Towards an Aesthetics of Touch: Challenges and Opportunities

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The so-called *lower senses* of taste and smell have received some attention in philosophical aesthetics over the past two decades, but touch remains relatively neglected. This paper addresses some possible reasons for its neglect and indicates promising areas of exploration. Section 1 briefly reviews challenges to developing an aesthetics of touch, some ontological, some cultural, some historical. Section 2 indicates some aspect of the nature of touch relevant to aesthetics, Section 3 addresses the question of whether touch qualifies as a vehicle for aesthetic experience and suggests notions of the aesthetic appropriate to touch. Section 4 turns to selected opportunities for reflecting on the aesthetics of touch in three broad areas: 1) art, craft and design 2) everyday and nature aesthetics 3) interpersonal touch. | *Keywords: Touch, Aesthetics, Art, Craft, Design, Everyday Aesthetics, Interpersonal Touch*

1. Some Challenges

The long neglect of the so-called *lower senses* of taste, touch, and smell has largely been corrected in philosophical aesthetics over recent decades with respect to gustatory taste and to a lesser extent with respect to smell, but, with a few notable exceptions, the aesthetics of touch has remained relatively unexplored.[1] There are several challenges that might explain the reasons for this neglect, some based on the intrinsic nature of the sense of touch, some on long existing cultural patterns, others on more recent historical developments. First, by nature, touch is inherently multi-dimensional and controversially so ever since Aristotle observed that touch was the outlier among the five senses in that it does not easily fit into his criteria of object, organ and medium (Aristotle, 1986, pp. 183–185). For example, both popular and scientific discussions of touch tend to focus on tactile sensitivity,

[1] Carolyn Korsmeyer's *Things: In Touch with the Past* (2019) is concerned with touch primarily in establishing the genuine as an aesthetic property and she explicitly steers clear of "tactile sense experience" (Korsmeyer, 2019, pp. 17, 24–25). This is not because she rejects the aesthetic relevance of tactile experiences, but because her focus is on the "thrill of the genuine" and touch is our "most reliable access to physical reality" ((Korsmeyer, 2019, p. 15). Among the more important articles on aspects of the aesthetics of touch are Roberts (2022), Irvin (2008), Diaconu (2006), and Montero (2006). For phenomenological approaches, see especially Patterson (2007).

especially the use of the hands and the responses of the skin. But one could also include in touch awareness of pain and temperature, or even sensitivities located deeper in the body such as the kinesthetic, proprioceptive, and vestibular.

Among the cultural factors that have held back work on an aesthetics of touch is the long philosophical tradition of regarding vision as the primary sense modality for both epistemology and aesthetics, with hearing a distant second, a tendency that has spread to society at large and become more deeply rooted due to the amount of time we now spend looking at and listening to our digital devices. As for philosophical aesthetics itself, many of the leading thinkers of the past either treated touch as lacking the power to serve as a vehicle of genuine aesthetic experience and judgment or they simply ignored touch altogether.[2]

A more general cultural challenge to thinking about an aesthetics of touch is the fact that most Anglo-Saxon and Asian societies tend to be somewhat socially touch-aversive compared to Latin American, Southern European, and Middle Eastern societies.[3] But perhaps the cultural phenomenon most inimical to a touch aesthetics is the omnipresence of Do Not Touch signs in Western art and culture museums.[4]

Finally, two recent trends in North America have also helped create an atmosphere that further complicates the exploration of touch aesthetics. One is the institutional bans against interpersonal touch in many workplaces and schools that have left some people wary of any kind of social touch, fearing that a friendly hug or a pat on the back will be misinterpreted. The second recent trend complicating reflection on social touch, of course, has resulted from the need to avoid most physical contact during the COVID pandemic. Even though the threat of COVID has waned, the uncertainty many of us felt about touching or being touched has lingered. Given the abundant research demonstrating the crucial role of interpersonal touch in fostering human development and well-being from infancy to old age, the recent decrease in social touch has led some philosophers and psychologists to speak of a "crisis" of touch (Kearney, 2021, pp. 2–7) or of "touch hunger" (Bannisy, 2023, pp. 63–83).

