

The Color of Angels

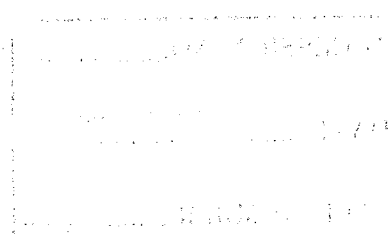
Cosmology, gender and the aesthetic imagination

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Lessons in aesthetics from the blind

Despite the flowering (or fragmenting) of art into a multitude of styles and forms in the twentieth century, Western aesthetics remains overwhelmingly visual.¹ Picasso's multi-perspectival figures, Pollock's paint-splattered canvases, Rauschenberg's all-white paintings, Warhol's pop art, among other prototypical manifestations of modern art, have greatly expanded our notions of art and representation, but only within the sensory field of sight. The aesthetic role of vision has, if anything, increased in the twentieth century due to such technological developments as color photography, the cinema, television, and computer graphics.

Not even dance and music are free from the visualizing tendencies of modernity. For most people in the contemporary West, dance exists more as a visual spectacle than as a tactile and kinaesthetic experience. The colonization of music by sight, in turn, is evidenced by the proliferation and cinematic refinement of music videos. The absence of visual allure, it would seem, is a leading factor in the current decline of popular support for symphony orchestras. To quote a spokesperson for a major American orchestra: "What can you say about an art form in which the star of the show (i.e. the conductor) turns his back to the audience?"²

There are, it is true, a number of works by contemporary artists which engage both visual and non-visual senses, particularly in the areas of performance and installation art. Such works, however, have thus far failed to generate widespread interest in a multisensory aesthetics, either among the public or among scholars of art, who each year produce ever more articles and books on the relationship between aesthetics and sight, art and the eye. Where then, as we prepare to enter the twenty-first century, can we look for a model of aesthetics which is not dominated by sight?

One answer is: in the experiences of the blind.³ This response might at first appear to involve a leap from culture to biology, from a social sensory order to one imposed by physiology. Nonetheless, given the current sensory climate of hypervisuality, it may be the case that only the physiological absence of sight can provide a context for allowing the non-visual senses to participate fully in cultural life.⁴

While there has long been a fascination with blindness in Western art and culture, this fascination has centered on the *absence* of vision, rather than on the *presence* of non-visual experience.⁵ By going beyond representations of blind-

ness to attend to the experiences of the blind themselves, we who are sighted can begin to learn what it might be like to apprehend the world as a sound- and smellscape, or to appreciate the contours and textures of our environment through touch. Exploring the sensory lives of the blind can help uncover a hidden world of non-visual sensations and representations, as well as inspire the creation of aesthetic forms based on senses other than sight. At the same time, such an exploration brings home to those of us who live in the visual panoply of modern, or postmodern, Western society that, while the blind may lack the sense of sight, the sighted are often out of touch with their other senses.

Beauty and the blind

The Western privileging of sight as *the* aesthetic sense has led philosophers and psychologists to question whether persons who lack sight can have any aesthetic experiences. The usual conclusion has been that they cannot. For example, the Enlightenment encyclopedist Denis Diderot, while in many ways sympathetic to the experiences of the blind, stated that, "when [a blind man] says 'that is beautiful', he is not making an aesthetic judgement, he is simply repeating the judgement of one who can see Beauty is only a word for the blind."⁶

This view, with exception sometimes made for the ability of the blind to appreciate music and poetry, continued to be widely held by art theorists into the twentieth century. In the 1930s, the psychologist Géza Révész undertook a major study of aesthetic abilities among the blind, entitled *Psychology and Art of the Blind*. In this study Révész attempts to systematically disprove any suggestion that the blind can either appreciate or create art by touch. As regards appreciation, Révész provides various examples of how blind persons were unable to accurately identify or judge the aesthetic value of sculpted busts. The fact that one blind man mistook a "beautiful head of the young Nero" for a representation of an ugly, old man, or that another judged a bust of a stern-looking Roman official to represent a handsome youth, and so on, is taken as indisputable proof by Révész of his assertion that "we have to deny absolutely the ability of the blind to enjoy plastic works aesthetically."⁷

As regards the creation of sculptures by the blind, Révész is equally severe. In the case of children creating clay models, he states that: "Even the worst representations of human figures by untrained sighted children are in every respect on a much higher level than the best work achieved by trained blind children."⁸ Révész grudgingly acknowledges that an "exceptionally gifted" blind sculptor may create a technically correct and seemingly aesthetic representation of a model, but holds that this will always, on close inspection, be seen to lack "genuine artistic worth":

The blind artist will never be able to reach the same heights as the seeing one; all his energy and talent will not help him to attain the highest spheres He will never create new forms . . . or exert any marked influence on artistic trends. For that, seeing, *artistic seeing*, is indispensable.⁹

A number of biases can be seen to inform Révész's aesthetic judgments. With respect to the failure of the blind to accurately identify the subjects of busts, Révész does not consider that the blind do not have the same experience in recognizing sculptures of different eras and styles as the sighted, who see sculptures not only during trips to museums, but in churches, parks, pictures, and many other places. Given the variety and number of things which can be taken in with just one glance, the sighted have a more extensive knowledge of forms and figures in general than the blind, who only know the forms of those things they personally touch. When one takes this into account, it is hardly surprising to find that a sighted person can identify the subject of a sculpture more readily than one who is blind. It is apparently a matter of experience more than of sensory or aesthetic capacity.

More importantly there is no recognition on the part of Révész that the works of art he is using for the purpose of judging the aesthetic capabilities of the blind were created primarily for the sense of vision, not for that of touch. Nor does it occur to him that the correct identification of the subject matter of specific sculpted representations might not be essential to a general appreciation of aesthetics. Révész believes that there is one universal code of aesthetics – his own. If a blind man calls a sculpted head ugly which Révész himself takes to be beautiful, it is not because the man might have a different idea of beauty, or because he is not familiar with the canons of Western art, but because he lacks an aesthetic sense. It is, in fact, apparent that Révész is not at all interested in the aesthetic judgments made by his subjects in their own right; his only concern is to prove that, according to his criteria, they are “getting it wrong.”

Révész's one-sided understanding of art appreciation by the blind extends to art production by the blind. As Révész holds that the visual is the one valid aesthetic medium, he has no qualms about judging sculptures created by touch strictly according to their visual appearance. Insofar as sculptures by the blind appear to reflect tactile, rather than visual, experience, they are considered by him to be distorted. Examples which he provides of this are a clay figure with ~~outstretched~~ arms in which the arms and hands are disproportionately large, and a sculpture of a kiss which focuses on the mouth and omits the back of the head.¹⁰ According to our everyday haptic experience, when one stretches out one's arms, they *do*, in fact, seem larger, and when one kisses, one's attention *is* focused on one's mouth, rather than the back of one's head. When one *looks* at someone with outstretched arms, however, the proportions of the body remain stable, and when one looks at someone kissing, the back of the head is there as well as the mouth. It is this visual experience which provides Révész with his artistic norm.

