as if to stop her. His legs already twisted in the other direction. He is walking away.

Things take on a more dramatic turn in the Correggio. Mary Magdalene is half seated but her right hand is hovering, her head and neck reaching out to Jesus. Again, he half turns, one hand at her level, the other pointing away from her and to the heavens.

Poussin offers us more of a close-up of the pair, looking rather rustic. Mary Magdalene has a kind of 'come-to-Mama' look about her and Jesus looks down and wards off her embrace with the chop of his hand.

In Bronzino's version, it's all a bit of a dance. Mary shimmies up to Jesus, arms outstretched, she gazes lovingly into his eyes. He seems to rebuff her with his chest... it is unclear as to the direction of his gaze – perhaps looking down to Mary or possibly the draping cloth that is wrapped around his waist and seems perilously close to falling to the ground. Of all the versions so far, this seems most like a kind of game of touch me / touch me not.

But it is another *Noli me tangere* painting that I want to focus on. One that I think is quite spectacular... and I wanted to briefly show you some of these other depictions so that you can see perhaps, how this painting is a little different.

This is Titian's *Noli me tangere*. Mary Magdalene and Jesus are close, almost close enough to touch. Jesus looks down towards her. His right arm is twisted around his body, not away from her – but so as to hold onto the cloth of the shroud around his neck. He gathers it up and places it in front of another quite extraordinary piece of cloth. The loincloth around his waist is tied in, what could be described as quite a

peculiar knot. Coming to a head at the front, this material form seems quite suggestive. It is semi-translucent, and coiled in such a manner that it seems to hint at that which lies beneath its folds.

And where exactly is Mary looking? She hardly seems like she is in a position of prayer. Her hand reaches out, reaches out to touch him. But this is no embrace. There seems to be a fairly clear line between her hand and its potential target.

Mary catches Jesus in the process of arising. He has not fully risen and she must not touch him in this state. This is an intimate moment between Jesus and Mary Magdalene. Unlike the Doubting Thomas, Mary doesn't need proof. Mary already believes. It is not evidence that she is seeking through her desire to touch his body. She does not need proof as much as she wants to embrace the loved object. To taste the body, to take him in... and commune with this newly risen form of Christ. Touch me not, he says. *Noli me tangere*, is the title of this painting.

In Titian's *Noli me tangere*, just seeing Jesus risen is not enough for Mary Magdalene. She wants to experience more than just the optic. And what Titian depicts is a body of Christ that suggests the violation or transgression of that optic.

Touch me not he says – and yet he is happy for the skeptical Thomas to touch him in his not yet ascended state. Mary wants to touch, there is a build up of tension that that could almost break, with the thought of a touch.

Something certainly seems to want to come out of the Brazilian artist Adriana Varejão's works, that often speak to the unresolved consequences of the effects of colonialism of Brazil by Europe. Blood and guts seem to spill from walls of counterfeit tiling. Pristine surfaces are ruptured, revealing their meaty interiors. The display of a mass of unidentifiable innards is quite spectacular, but what is probably more disturbing is the seeming undulation of the walls and floors that she recreates. It suggests that the skin of the architecture that surrounds us is more fragile than we might wish to believe... and that surface fineries are not always what they seem, on the surface.

"The ego is first and foremost, a bodily ego; it is not merely a surface identity, but is itself a projection of a surface." (Freud)

Poor Pipilotti Rist. Be nice to me she pleads. Her head seems to be squashed somewhere in between the screen and the black void behind her. As her face contorts and drags and her make up smoothes and leaves a trail, she shows us something that we wouldn't normally see. We are getting a kind of skin's-eye-view of things. We are seeing touch - the pressure of touch as it rolls all over her face. With her hand pressed against the glass, it does seem that she is trapped, behind the transparent skin of the screen. Or else she is trying to leave her mark in that black void. In either case, it is fairly painful to watch. It looks painful. The show of touch here is violent: it distorts and disturbs.

Touch and the lure of the forbidden. Touching because you shouldn't. The painful touch. We saw Pipilotti Rist's literal touch before as she pancaked her face across the screen. The immediacy of this touch has certain rawness – there is a lack of depth between flesh and glass. The glass of the screen becomes like our own eyeballs, so it is an impossibly close-up vision of touch.

Noli me tangere. Touch me not. Depictions of touch, of skin, of wounds and pressure. These are all ways of thinking about touching, however as Derrida noted:

“...in order to think touching, this thinking about touch must not touch.” – Derrida, *On Touching*

To think about touching implies a distance: a disembodied vision. This is the realm of the optic, the eye that sees, surveys and understands, that translates clearly visible matter into concepts that can be understood. The relationship between knowledge and the ocular has longstanding foundations. As Pallasmaa notes in *'The Eyes of the Skin'*:

“In Western culture, sight has historically been regarded as the noblest of the senses, and thinking itself thought of in terms of seeing. Already in classical Greek thought, certainty was based on vision and visibility.”