In combination, these challenges could easily discourage one from attempting to explore an aesthetics of touch. But I believe there are also many opportunities for fruitful aesthetic reflection on touch. Obviously, examining the role of touch in the appreciation of the various arts would be one such opportunity, but I believe an overview of a broader set of topics that would

[2] Kant, for example, remarks that "plastic art offers figures to two senses, sight and touch (though it offers them to touch without regard to beauty)" (Kant, 1987, p. 191). For Hegel "smell, taste, and touch remain excluded from the enjoyment of art" (Hegel, 1975, p. 38). The major eighteenth century exceptions to the denial of touch's aesthetic potential are Edmund Burke and Johann Gottfried Herder, both of whom I will discuss later.

[3] As Banissy notes, this is an overly broad generalization (Bannisy, 2023, p. 143).

[4] Many leaders in the museology field are attempting to remedy the prejudice against touch, especially by providing things like touchable replicas for the blind (Candlin, 2010).

include touch in everyday aesthetics and nature aesthetics as well as the aesthetics of interpersonal touch is also needed. In what follows, after briefly addressing some issues concerning the nature of touch relevant to aesthetics in Section 2, and replying to the claim that touch cannot be a vehicle for genuine aesthetic experience in Section 3, I will explore three broad topical areas for developing an aesthetics of touch in Section 4: the role of touch in art, craft, and design, the place of touch in the aesthetics of the everyday and nature, the issues regarding touch surrounding legitimate interpersonal touch.

2. The Nature and Varieties of Touch

A first issue concerning the nature of touch relevant to aesthetics is whether touch is one sense or several. Since almost everyone agrees that touch includes the sensitivity of the hands and skin, the main other candidates for inclusion in touch are pain and temperature and the kinesthetic, proprioceptive, and vestibular senses.

Neuroscientists emphasize receptor types and their neural pathways to the brain, identifying at least six types of receptors in the skin for different tactile sensations and other kinds of receptors for pain and temperature, plus additional kinds of sensory cells in muscles and joints for movement, orientation, and balance (Gallace and Spence, 2014, pp. 9–35, Linden 2014, pp. 40–69). Accordingly, one could argue that from the perspective of neuroscience, touch proper only concerns the mechanoreceptors in the skin and hands. But from the perspective of folk belief and usage, the term touch usually references a single perceptual system with many sub-dimensions. Some philosophers of perception, such as Vignemont and Massim, seek to unify the sense of touch by eliminating certain subsystems, arguing that what unifies the various aspects of touch is the phenomenon of pressure, which excludes temperature and pain (Vignemont and Massim, 2015). Other philosophers, such as Matthew Fulkerson, attempt to show that the folk view of touch as a single system with several subsystems makes sense if one approaches touch primarily as an exploratory activity, although he does exclude pains, tingles, and itches. (Fulkerson, 2014, p. 46). Mohan Matthen takes a different tack, suggesting that we think of the multisensory emphasis of some scientists and philosophers and the unitary emphasis of folk thinking as complementary approaches. In his view, we need not choose between the sophisticated multisensory views and the everyday folk approaches since both agree that "the senses are modes of picking up information about the world" and differ primarily by virtue of "emphasizing different aspects of the process" (Matthen, 2015, p. 582). I believe the implications for an aesthetics of touch of Matthen's solution is that we may legitimately proceed in working towards an aesthetics of touch by using *touch* in its broad everyday sense so long as our philosophical analyses are consistent with the relevant empirical discoveries concerning the functions of the various sub-categories of touch (Lopes, 2018).

In addition to addressing the problem of the unity of touch, an aesthetics of touch will need to keep in mind two sets of distinctions between different varieties of touch. The first distinction is that between object-directed, active touch and body directed, passive touch. Active touch (also called haptic touch) is our familiar everyday experience of using our hands to explore the world around us, grasping and manipulating objects, wielding tools, playing instruments, assessing shapes, textures, weights, etc. The human fingers have hundreds of thousands of sensors that can, for example, discriminate differences among ridges only one millimeter apart (Jones, 2018, pp. 49–50).