There is no possibility, according to Révész's model of artistic worth, of the blind being able to elaborate an aesthetics of touch. Nor is Révész impressed by the fact that the blind can experience pleasure in creating and feeling works of art.

The pleasure which . . . the blind derive from works of art is a sensual pleasure, a joy created by the clearness of the structure and the architectural

arrangement, but not a blissful appreciation of artistic values. The blind remain in the psychological sphere, in the sphere of slightly differentiated sensations of pleasure and displeasure, and are unable to force their way into the realm of Aesthetics.¹¹

The aesthetic doctrines of Révész and others like him are based on cultural prejudices, assumptions about the identity of the aesthetic with the visual which have long been entrenched in Western culture. Even the blind themselves have often held these assumptions. In the early twentieth century Pierre Villey, a blind professor of literature, stated that the visual arts were beyond the scope of the blind to appreciate and that “there can be no question of constituting an art specially suitable to the touch.”¹²

For many contemporary artists and scholars of art, the notion of a non-visual art is still unthinkable, or simply not worthy of thought. For example, one recent study of the role of vision in artistic creation claimed that the only imaginable scenario in which an artist could dispense with sight would be “when a great artist, after years of experience, goes blind and has no eyes left to help him.”¹³ The artist in this case, it is stated, must rely on his visual memory and picture his work in his mind. The possibility that a truly creative artist, on becoming blind, would explore how senses other than sight might serve as the media or locus for the elaboration of aesthetic concepts is simply not in the picture. Aesthetics lies in the (culturally mediated) encounter between a spectator and a spectacle. If the “spectator” is blind, or if the spectacle is missing, is there anything left to experience?

Seeing and nothingness

In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre describes the situation of a man standing in an empty park. Seeing but unseen, the man dominates the layout of the park – the lawn, the benches, the walk – with his gaze. When someone else enters the park, however, his visual hegemony over his surroundings is disturbed. The watcher finds himself watched, displaced from his position of authority and transformed into an object in another’s field of vision.¹⁴ As Norman Bryson puts it, “the intruder becomes a kind of drain which sucks in all of the former plenitude, a black hole pulling the scene away from the watcher self into an engulfing void.”¹⁵

Consider, now, the case of a blind man standing in a park.¹⁶ Imagining the park to be empty, as Sartre does, and not particularly aromatic, as parks often are not, what would his experience be? Of nothing in particular, or rather, of nothing in particular outside his customary consciousness of his own being. It is precisely when someone else enters the park – when the tread of footsteps is felt, the sound of a voice heard – that the world comes out of nothingness into being.

Take, for example, the following description by the blind writer, John Hull, of his experience of sitting on a park bench:

Where nothing was happening there was silence. That little part of the world then died, disappeared. The ducks were silent. Had they gone, or was something holding their rapt attention? . . . Nobody was walking past me just now. This meant that the footpath itself had disappeared. . . . There is a sudden cry from the lake, "Hello Daddy!"; my children are there in their paddleboat. Previously, a moment ago, they were not there.¹⁷

For the blind, "intruders" do not so much "take the park away" as they create it. Without such intrusions there *is* no park. As Hull remarks:

Mine is not a world of being; it is a world of becoming The rockery, the pavilion, the skyline of high-rise flats, the flagpoles over the cricket ground, none of this is really there. The world of happenings, of movement and conflict, that is there.¹⁸

The world thus exists for the listener not as a stable scene, but as a dynamic sequence of sounds.¹⁹ It is too changeable, too transient, to be dominated – as one dominates a landscape through sight – it can only be attended to and engaged with.

To return to Sartre, despite his fascination with the gaze, he was highly distrustful of the hegemony of sight. In work after work, the philosopher denounced the objectifying character of vision and sought an escape in the transcendent realm of the imagination.²⁰ Nonetheless, Sartre was ultimately unable to imagine a satisfactory alternative to visualism. For Sartre sight furnished the perceptual model for all the senses,²¹ and the imagination itself thrived on visual experience. "I think with my eyes," he admitted.²² When, in his old age, Sartre became blind, he described himself as a "living corpse," unable to interact with the world.²³ Despite his critique of the tyranny of sight, it would seem in the end that for Sartre the only alternative to seeing was "nothingness."

A world of one sense

It is sometimes the case that a person is so fixated with one particular passion or perspective that the whole world seems to be understood solely in relation to it. The utopianist Charles Fourier named such single-minded persons "monogynes" in his writings. From his personal experience he gave the example of an obsessive wine fancier, a "monogyne with the dominant of taste, the tonic of drinking":

This fellow saw everything in wine; instead of reckoning time by hours and half-hours, he reckoned it by the number of bottles drunk One of the two coaches on the road . . . passed us going down a hill, but he called out to it in a bantering tone, "Bah, bah, we shall drink before you" (that is to say, we shall arrive before you, for why do you arrive at all if not to drink?) A lady experienced sickness from the movement of the coach . . . the

monogyne [said], "You had better drink a little wine, Ma'am!" (for what is the remedy for every sickness, if it be not wine?) . . .²⁴

"He was not a sottish drunkard," Fourier notes, "but a man gifted with a marvellous instinct for referring all the circumstances of life to wine."²⁵

In the twentieth century, the Western world in general, and the academic world in particular, can be said to have a fixation with the sense of sight. This unisensoriality is somewhat obscured by the fact that the concept of sight, like an object reflected in a room of mirrors, has assumed so many different guises in our culture that it can provide us with the illusion of a complete sensorium. Paintings, photographs, and films, for example, are said by some critics to represent and evoke non-visual sensations so well, that the non-visual senses can scarcely be said to be absent from these media.²⁶ In many contemporary academic works sight is so endlessly analyzed, and the other senses so consistently ignored, that the five senses would seem to consist of the colonial/patriarchal gaze, the scientific gaze, the erotic gaze, the capitalist gaze, and the subversive glance.²⁷

Whether scholars are interested in celebrating, condemning, or rehabilitating sight, their focus remains visual, and other sensory domains remain unexplored. In keeping with the current trend to seek visual alternatives to visualism,²⁸ Martin Jay, for example, has suggested that the hegemony of vision in modernity might be displaced by an ocular multiplicity: "the multiplication of a thousand eyes" (or views).²⁹ In postmodernity sight still reigns supreme, but it is the vision of the kaleidoscope, rather than the telescope. (It is perhaps ominous in this regard to note that the inventor of the kaleidoscope, David Brewster, went blind by staring at the sun.)³⁰

The examples of unisensoriality given above are based on culture rather than physiology. What, however, if a person were *actually* possessed of only one sense? How would the world seem to such a person? This is the question the Enlightenment philosopher Etienne de Condillac tried to answer in *Treatise on the Sensations*, when he considered the situation of a statue which comes to life possessing just one sense.³¹ There is a world of difference, of course, between a statue with one sense imagined for the sake of a philosophical inquiry and a human being with one sense, living within society. The former is a thought-provoking intellectual exercise, the latter seems unthinkable.