Within this occularcentric tradition – that privileges sight over the other senses – the clearer the vision, the clearer the translation of vision into language: from the seeable to the sayable.

To see things more clearly, to gain a better perspective over a situation, to give it a good hard look, to eyeball something: all of these sayings about seeing are bound up in forms of knowledge and critique.

The optic has been legitimized, certified and ratified by art history. The injunction of 'do not touch' reinforces the inviolate space around the art object. Even if a statue on a plinth is covered in bird shit, it still says *don't touch me*.

Urs Fisher's melting wax sculptures initially take the form of a noli me tangere sacred work of art, but as the candles burn, the figures become nothing more than a puddle of wax on the floor. The haptic is a kind of bastard uprising against the regime of the visual. It is a kind of consumption that is not visual – it takes on the riotous nature of desire – to touch and be touched.

The transgression or violation of the thing that says don't touch me – is that which says it wants to be handled. The object that wants a connoisseur: the person who would be positively engaged.

The transgression of the thing that says don't touch me, the object that touches you back, that arouses the body – a body that now seeks the gratification the eye would get... This is the transgression that pornography enacts. But we could also compare this same object that touches back, that stimulates more than the eye but the entire bodily surface to the ambition of participatory art, or relational aesthetics.

To get in there and do things, touch, interact – whether or not you actually manage to violate the sacred optic realm, the injunction is there. Please touch. Duchamp raises a question. Is it better to feel with the hand or to see? The haptic is not just a supplement to the optic. It has to be a transgression, so it is not going to compliment – it has to violate the optic in some way.

“Haptic images do not invite identification with a figure so much as they encourage a bodily relationship between the viewer and the image. Thus it is less appropriate to speak of the object of a haptic look than to speak of a dynamic subjectivity between looker and image.” – Laura U Marks, *Touch*, 3

Objects from the past are touched by and in the present. They are translated again by the present. Translation can be timed. The touch of an object can travel through time...

And perhaps we could even add to this and say that there is a current obsession in art exhibitions to be close to past knowledge, to touch history in the present – and to re-present it... in all senses of the word.

While it may be largest store of knowledge in our universe, our own interaction with the wonderful World Wide Web and all of the information it contains is yet dependent on the touch of a thought. We can conjure almost anything up onto our screens right now, if it has been seen recently, it has almost always been imaged. In a sense, we are limited only by our own imaginations.

With the popularity of the touch screen in interfaces such as the iPad, the space between thought, touch and image has significantly collapsed. You can barely trace the difference between the speed of a thought and the pointed finger that swipes it into play.

Through digital imaging, the trace of a gesture – and the time of its tracing – can be made visible in a kind of fusion of time and space as in the clip by Cardiff and Miller that we just saw. Idris Kahn's practice of creating densely layered composite photographs allows the entirety of something – like every page of Sontag's *On Photography* or Barthes' *Camera Lucida* for example – to be seen, or kind of seen, in an instant. In this *Homage to Bernd Becher* that was made shortly after Becher's death in 2007, Kahn condenses the entire body of Bernd and Hiller Becher's photographs of Prison Type Gasholders into a singular, shuddering mass.

This act of visualizing the trace of a figure on the skin of an image, could lead us to thinking again about the touch screen interface: Imagine if it were possible to trace back every movement performed on top these glass stages – not only each line – but what they corresponded to, and what they led to, their duration and their content... If presented with such a thing we could very possibly be confronted with quite a disturbing picture of ourselves. A kind of imprint of our own consciousness.

When you clear your browsing data on Google Chrome, you have the option to obliterate items from the past hour, day, week, month – or the final option, which is listed as: *the beginning of time*. You clear your history, the history of your web presence. It is no longer apparent or easily retrievable, but it still there, lurking somewhere in the bowels of your machine or a server on the other side of the planet - and it can be recovered through code. The consequences of this are still being figured – as made evident in last month's European Court of Justice Ruling that found EU citizens have what has been termed the "right to be forgotten" online and that Google must remove links to search results that can damage a person's reputation. But can the internet ever really forget?

Time becomes something that can be curated. In the mind, in fiction, in art and its histories. We are aware that certain objects were made, *at the time*, as particular representations. But the past is drawn into the present and offers another translation of meaning.

One screen in Mark Leckey's room at last year's Venice Biennale showed the artist delivering what seemed to be the pitch for an exhibition called "The Universal

Addressability of Dumb Things". The pitch worked and the show has happened. The proposal continues to be rejigged – and heading toward a conclusion, I want to show you a brief clip from its current incarnation.

One foot in this world and one foot in another – and toggling between the two. Between *Noli me tangere* and *Please Touch*. Two prosthetic arms, one ancient, one modern, reaching out as far as they can to grasp all that there is in the world. The haptic is consistently formulated in terms of proximity. It surpasses the duality of the tactile and the optical. It is a close-range perception: a certain style of interaction. The sensibility of flesh. The border between flesh and cognition. Between thinking touch and being touched back.