Although active touch is what we first think of in relation to touch, *passive touch* is equally important and concerns the present state of our bodies, such as our experience of being touched by someone or something or even feeling something going on with or within our bodies (Fulkerson, 2014, pp. 7–8).[5] But these are not wholly internally oriented sensory experiences since we can sometimes be aware of an external object causing the sensation such as a bug crawling across our forearm.[6] From a neurological point of view, many of the same set of receptors are involved in passive touch as in active touch, although, as we will see, neuroscientists have now discovered a special kind of receptor that responds to gentle stroking.

In addition to the active/passive distinction, another pertinent contrast to keep in mind when developing an aesthetics of touch is that between touch as direct physical contact and indirect or non-contact touch which goes by various names such as "remote or "distal" touch (Fulkerson, 2014, pp. 137–164), "implicit" or "hypothetical" touch (Korsmeyer, 2019, pp. 41–42). One type of distal touch is touch through a medium (a glove or cloth) or through an instrument or tool (a scalpel or a shovel), or through a machine ("road feel" from a bicycle or car). But perhaps most important for aesthetics, is the experience of distal or implicit touch that occurs in museum settings where artworks or other treasured cultural artifacts are kept behind glass or roped off, with guards standing by to scold us should we reach toward them. The distal touch phenomenon in the museum setting involves an interaction between vision and touch in which, when we are prevented from physical contact with an object or surface, especially one that lies within our possible reach, we imagine what it would *feel* like to physically touch it. As Korsmeyer remarks, touch is still at work in such proximal encounters "because touch carries such a high degree of bodily awareness, specifically of position and location in relation to an object. Thus, mere nearness can suffice to bestow a sense of presence" (Korsmeyer, 2019, p. 42).[7]

5 Phenomenological philosophers from Husserl and Merleau-Ponty on have been particularly interested in the duality of touch; the fact that active touch is almost always at the same time an experience of being touched by whatever or whomever we touch.

6 Fulkerson describes at least eight overlapping polarities in addition to the active/passive one and in my discussion above I have combined elements of the first three (Fulkerson, 2014, pp. 8–9).

7 There are many other issues concerning the nature of touch, but most lie on the periphery of aesthetics, such as Aristotle's notion of a "common sense" (*koine aesthesis*), although some Stoics referred to it as the *inner touch* (Heller-Roazen, 2007).

3. Aesthetic Perspectives Appropriate to Touch

In rebutting the long standing denial that touch can be a vehicle for aesthetic experience, I am going to assume a version of Robert Stecker's "minimal" conception of the aesthetic as an "experience of attending in a discriminating manner to forms, qualities, or meaningful features of things, attending to these for their own sake, or for the sake of this very experience" (Stecker, 2006, p. 4) The main argument against the aesthetic potential of touch is that touch experiences are purely sensory and non-cognitive, lacking the forms, qualities, or meaningful features that Stecker mentions.[8]

An initial intuitive reply to the claim that touch is purely sensual and lacks forms, qualities, or meaningful features is that such a claim arbitrarily excludes from aesthetic consideration such tactile *qualities* as smooth/rough, soft/hard, light/heavy, that are as appropriate a basis for aesthetic experiences as line and colour. Gary Iseminger, who shared Stecker's criterion of valuing an experience "for the sake of this very experience," gave the example of seeing a "jagged and bleached" piece of driftwood on a beach and "valuing this experience for its own sake" (Iseminger, 2006, p. 99). But, instead of just looking at the driftwood, one could pick it up and feel its textures in a discriminating manner and value that experience for its own sake. As for *forms* or *meaningful features*, these are part of the cognitive aspect of most aesthetic creation that involves touch, for example, in the work of ceramists or weavers who form their materials by hand, thereby giving those materials meaningful features. As the Bauhaus designer/weaver, Anni Albers says in her essay on tactile sensibility: "grain and gloss, smoothness, roughness … [are] elements of form that belong to the aesthetic side of tactile experience…" (Albers, 1965, p. 64). Similarly, many fashion designers make design decisions based on the tactile qualities and meanings of the way various fabric textures feel when touched or worn. Thus, the *purely sensory* claim not only ignores aesthetic actions by creators, it also slights the role of cognition in the appreciation of art and design through touch, e.g. the fact that many people who appreciate ceramic or textile works, *attend in a discriminating manner* to their tactile *qualities* and *forms*, thereby finding *meanings* as well as sensual pleasure in actively touching them or in feeling them against their bodies.