Nevertheless, physiological unisensoriality can exist. Let us consider here the case of Laura Bridgman, a nineteenth-century American who had her sight, hearing, and much of her smell and taste destroyed by scarlet fever in her infancy, leaving her with touch as her one fully functioning sense.³² Although Laura's senses were ravaged by disease, her mental faculties apparently remained unimpaired. She was educated at the Perkins Institute for the Blind in Massachusetts where she learned to communicate through tactile hand language and writing. The notable success of Laura Bridgman's education demonstrated that one can learn to think and communicate with only one sense – at least in the case of that one sense being touch.

Laura kept up a constant manual exploration of her surroundings. A report on her tactile abilities as a child states that:

Like the feelers of some insects which are continually agitated . . . so Laura's arms and hands are continually in play; and when she is walking with a person she not only recognizes everything she passes within touching distance, but by continually touching her companion's hands she ascertains what he is doing.³³

The absence of the distance senses of sight and hearing would seem to have heightened Laura's consciousness of bodily sensations. She was very attentive, for example, to the movement of blood in the body, which, due to her understanding of sound as vibration, she characterized as sound. One of her teachers states:

In talking of the circulation of the blood she insisted that it made a noise, and put my hand on her neck to feel the pulsations, saying, "Sit very still and see if you do not hear it."³⁴

With no memories of sounds or sights, even Laura's dreams were exclusively tactile. Witness, for example, her description of a nightmare:

My heart ached, I was very much frightened last night. I do not know what made my blood make a noise . . . I think dream was very hard and heavy and thick; it made me grow quick, my blood ran very hard.³⁵

As might be expected, Laura was exceptionally adept at reading "body language." One of Laura's teachers remarked "Laura not only observes the *tones of the finger language*, she finds meaning in every posture of the body and in every movement of limb." Given her tactile acuity, the persons around Laura found it very difficult to conceal feelings from her. Changes of mood were quickly noticed by her sensitive fingers, giving the sensorially deprived girl a reputation for having an extra, compensatory sense of mind reading.³⁶

Although Laura's sense of aesthetics was never cultivated, the pleasure she took in a number of things indicates what areas might have proved fertile for such a cultivation. For example, despite her somewhat Puritanical upbringing, Laura took great delight in fine and silky clothing and in jewelry, both on herself and on others. Laura also enjoyed handling figurines and other hand-sized ornaments, and kept a shelf full of such ornaments in her room.³⁷

Interestingly, Laura's greatest treasure was a music box. Although she was unable to hear music, she could *feel* it, for sounds are communicated through vibrations. Laura could thus take pleasure in the reverberations of her music box, just as she could enjoy the rhythm of a drumbeat or distinguish differences in pitch.³⁸ While such "tactile music" has traditionally been excluded from the realm of aesthetics in the West, there is no reason, aside from custom, why a

musical form specifically directed to the sense of touch should not be elaborated.

In her enjoyment of poetry, which she both read and wrote, Laura came closest to participating in the standard Western notion of aesthetics. Nonetheless, even poetry was deemed to be only partly accessible to Laura due to her inability to understand visual imagery and sound-based cadences and rhymes.

Even when [art] speaks directly to the heart and mind by poetry, sight and hearing remain the essential instruments of aesthetic enjoyment, so much are rhythm, the music of words, the images evoked, the integrant elements of this.³⁹

If there can be a poetry of sounds, however, why should there not be a poetry of shapes, of tactile rhythms and tactile rhymes? Why should Laura not have been able to feel a poem as deeply in her fingers, as the hearing can with their ears?

The case of Laura Bridgman indicates that, although touch is placed at the bottom of the traditional Western sensory hierarchy, it has the potential to serve as a medium for a full range of ideas and emotions. However, this was not usually the conclusion reached by Laura's contemporaries. In keeping with the visual emphasis of Western culture, the tendency was to downplay the role of touch in Laura's development and to imagine that her abilities were due to a hidden, inner sight. This was the view expressed, for example, in a nineteenth-century poem about the girl:

The lonely lamp in Greenland cell,
Deep 'neath a world of snow,
Doth cheer the loving household group
Though none beside may know.

And sweet one, doth our Father's hand
Place in thy casket dim
A radiant and peculiar lamp
To guide thy steps to him?⁴⁰

Laura herself, in turn, rather than serving as an example of how the sense of touch might be developed, became a tourist spectacle, one of the "must-sees" of Boston. Visitors came by the thousands to see Laura put on display at the weekly exhibitions held by the Perkins Institute, and she was obliged to sign as many autographs as a twentieth-century movie star.⁴¹ Later on, this role of sensory showpiece would be taken over by the renowned blind-deaf writer Helen Keller, who was said to constitute one of the two wonders of America, the other being Niagara Falls.

The sensory lives of Laura Bridgman and other blind-deaf persons bring the perceptual biases of the Western world view into sharp relief. Perhaps the most striking example of this contrast between tactile and visual worlds can be seen in

a photograph taken of a Canadian blind-deaf girl, Ludivine Lachance, at the turn of the century (Figure 6).⁴² In this photograph Ludivine is shown seated in a room, surrounded by nuns and physicians, fingering what seems to be a mounted fish. She is the subject of the gaze of everyone around her, the subject of the gaze of the photographer, and, finally, the subject of the gaze of all who look at the photograph. Everyone is trying to capture, to penetrate, the mystery of this blind-deaf girl through sight, and yet Ludivine herself remains remote, inaccessible, perceiving the world through touch.

Tactile museums

My world is built of touch-sensations, devoid of physical color and sound; but without color and sound it breathes and throbs with life. Every object is associated in my mind with tactile qualities which, combined in countless ways, give me a sense of power, of beauty, or of incongruity.⁴³

Helen Keller, *The World I Live In*

As a marginal group within society, the blind, and the blind-deaf, have long had their experience of the world slighted or ignored by the sighted majority. Nonetheless, particularly in the last twenty-five years, a number of significant projects have been undertaken in the fields of psychology and art dedicated to understanding and catering to the tactile abilities of the blind. These include attempts to translate pictures into tactile images for educational purposes and the creation of museums of “tactile arts.”



Figure 6 “The Blind-Deaf Ludivine Lachance”

Source: From Corinne Rochelau, *Hors de sa prison*, Montréal, Arbour and Dupont, 1927.

Art Education for the Blind, a New York-based organization founded in 1987, is involved in transposing key works of Western art from the realm of sight to that of touch. One of the works which has undergone this transposition is Marcel Duchamp's famous Cubist painting *Nude Descending a Staircase*. Duchamp's painting presents a series of overlapping images of a machine-like figure descending a staircase. Its tactile representation consists of a series of merged angular wooden statuettes – heads, arms, legs, and bodies combined into one mass – descending a staircase. As an auditory accompaniment to this sculpture, a tape is played of staccato footsteps going downstairs. At the end of the tape the footsteps blend into mechanical sounds. The sculpture and tape are intended to illustrate the predominant features of Cubism – the presentation of several perspectives or successive events simultaneously and the depiction of bodies as sums of geometrical forms – in such a manner that the sightless can have a direct sensory appreciation of this style of art.⁴⁴

The customary restriction of the blind to three-dimensional forms of art is based on the seemingly obvious consideration that the blind have no direct way of knowing pictures. Research now indicates, however, that the blind *can* identify and even draw pictures, insofar as these are available to the touch by means of raised lines. Those who are blind from birth are at a disadvantage in identifying the subjects of drawings because they have no previous experience of pictures. Nevertheless, even blind persons with no knowledge of the conventions of pictorial representation have been found to be able to recognize common images such as a human body or a table when presented to them as simple, raised line drawings. (This ability is not universal, however, and may depend on a person's level of tactile discrimination.) Interestingly, the fact that a full-length human body is presented as only a few inches high on a page or that a three-dimensional and multi-textured form can be represented by a few simple lines does not seem to pose a problem for the blind. The tactile pictures, when they are recognized, make sense.⁴⁵

This discovery makes it possible for books for the blind to contain tactile illustrations and for visual pictures to be translated into tactile images. In Great Britain, for example, the Living Paintings Trust produces albums of simple relief reproductions of the paintings of old and modern masters. Each album has ten reproductions and is accompanied by detailed information about the works and their creators.

Depictions of the outlines of objects can be understood both through sight and through touch. Many of the common elements of Western pictorial representation, such as color, shading, and perspective, however, only work within a visual context. In order to portray such sensations as texture, three-dimensionality and distance, tactile artists would have to develop their own set of pictorial conventions. For example, to depict the roundness of a jar in visual drawings, the sides may be shaded with darker lines. As regards the *tactile* drawing of a jar, however, its roundness may be indicated by placing more prominent raised lines on the front of the jar – the part nearest to the touch – and less prominent lines on the sides.⁴⁶ With respect to the depiction of distance,

perhaps the visual technique of representing things as smaller the further away they are might work metaphorically for touch as well, or perhaps objects in the background of a picture could be depicted with dotted lines to indicate that they are out of touching distance.

When Diderot learned of a blind man who could recognize the portrait of a friend from a drawing made on his hand, he suggested that, "The blind could thus have their own kind of painting, in which their skin would serve as their canvas."⁴⁷ The examples of tactile art we have been considering above all involve a manipulation of external objects and images. It is also possible, however, for tactile images to be impressed directly on the skin. This can be most readily accomplished through the use of electronic devices which convert visual images into a tactile display of vibrating points.

In one experiment a television camera transmitted images of objects or photographs to an array of 400 tiny vibrators mounted in the back of a chair. Subjects who were seated in the chair, their backs bare, could feel the images as patterns of vibration on their skin. Almost all subjects were able to recognize simple geometrical shapes and patterns quickly, but the identification of more complex images, such as faces, required a period of training. When subjects were able to pan the television camera over the object they were trying to identify (the way that eyes move over a scene), the consequent changes in the pattern of vibration assisted them in making identifications.⁴⁸

Such technology has the effect of turning the skin into a tactile eye. For example, to blind subjects who had previously had no direct experience of the visual phenomenon of perspective, it came as a revelation when the tactile shapes communicated to them through the vibrators grew larger or smaller as an object was moved closer or further away from the camera. Insofar as the vibrators are positioned at one's back, however, there is a strange reversal of the customary perceptual process: one perceives from behind objects which lie in front. Apparently, however, subjects readily adjusted to this unusual state of affairs and mentally located objects in front of them which they tactilely perceived at their backs.⁴⁹

Thus far we have been looking at ways in which touch can simulate vision. Touch, however, has a rich sensory dynamic and aesthetic potential of its own which is well worth exploring. The primary critique of touch as an aesthetic modality is that it is a sensory snail, perceiving objects piecemeal rather than all at once. Rudolf Arnheim writes of this aspect of touch in *Visual Thinking*:

Dependent upon immediate contact, it must explore shapes inch by inch; it must laboriously build up some notion of that total three-dimensional space which the eye comprehends in one sweep.⁵⁰

The assumption is that tactile exploration is a tedious, time-consuming activity compared to the ease and speed of visual scanning. Yet if touch is slower than sight, it can afford a greater pleasure of discovery, of making sense of something not all at once, but in stages. It is this delight of anticipation and

gradual revelation which leads us, for example, to wrap presents in paper, perhaps concealing a smaller box inside a larger one, rather than displaying them as they are, to be immediately apprehended by sight.

Furthermore, there is no reason why a tactile work of art could not be made small enough to obviate the need for an extensive process of manual investigation.⁵¹ Just as the form of a statue can be grasped at once by the eye, the form of a figurine can be grasped at once by the hand. This is not to say that one would not want to explore the different parts of the figurine further with one's fingers, just as one's eyes might linger on various details of the statue. Works of visual art, moreover, are not necessarily "eye-size." Paintings, such as murals, can be too large to grasp in one glance, and no one can see both the back and front of a sculpture at once, or the inside and outside of an architectural work. As with the tactile apprehension of large objects, visual images also often need to be compiled piece by piece.

This leads us to a fundamental difference between sight and touch. To see something properly one must distance oneself from it. Even if the object is very small, it is necessary to keep it at least a few inches away from one's eyes in order to focus on it. To be able to experience something by touch, however, one has to do exactly the opposite and unite oneself with it. This makes the tactile experience of art a much more intimate process than the visual experience of art. When touch is involved a physical bond is created between a work of art and the person perceiving it. The detached air of contemplation which is supposed to characterize the aesthetic attitude in the West becomes impossible as art work and art connoisseur are joined.