In addition to such intuitive examples, there is empirical evidence from contemporary neuroscience showing a constant interplay between sensation and cognition (if not always conscious) in the experience of touch. For example, if we follow the neurophysiological processing of a typical tactile encounter, when our touch receptors send signals to the brain, these externally induced sensory features (bottom up) are rapidly combined with information from present contexts and past experiences (top-down) to generate percepts (Linden 2014, pp. 32, 161–164; Gallace and Spence, 2014, pp. 25–35). Moreover, as the neuroscientist, David Linden points out, the entire sensory

[8] Other arguments against the aesthetic credentials of touch include the claim that touch experiences are private and subjective, and the claim that common usage does not treat touch as aesthetic. For a discussion see Roberts (2022, pp. 50–51).

system is under "powerful multisensory and emotional modulation," so that biases due to past experiences and present contexts play a crucial role in the perceptual outcomes of sensory inputs (Linden, 2014, p. 85). The aesthetic satisfactions of tactual experiences, then, are not simply a matter of sensual pleasure, but are, in various degrees, cognitively informed satisfactions.[9] Hence, as I explore the aesthetic potential of specific areas of tactile experience in Section 4 of this essay, I will often draw attention to the cognitive aspect of some experiences that might otherwise be thought to be purely sensuous or merely practical.

Finally, we should note that although most aesthetic theorists from the eighteenth century on have rejected or ignored touch, there are a couple of notable historical precedents for treating touch as an aesthetic sense. One is Edmund Burke, who claimed that touch can give us "the beautiful in feeling" (specifically the smooth and soft) in a way that "corresponds wonderfully with what causes the same species of pleasure to the sight" (Burke, 1958, p. 120). An even stronger precedent for touch's aesthetic potential can be found in Johann Gottfried Herder. "Touch may not be that crude a sense after all, since it is properly *the organ of all sensation of other bodies, and hence has a world of fine, rich concepts subject to it*" (Herder, 2006, p. 209).[10] As we will see later, Herder makes good use of this conceptual understanding of touch in his approach to sculpture.

Some aesthetic theorists might be willing to concede the above points with respect to active or haptic touch but might still deny that there is a cognitive dimension to passive or interoceptive touch. Tom Roberts, for example, has recently developed a positive case on behalf of the aesthetic credentials of haptic touch while rejecting the aesthetic potential of bodily oriented touch. His positive case for the aesthetic credentials of haptic touch is based on Parsons' and Carlson's concept of "functional beauty" which they cash out as "*looking* fit for function," and which Roberts extends to touch as "*feeling* fit for function" (Roberts, 2022, pp. 52–59).[11] But, at the same time that Roberts embraces a role for touch in functional beauty, he dismisses the aesthetic credentials of passive touch, calling it "mere bodily sensations" and contrasting such "simple interoceptive sensations" with the aesthetic capabilities of active touch's "world-directed nature" (Roberts, 2022, p. 55).

Although I agree with Roberts that "mere bodily sensations" would not be aesthetic, not *all* instances of bodily directed or interoceptive touch are mere bodily sensations lacking in aesthetic potential. Sherri Irvin for example, has argued in a lively essay on the tactile experience of *Scratching an Itch* that some qualitative experiences of one's own body can become legitimate objects of aesthetic attention in a kind of "somatic analogue to noticing how

9 On could assert a general "cognitive penetrability" of the senses, including touch, but this is a controversial claim. (Fulkerson, 2014, pp. 87–88).

10 Cited in Zuckert (2019, p. 207). Zuckert identifies four different varieties of touch in Herder's work (Zuckert 2019, p. 208). See also Guyer (2012, pp. 390–393).