If the primary argument against touch as an aesthetic sense is based on its inability to achieve a "unified and spontaneous apprehension of form," the secondary argument lies in its ignorance of color and the play of light and shadow. The assumption is that, without color and light, all touch can offer is form. Yet touch, in its splendid diversity, offers much more to engage the mind than the mere sensation of form. For example, a sphere, besides being round, can be hard or soft, warm or cool, slippery or sticky, textured or smooth, heavy or light, moving or still. Some of these different qualities of touch are listed by Helen Keller:

The delicate tremble of a butterfly's wings in my hand, the soft petals of violets curling in the cool folds of their leaves . . . the clear, firm outline of face and limb, the smooth arch of a horse's neck and the velvety touch of his nose⁵²

With a little imagination one can see that there would be an infinity of possibilities for combining these different properties into both representational and abstract works of art. To give a very basic example, a tactile "painting" of the sea could employ a combination of sand and metal to convey the graininess of the shore and the cool swells and curves of the waves. Tactile works of art would tend to wear away through repeated touching, but durability – while

enabling artistic creations to be “timeless” museum pieces – has nothing to do with the aesthetic experience per se.

Tactile aesthetics can be extended from sculptures and pictures to include living spaces. In this regard it should be noted that even the experience of visiting an exhibition of visual arts is, in part, a tactile or kinaesthetic one, as one moves through the gallery from exhibit to exhibit.⁵³ Most buildings, however, are currently designed to have a neutral tactile environment; walls and floors are smooth, the air is still, and the temperature is constant. With respect to this last point, Lisa Heschong remarks in *Thermal Delight in Architecture* that “there is an underlying assumption that the best thermal environment never needs to be noticed and that once an objectively ‘comfortable’ thermal environment has been provided, all of our thermal needs will have been met.”⁵⁴ This assumption disallows all the pleasure and stimulation that can be experienced from variations in temperature.

The one consciously designated location for tactile aesthetics in the modern, urban world is the museum designed for the blind. In such museums the rule is the opposite of that of ordinary museums – “Touch!” Various cities of Europe and America offer tactile museums, but perhaps the most innovative is Gallery Tom in Tokyo. In Japan the blind constitute a more powerful social force than in most parts of the world. Thanks to this, Tokyo has such aids for the visually impaired as corrugated tiles indicating safe routes in train and subway stations and at street crossings. Gallery Tom represents a further development of this heightened social awareness of the needs and interests of the blind.⁵⁵

The gallery, designed by Hiroshi Naito, is situated on a street corner to make it easier for blind persons to locate. Inside, changes in floor texture – from cedarwood to *tatami* matting – and temperature help to orient visitors and contribute to their sensory experience. The exhibits present sculptures by Western and Japanese sighted artists together with works by blind artists. Eye masks are available for sighted visitors who wish to turn off the visual world for once and revel in touch. On the ground floor there is a large performance space, which can be used for music, dancing, or as a meeting place. The last word, as one leaves the gallery, is a poem in braille on the stone doorknob of the exit door.

Despite the existence of museums such as Gallery Tom, works of tactile art are still considered more of a novelty, or a second-class aesthetics for those who lack sight, than a genuine art form. Many visitors to museums of tactile art undoubtedly find the experience, after the novelty wears off, somewhat tedious. The different shapes and textures of the works are sensed, but they have no particular meaning, they are not enlivened by any symbolic code. This has nothing to do with any intrinsic aesthetic deficiency of touch but rather with the lack of a cultural tradition of tactile representation.

Rudolf Arnheim, who came to support the development of a haptic aesthetics in his later writings, stated that:

The blind have to live in a society that suffers from a serious neglect of the sense of touch, a society in which, for example, the many hours of televi-

sion viewing transform the world into a distant spectacle. The natural intimacy of handling things by which human beings normally learn remains excluded. The [aesthetic] education of the blind should be viewed, therefore, in the broader context of the need to reeducate an entire sensorially crippled population.⁵⁶

That persons accustomed to perceiving art only through sight are unable immediately to appreciate the aesthetic potential of tactile works of art, does not mean that there can be no tactile works of art. It means, rather, that the art of touch must be fostered and elaborated within a community, whether that of the blind, or that of society at large, for tactile arts to attain their full aesthetic and cultural potential.

Olfactory aesthetics

I doubt if there is any sensation arising from sight more delightful than the odors which filter through sun-warmed, wind-tossed branches, or the tide of scents which swells, subsides, rises again wave on wave, filling the wide world with sweetness. A whiff of the universe makes us dream of worlds we have never seen, recalls in a flash entire epochs of our dearest experience.⁵⁷

Helen Keller, *The World I Live In*

While the idea of an art of touch has received a certain amount of public attention, the notion of an art based on odors remains fantastical to most people. This continues to be the case even though modern techniques of fragrance engineering have made it possible to reproduce virtually any odor at will, and thus to "paint" scenes with odors, as with colors.

At various times since the 1800s a call has been made for the elaboration of an olfactory aesthetics. In Huysmans' nineteenth-century classic *Against Nature* the protagonist reasoned that "it was no more abnormal to have an art that consisted of picking out odorous fluids than it was to have other arts based on a selection of sound waves or the impact of variously colored rays on the retina of the eye."⁵⁸ In 1952 Etienne Souriau, a French professor of aesthetics, offered an exhibition of artistic scents produced by a "smell machine." Souriau stated that "there is no reason why hearing and seeing should be the only centres capable of receiving great art, since a trained nose can detect several thousand perfumes."⁵⁹ Such statements in favor of an art of odors, however, have generally been regarded as fleeting novelties rather than as true stimuli to the aesthetic imagination.

Some might argue that perfumery is the "art of odors" and that it is hence unnecessary to call for an olfactory aesthetics. To limit olfactory aesthetics to the productions of the perfume industry, however, would be like limiting the visual arts to the field of fashion design. There is a whole world of vital olfactory imagery and meaning which cannot be, and is not meant to be, encompassed within a perfume bottle.

Odors defy Western conceptions of art in that they are immaterial. An odor cannot be hung on the wall as a visual image can, or placed on the floor like a sculpture. Furthermore, the fact that odors do not confine themselves to discrete areas, but spread and merge, means that the scent of one olfactory work would mingle with that of another. In visual terms it would be as though the colors of one painting were to run across the wall and blend into those of the painting next to it. While from a postmodern perspective this merging of supposedly independent creations might be an admirable quality, from a traditional point of view, artistic integrity would definitely be compromised. Each olfactory exhibit would have to be placed in its own, air-tight, room.

In their invisible, intangible, and transgressive nature, odors seem more like sounds than colors. A model drawn from music might therefore appear more appropriate for the elaboration of an olfactory art than one drawn from the visual arts.

However, in certain key ways, odors are closer to colors than sounds. While many objects in our environment are soundless, nearly all present both olfactory and visual images. Thus a flower, for example, could be realistically represented by odor as well as by color and line, while it could only be represented in a metaphorical way by sound. Perhaps olfactory art would turn out to occupy a middle ground between music and painting, and an olfactory art gallery would be made up of different cubicles which people would enter to be enveloped in an interplay of scent.

Until recently the question might have arisen as to whether "bad" odors can make "good" art. Referring to a painting of the entombment of Christ in which a bystander is depicted holding his nose, Gotthold Lessing argued in *Laocoon* that artists should avoid suggesting loathsome sensations: "For not only the actual smell, but the very idea of it is nauseous."⁶⁰ C.S. Lewis similarly stated that "a bad smell is beyond the reach of art."⁶¹ Nowadays "loathsome" sensations are so commonly the subject of art, that bad odors would certainly not be ruled out as unaesthetic on the grounds of their repugnant nature. Smells, however, *would* tend to be more physically intrusive than visual presentations. For example the visual nature of certain current "artworks" consisting of the decaying bodies of animals sealed inside glass cases allows for a degree of detachment which would scarcely be possible in olfactory art.

Protests against olfactory art might be made by those who believe in an inodorate sanctity of public space, free of perfume, tobacco smoke, and air freshener. These protests usually stem from concerns about health rather than aesthetics, although the latter undoubtedly plays a role. In order to be responsive to such concerns, perhaps galleries could set aside certain areas of their exhibition space for non-olfactory art, the way restaurants currently reserve sections for non-smokers.

The basic deterrent to the development of an olfactory art, however, is not one of presentation, but one of meaning. Not only do we lack a well-elaborated code of odors in the West, we are often unable to recognize even the most familiar odors when these are separated from their source.⁶² That is, we know

the smell of a rose when the rose itself is there, but if only an odor of roses is present, a large percentage of people would be unable to identify it.⁶³

The blind and deaf Hellen Keller, by contrast, had an acute olfactory consciousness. She could recognize an old country house by its "several layers of odors," discern the work people engaged in by the scent of their clothes, and remember a woman she'd met only once by the scent of her kiss. So important a role did smell play in her life, that when Keller lost her senses of smell and taste for a short period, and was obliged, like Laura Bridgman, to rely wholly on her sense of touch, she felt she finally understood what it must be like for a sighted person to go blind. "It seemed incredible, this utter detachment from odors, to breathe the air in and observe never a single scent."⁶⁴

The heightened olfactory awareness sometimes displayed by persons who are blind is not a special compensatory ability, but the result of intense cultivation of the sense of smell. It was once thought that the ability to identify people solely by their voices was a peculiar talent of the blind. Thanks to the invention of the telephone and the radio, however, almost all of us who make use of these devices have this ability today.

Helen Keller emphasized that "By themselves, odours suggest nothing. I must learn by association to judge from them . . ." ⁶⁵ That olfactory associations could be painful, as well as enjoyable, is conveyed by her in the following passage.

The other day I went to walk toward a familiar wood. Suddenly a disturbing odor made me pause in dismay. Then followed a peculiar, measured jar, followed by dull, heavy thunder. I understood the odor and the jar only too well. The trees were being cut down.⁶⁶

Suppose Keller's sensations on that day were to be transformed into a gallery exhibit. One would walk into a room entitled, say, *The Disappearing Forest*. The room would be visually empty but filled with the sharp scent of a cut tree. The vibrations of sawing would reverberate throughout the room, followed by a heavy thud. Would such an exhibit, lacking as it does any visual referents, be any less moving or evocative than a painting or photograph of a tree being felled?

Even given the importance of making the fullest possible use of all their remaining senses, the blind-deaf often feel restrained in their elaboration of smell by the opprobrium attached to this sense in the West. Helen Keller commented that due to "the prejudices of mankind" she found it hard "to give an account of odor-perceptions which shall be at once dignified and truthful." Similarly, in his discussion of the sensory skills of the blind-deaf, John Macy wrote in 1902 that "The sense of smell has fallen into disrepute, and a [blind-deaf] person is reluctant to speak of it."⁶⁷

That this "sensist" conception of smell has not changed much since then can be seen in the stereotypical imagery of Patrick Süskind's popular novel of the 1980s, *Perfume*, which portrays a depraved aromophile who murders women for their scent.⁶⁸ It was just such a fate that high-minded critics worried might await the blind-deaf with their utter reliance on the so-called lower senses. In

the words of one nineteenth-century educator: "Destitute of the spiritualizing refining influences exerted by the eye and ear, the blind deaf-mute is tempted to an excessive indulgence of his lower animal nature."⁶⁹ The sense of smell was evidently considered much too uncivilized in the modern West to make its education desirable, or even safe.

The last word here should go to Helen Keller:

We should not condemn a musical on the testimony of an ear which cannot distinguish one chord from another, or judge a picture by the verdict of a color-blind critic. The sensations of smell which cheer, inform, and broaden my life are not less pleasant merely because some critic who treads the wide, bright pathway of the eye has not cultivated his olfactive sense.⁷⁰

Dark continents: blindness, race, gender

The traditional exclusion of the proximity senses from art is linked with the traditional exclusion of certain groups of people from art. These groups include the blind, women, and peoples typed by the West as "primitive." Though each of these social groups contains an immense variety within itself, each has been stereotyped by mainstream Western culture as a "dark continent" of otherness. Many of the aesthetic practices conventionally associated with the blind, such as weaving and basketry, have also been associated with women and/or "primitive" peoples, and classified as handicraft rather than art.⁷¹

The blind have often been directly linked with "primitive" peoples by Western theorists due to the supposed dependence of both groups upon the proximity senses. In *The World of the Blind* Pierre Villey likened the "tactile music" of the blind-deaf to "the extremely simple music of many uncivilized races."⁷² The nineteenth-century physician William B. Carpenter associated the apparent tactile acuity of the blind with the tactile sensitivity of weavers in India. Carpenter added:

A like improvement is also occasionally noticed in regard to Smell, which may acquire an acuteness rivaling that of the lower animals; and this not only in the blind, but among the races of men whose existence depends upon such discriminative power. Thus we are told by Humboldt that the Peruvian Indians in the darkest night cannot merely perceive through their scent the approach of a stranger whilst yet far distant, but can say whether he is an Indian, European, or Negro.⁷³

A number of scholars have considered "primitive" and ancient peoples to express a haptic orientation similar to that of the blind in their art.⁷⁴ In his study of the nature of creative activity Viktor Lowenfeld stated that the tactile emphasis found in the art of the blind can also be found in, among other places, "Australian drawings made on the bark of trees," and "Babylonian, Assyrian and Egyptian art."⁷⁵ To illustrate his point Lowenfeld juxtaposed a photograph of a

Peruvian sculpted head with a head sculpted by a blind person; both heads, he argued, express muscular sensations rather than visual impressions.⁷⁶