11 Roberts then goes on to show how a variety of functional objects such tableware, furniture and vehicles can be understood to have functional beauty perceived via haptic touch.

our visual attention is drawn to different aspects of a painting" (Irvin, 2008, p. 28). And, just as we resist speaking of a single colour or sound in isolation as aesthetic, but treat them as aesthetic when they are part of a larger, more complex structure, so also when an itch "takes its place in a larger structure of experience that we may attend to and appreciate, it clearly is appropriate to see it as having an aesthetic character" (Irvin, 2008, p. 30).[12] Moreover, as Irvin points out, the kinds of somatic experiences that do qualify as aesthetic rather than merely pleasant or unpleasant, only do so when they become the focus of discriminative attention to their qualitative properties (one of Stecker's criteria) (Irvin, 2008, p. 31). Thus, Irvin is not claiming that all interoceptive experiences are aesthetic, but only those "experiences involving the right sort of attention to the right aspects of the phenomenon" (Irvin, 2009, p. 230). Nor does she claim that these selected everyday bodily experiences are equal in aesthetic status to the experiences of "exultation" that result from works of high art (Irvin, 2008, p. 32).[13]

Building on Irvin's last point I would suggest that we understand the aesthetic experience and value of touch as a continuum from non-aesthetic sensations that are indeed *merely pleasant or unpleasant* through such aesthetically modest somatic pleasures as admiring the textures of a leather couch or the feel of a silk dress, all the way to the most complex tactual satisfactions of physically creating and appreciating works of art and design.[14] Accordingly, my approach to aesthetic experience in the remainder of this essay will modify Stecker's minimal conception to assume a scalar view of aesthetic experience and value. Moreover, I also endorse the recent turn in aesthetic writing that argues for supplementing the traditional focus on the spectator's contemplative appreciation, by including some version of aesthetic acts (Lopes, 2018; Nanay, 2023; Saito, 2023).[15] Thinking about touch from the perspective of aesthetic agency means that the opportunities for an aesthetics of touch will take in many haptic experiences (as Robert's has done) that might otherwise be ignored as well as taking in active responses to certain interoceptive experiences (as Irvin has done).

Finally, we need to keep in mind that almost all aesthetic activities in which humans engage are multisensory, even if one sense or another takes the lead (Gallace and Spence, 2014). Hence, we need to be alert not only to what neuroscientists call sensory blends involving touch, such as those that produce the experience of wetness, but of the more general role that the other senses play even in experiences that may seem purely tactile (Linden, 2015). In many instances, other sensory inputs not only subtly modify our

12 Irvin also draws on Alan Carlson's nature aesthetics, arguing that touch phenomena such as itches and scratches can be accurately attributed to categories that permit "appropriate characterization" (Irin, 2008, p. 30).

13 Saito (2017, p. 41) makes a similar point about everyday aesthetic experiences. Irvin's audacious paper has not gone unchallenged; see Soucek (2009).

14 For a similar scalar approach, focused on the aesthetics of the everyday, see (Leddy, 2012, pp. 155,175, 285).

15 Each of these thinkers has a somewhat different take on the nature and role of action in aesthetic experience.

touch perceptions but can also lead to touch illusions similar to those that exist for vision and sound (Jones, 2018, pp. 66–86).

4. Opportunities for An Aesthetics of Touch

4.1 The Arts

Although there are tactile aspects to both the creation and appreciation of almost all the traditional fine arts, including dance and even painting and music, I will limit my comments to sculpture and architecture.[16]

4.1.1 Sculpture

Theorizing the aesthetics of sculpture through touch is a particularly apt example since the issue has been pursued by a major philosopher in the history of aesthetics as well as by artists and art historians from the Renaissance to the present.[17] Herder's *Sculpture: Some Observations on Shape and Form from Pygmalion's Creative Dream* (2002) stands out for its claim that the best way to know sculpture is through touch. Herder's key point is that although we initially encounter sculpture visually, our sense of sight is *'guided' imaginatively by touch*. Taking as his focus classical figurative sculpture, Herder claims that we proprioceptively imagine our way into the stance of the figure, following the line of its curves and "transposing our soul into the same situation." We are moved by "the gentle fingers of our inner sense and by our harmonious feeling of sympathy" (Herder, 2002, p. 80). Herder is clearly proposing a version of *distal* touch, although many of the specifics of his account would be of little direct use for interpreting late modernist or contemporary sculpture which is largely non-figurative. But, as Rachel Zuckert suggests, this does not obviate the value of approaching modern sculpture through the sense of touch "even if in forms Herder does not describe" (Zuckert, 2020, p. 216). Moreover, the general notion of distal touch could be adapted for an aesthetic account of art forms that have emerged from classical and modernist sculpture such as assemblage, installation art, and land art.[18]