It is indeed the case that many cultures less visualist than the modern West are concerned to express proximity sensations – along with visual impressions – in their aesthetic productions. Hence Navajo sand paintings are meant to be felt as well as seen, Amazonian basketry conveys meanings through textures and odors as well as through visual design. Such productions, which are often functional instead of purely formal, may not fit the standard Western definition of art, but they do conform to indigenous concepts of the aesthetic.⁷⁷

In terms of conventional Western thought, however, the interest shown by “primitive” peoples in the proximity senses renders their artifacts, and indeed their lives, unaesthetic. Friedrich Schiller stated in *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* that “aesthetic freedom” comes only with the elevation of sight above the other senses, and “as long as man is still a savage he enjoys by means of [the] tactile senses.”⁷⁸

Although “primitive” peoples may possess the faculty of sight for practical purposes, as regards art they are deemed to be blind. “Suppose I place the *Mona Lisa* of Leonardo da Vinci in front of a Pawnee Indian or a Kaffir tribesman,” wondered Thomas Edison as portrayed in a novel by Villiers de l’Isle-Adam, “However powerful the glasses or lenses with which I improve the eyesight of these children of nature, can I ever make them really *see* what they’re looking at?”⁷⁹

To an even greater extent than “primitive” peoples, women have shared the symbolic space of the blind in Western culture. In the traditional imaginary, the blind (regardless of sex) are symbolic females: confined to the home, immersed in the world of the body rather than the intellect, and dependent on guidance from their “enlightened” “superiors.” As in the case of the blind, it has often been assumed that women (while full of dark intuitions) lack the visionary ability to be great artists.⁸⁰

Like the blind, and like many non-Western peoples, women can challenge the traditional visualism of Western art by drawing on their particular aesthetic experiences to develop a non-visualist, or multisensory aesthetics. While many female artists have concentrated on learning and re-inventing the visual codes of art, some have manifested an interest in employing art to evoke the traditional non-visual elements of women’s lives in a context of critical reflection.

The contemporary work of this nature which has probably drawn the most attention is Judy Chicago’s *The Dinner Party* (1974–79). In this work, painted ceramic plates on embroidered runners set on a triangular table commemorate notable women from Western history. Using the conventionally feminine media of china and embroidery, *The Dinner Party* combines evocations of taste, touch, and women’s work in an artistic exhibit. Judy Chicago wrote of this work:

I had been trying to establish a respect for women and women’s art; to forge a new kind of art expressing women’s experience It seemed appropriate to relate our history . . . through techniques traditionally associated with women – china-painting and needlework.⁸¹

A work which engages the proximity senses more directly than *The Dinner Party* is the 1978 tacto-visual sculpture *Femme d'espérance* (Woman of Hope) by Azélie-Zee Artand and Jovette Marchessault. This work consists of a 6-foot-tall feminine figure with outstretched arms composed of such odds and ends as yoghurt containers, jam jars, and egg cartons. The sculpture is labeled "Présence vitale" in Braille and "Femme d'espérance" in relief shorthand. Artand and Marchessault say of their work:

We have animated this refuse into:

Woman of exploration,

Woman of dynamism,

Woman of color,

Woman of excitement,

Manifestation of energy!⁸²

By making their work an object for touch as well as for sight, the artists emphasize the dynamic, forceful nature of the *Femme d'espérance* who reaches out to grasp the future – and the museum-goer.

Since the 1970s a number of women have created works of art which involve the proximity senses, and in particular touch. The Chilean artist, Cecilia Vicuña, for example, has drawn from the traditional aesthetic domains of both women and indigenous Andeans (for whom weaving is of great cultural importance) to develop a haptic aesthetics in her woven installations and performance art. In Vicuña's *12 Hilos en un corral* (12 Threads in a Corral) of 1994, woolen threads criss-crossed a traditional stone corral from wall to wall. This work offered those who entered into it the unique opportunity of situating themselves *within* a weaving and not simply perceiving it from outside.⁸³

There is an enormous aesthetic terrain to be explored with regard to the senses of touch, smell, and taste. Many of the existing paths into this terrain come from the experiences and artworks of the blind, from the aesthetic practices of non-Western peoples, and from the traditions of women around the world. This circumstance by no means indicates that an aesthetics of the blind may be identified with a feminine aesthetics or with the aesthetic systems of non-Western societies. It does, however, give women, non-Westerners, and the blind a special potential and motivation for making the "dark continent" of the proximity senses part of the world of (Western) art.

Back to the Futurists

Although most artists and art critics have followed "the wide, bright pathway of the eye" in their work, not all in the history of art is scopic. As we saw in the previous chapter, the concept of a multisensory aesthetic was proposed over a century ago by the Symbolists and subsequently elaborated by the Futurists.

It is in Futurism, indeed, that we find the most extensive and innovative employment of the proximity senses in art to date. In 1924 F.T. Marinetti

wrote a manifesto which announced the invention of tactile art: “a launch that will carry the human spirit to unknown shores.”⁸⁴ In this manifesto Marinetti described how he had cultivated a desire for tactile variety by wearing gloves for several days, and developed his tactile sensitivity by feeling objects in the dark. This training in tactile awareness prepared the poet for the creation of the first tactile artworks, which consisted of tables covered with materials of different textures in accordance with a theme.

Marinetti insisted that tactile art “had nothing in common with painting or sculpture,” but required a whole new aesthetic approach. It was unwise, therefore, for tactile art to be undertaken by persons trained in the visual arts, for such persons would “naturally tend to subordinate tactile values to visual values.” With this new art, Marinetti suggested, it would be necessary to bypass visual rationality and concentrate on the “force–thought–sentiment” which takes place in the encounter between hand and matter.⁸⁵

The most complete realization of the Futurist ideal to involve all the senses, and particularly the neglected proximity senses, in art occurred in 1932 with the invention of Futurist cuisine. The following description of one course of a Futurist culinary artwork illustrates the multisensory nature of this new art form (as well as the piquant humor of its creators):

The second course consists of four parts: on a plate are served one quarter of a fennel bulb, an olive, a candied fruit and a tactile device. The diner eats the olive, then the candied fruit, then the fennel. Contemporaneously, he delicately passes the tips of the index and middle fingers of his left hand over the rectangular device, made of a swatch of red damask, a little square of black velvet and a tiny piece of sandpaper. From some carefully hidden melodious source comes the sound of part of a Wagnerian opera, and, simultaneously, the nimblest and most graceful of the waiters sprays the air with perfume.⁸⁶

The Futurists invented terms to describe sensory combinations which might aptly be employed in culinary art. *Disluce*, for instance, referred to “the complementary nature of a given light with the flavour of a given food” and *contattile* to the affinity between particular textures and flavours. An example of the former was “the *disluce* of chocolate ice-cream and a hot orange light,” and of the latter, “the *contattile* of banana and velvet”.⁸⁷

As testified by the paucity of tactile or culinary works of art today, Futurist multisensoriality never really caught on in the art world. In the 1960s the alternative art movement Fluxus briefly revived Futurist notions of multisensory art, presenting works such as Ay-O’s *Tactile Box* and Takako Saito’s *Smell Chess*.⁸⁸ Among contemporary artists, there are a number who, while not participating in any collective movement to expand the sensory bounds of aesthetics, engage the non-visual senses in their work.⁸⁹ As with the sensory innovations of the Futurists, however, such cross-sensory explorations do not seem to be making much of a mark on mainstream art. In fact, while possessing non-visual elements, most of these contemporary artworks are still basically visual exhibits,

displayed to be *seen*, first and foremost. Marinetti was undoubtedly correct when he suggested that in the present sensory order the visual will inevitably dominate over the non-visual when the two are united in a work of art.

The Futurists believed that the technological developments and social upheavals of the new, twentieth, century would occasion an overthrow of the traditional sensory order. Vibration, and not vision, was to be the dominant sensory model of a modern age characterized by electricity and speed. Even light was understood by the Futurists more in kinaesthetic terms of vibration than in classical terms of clarity. Marinetti imagined a "Saint Speed" bubbling in his electric lamp and predicted that in the future "eyes and other human organs" would become "true accumulators of electric energy."⁹⁰

The proliferation of electric devices and of ever-faster modes of transportation in the twentieth century has made Marinetti's prediction true in a sense: vibration and speed *are* characteristic sensations of modern life. Yet Marinetti and the Futurists failed to predict the ways in which the new technologies would give rise to potent new realms of visual imagery and visual ideology, making sight, and not kinaesthesia, the dominant sense of the desired new age. Hence we are left with the irony that at the end of the twentieth century the Futurist ideal of art forms for all of the senses remains futurist.

We can learn much about the social life of the senses from the Futurist foray into multisensoriality. Futurism, for example, demonstrates that multisensory aesthetics need not be a matter of other-worldly harmonies (as imagined by the Symbolists and Theosophists), or of pre-cultural synaesthetic fusions (as conceptualized by Merleau-Ponty and other phenomenologists of perception),⁹¹ but can convey the complex dissonances and conflicts of contemporary life.

Futurism also makes it apparent that multisensory aesthetics, like all forms of aesthetics, can be the vehicle for the expression of diverse social ideologies.⁹² When the Futurists called for an "upstart" multisensory art, they were at the same time interested in employing aesthetics to empower the "upstart" working classes, whom they considered to be excluded from traditional "visualist" museum culture. (Ironically, one of the reasons why the Futurists initially favored Fascism over Socialism as a workers' movement was that they found the representatives of the latter to be "unfailingly opposed to all revolutionary artistic practices.")⁹³ Just as Futurist art aimed to liberate the senses from conventional aesthetic hierarchies, it aimed to liberate the classes from conventional social hierarchies.

Nonetheless, while sensory hierarchies are closely interrelated with social hierarchies, to champion a greater equality of the senses is not necessarily to support social equality for all people. In his tactile art work *Sudan-Paris* Marinetti employed "crude, greasy, rough, sharp, burning tactile values" to signify Sudan and "soft, very delicate, warm and cool at once, artificial, civilized" values to signify Paris. While Marinetti was more apt to esteem the rough Sudanese set of tactile values than the soft Parisian one, this division of tactilities indicates how a tactile art might be employed to perpetuate conventional social divisions, such as between First and Third World.

Despite their revolutionary aesthetic ideals, and, in fact, because of their association of those ideals with populism, the Futurists ended up supporting a repressive fascist regime. It cannot be assumed, consequently, that a multisensory aesthetics – with its commitment to overthrowing sensory hierarchies – will be inherently subversive of social hierarchies and productive of a more open, just, or compassionate social order. In order to promote values of openness, justice, and compassion any aesthetic exploration must be explicitly and consistently linked to those values.

Crossroads of the senses

What are the possibilities for the elaboration of a multisensory aesthetics as we enter the twenty-first century? On the one hand, current efforts to open up the traditional boundaries of the visual arts would seem to promise a more welcoming environment than in the past for the development of new, non-visual art forms. Julia Kristeva has commented that the apparently fractured nature of contemporary visual representation might allow “hearing, skin, taste and so on to enter into account.”⁹⁴ Along similar lines Jacques Derrida has suggested that smell and taste might be employed as the sensorial basis for an alternative model of writing – a notion which Gregory Ullmer, in his commentary on Derrida, has expanded to include art.⁹⁵

On the other hand, as at the turn of the twentieth century, the current collapse of the boundaries of visual representation appears to be leading more to new departures within the visual arts (such as computer-generated images or Sherry Levine’s photographs of photographs) than to non-visual art forms. We have, perhaps, more kinds of sights to look at than ever before, but not many more aesthetic elaborations of smell or touch.⁹⁶

In the scopic regime of postmodernity, vision is implicitly presented as the slick, powerful, First-World sense of the future, while the other senses are largely relegated to the background, poor Third-World relations, unsophisticated and underdeveloped. In this cultural climate the concept of multisensory art runs the risk of being dismissed as *passé*, a nineteenth-century Symbolist fad or a McLuhanesque relic of the 1960s, before it has ever had the opportunity to be adequately developed. Why labor over an aesthetics of touch when one can experiment with state-of-the-art computer graphics?⁹⁷

The New Age movement, with its concern to overcome the “mind–body split” of modernity through such sensuous practices as aromatherapy and reflexology, perhaps offers the closest approach in contemporary society to a multisensory aesthetics. It is often argued that this movement lacks critical consciousness and is no more than a “feel-good” jumble of modern and historical, Western and non-Western, ideas and practices. Nonetheless, the continuing popularity of the New Age movement indicates the existence of a widespread desire for alternative models of perception and interaction – indeed, for a new sensory cosmology.

There can be little doubt that Western culture as a whole, and Western art in

particular, is going to continue down the visual highway in the immediate future. The momentum in this direction is too great to allow for any large-scale deviation. In order to even imagine an alternative path it is necessary first to make a conceptual break with visual culture. One means of creating this break is by considering the aesthetic experiences of the blind and the blind-deaf. What better antidote to Western society's hypervisualism than the tactile universe of Laura Bridgeman or Helen Keller's world of touch, smell, and taste?

The value of making such a break is that it can open up new ways of understanding our cultural histor(y/ies) and new realms to be explored by the aesthetic imagination. This departure, in turn, may suggest novel perspectives and contexts for examining our tyrannical and fascinating visual culture. It is to be hoped, for the enrichment of us all, that a growing number of perceptive wayfarers will be enticed to enter this alternative sensory and intellectual territory, and that the blind, who have a long history of adventuring in the realm of the non-visual senses, can help lead the sighted on this journey.

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