But we should not discount the possibility of a more direct approach to a touch-based aesthetics of sculpture since there is at least one contemporary artist, Rosalyn Driscoll, who creates sculptural constructions with the explicit intention that they be physically touched by the audience (Driscoll, 2013). Driscoll insists that all serious aesthetic engagement with sculpture is multisensory, and she often asks her audiences to explore her sculptural works

16 For dance, see Barbara Montero's article arguing that proprioception is itself an aesthetic sense (Montero 2006). Dominic Lopes has written on the role of touch in appreciating pictures in general (Lopes, 2002). In the case of painting, I have in mind the tactual surfaces created by painters known for their *touch* (Rembrandt, Van Gogh). In the case of music, there is the habit of praising a pianist's or guitarist's "touch." The French word for piano keys is *les touches* and the Italian term for a keyboard work is *toccata*.

17 The most prominent twentieth-century art historian to explore the appreciation of sculpture through touch was Herbert Read (1956). The other art historian famous for invoking touch is Alois Riegl who distinguished between optic or long-range vision and haptic or close, tactile vision (Riegl, 1985).

18 Accordingly, the definition of what constitutes sculpture will also need investigation as part of an aesthetics of touch (Davies, 2023).

both visually and haptically (the later while wearing blindfolds). In this way the audience ends up having two distinct but related experiences they can compare (Driscoll, 2013, p. 111).

4.1.2 Architecture

Jenefer Robinson argues that the most important aspect of the aesthetic experience of architecture is the way that a building's spaces make our bodies feel as we walk through them, playing on our kinesthetic, proprioceptive, and vestibular senses at once. "Good architecture invites or compels multisensory experiences and ways of moving and acting that can be felt in a bodily way [...] even the recreation of a building in imagination *has a bodily or motor component*" (Robinson, 2012, pp. 342, 344 [italics hers]). Thus, for Robinson, bodily touch plays a leading role in appreciating architecture "based on *remembering walking, remembering touching* ..." (Robinson, 2012, p. 346). Note that for Robinson, the role of touch in appreciating architecture is dual; it is thoroughly somatic and internal (a feeling), yet it is at the same time externally directed and responsive. Whereas Tom Roberts offers a stark opposition between exteroceptive and interoceptive touch with respect to design, Robinson describes an experience *of* architectural space external to the body that is experienced *through* interoceptive, bodily touch.[19]

4.1.3 Craft and Design

Craft. In almost any definition of craft, the notion of *made by hand* plays a central role, but conversely, one could also think of many craft works as *made 'for' the hand*. Consider the humble, coffee mug, prized not only for the look of its glazes but for the feel of its textures and weight as it warms the hands on a cold winter day. Similarly, the rough, raku-fired tea bowls used in the Japanese tea ceremony appeal aesthetically as much or more to the sense of touch as to the eyes. Although many people have the visual qualities of raku bowls in mind when they speak of their beauty, drawing on Burke, one could also speak of them as *beautiful in feeling*. Another highly tactual traditional craft area, although parts of it have now come to be accepted as fine art, is work in fibers, whether hand weaving, knotting or more innovative techniques, all of which, as the Anni Albers essay cited earlier makes clear, need to be appreciated as much through touch as through vision.

Design. What we have been saying about hand-crafted functional and decorative objects as encountered through touch, is also true of many products of mass-produced industrial design, the area Roberts discussed in terms of the functional beauty of *feeling fit for function*. I would add to Roberts's analysis that we should take note of two major types of aesthetic experience regarding the role of touch in appreciating design multiples. One type of aesthetic touch experience focuses on feeling surfaces, the other on handling objects. The aesthetic experience of surfaces comes in both active and passive versions; active versions include including such activities as exploring the feel of

[19] There are, of course, other tactual aspects to architecture one could discuss. For example, many architects design surfaces that positively invite touch, such as the silken concrete that Tado Ando uses in many of his buildings.

different types of fabrics or wood finishes. Passive versions include such experiences as the feel of a flannel shirt against the skin or what the English poet, Rupert Brooke, called "the cool kindliness of sheets" (Brooke, 1915, p. 121).

The other type of aesthetic experience of design through touch is primarily haptic (Roberts's focus) since it most often involves handling things like table ware or sitting in chairs. Of course, in the home or office these haptic experiences may not get beyond the level of the pleasant/unpleasant, but in most art or design museums a utensil or piece of furniture is meant to be experienced aesthetically, *for itself*, although, given the *do not touch* norm, most tactual experiences in the museum context are distal. Yet, in a break from tradition in 2024, the Denver Art Museum held an exhibition of contemporary furniture that replaced the *Do Not Touch* signs with *Have a Seat* signs. As the curator wrote, the show was intended to provide "a full, sensorial, immersive space," in which visitors could feel the fabrics, get an idea of the weight of the chairs by moving them, and find out if they were comfortable (Rinaldi, 2024, p. 22). If a skeptic about the aesthetic potential of touch were to balk at including ease of movement and comfort among aesthetic properties, I would point out that these aspects of touch surely meet Stecker's criteria of *qualities, or meaningful features* that can be attended to, in the right circumstances, in a *discriminating manner for their own sake*.

4.2 Touch and Everyday Aesthetics:

One of the objectives of developing an aesthetic account of touch, is to bring into awareness the many ways in which our everyday lives are a constant negotiation of the natural and designed environment through touch, with each kind of touch experience offering different degrees of possibility for aesthetic attention and reflection. Here are just a few. For many of us, our day begins with the enlivening feel of a morning shower and the texture of a towel as we dry, followed by the sensations of the different textures of clothing as we dress, followed by a breakfast whose mouth feel is often as important as its flavours. If we take the subway to work during rush hour, there is the feel of the strap overhead, of other bodies pressing against us, and the jerking and swaying of the car. If we drive to work, we feel the seat against our body, the steering wheel in our hands, we reach out to touch various buttons, and, depending on street conditions, we may enjoy or grumble at the "road feel." A few of us may arrive at jobs that will involve our hands and bodies in tactual labor, but even if we spend the day doing office work, clerking in a store, teaching in a school, or treating patients in a clinic, there will be innumerable moments of touching, both active and passive. Once back home, we may engage in the tactile pleasures of cooking and after supper there may time for maintenance or repair involving touch. Most of these everyday haptic and somatic touch experiences fall into the pleasant/unpleasant or neutral category and do not register as a focus of aesthetic attention.[20] Yet, on occasion, one or another

[20] Accompanying most of these daily haptic movements is the constant, but largely unconscious feel of our clothing and the movement of air on our skin, and the inner sensations of our muscles and joints, etc.

everyday occurrence may, if only momentarily, become the focus of discriminative attention to their qualitative properties for themselves and move into the realm of the aesthetic.

One such touch experience raises a specific aesthetic issue: the aesthetics of repair. In our prosperous Western societies, there is a bias toward doing maintenance and repair that keeps or restores items to their original state as much as possible. This aesthetic principle, of course, is part of what lies behind the *Do Not Touch* ethos of art and culture museums. Although museums have a legitimate concern that the constant handling of precious artifacts might cause degradation over time, there are problems with extending this originalist aesthetic to everyday functional objects. First, if the worn or damaged item is something within our capacity to repair, but we simply replace it or hire out the repair, we lose the tactile interest and aesthetic satisfaction of repairing it with our own hands. Secondly, whoever does the repair, if we chose to restore the item to its original state or simply replace it, we eliminate the aesthetic satisfactions of the tactile (as well as visible) indicators of repair. As Yuriko Saito points out, the Japanese *wabi* aesthetic embraces signs of imperfection, such as wear, age, damage, and also repair, thus affirming "the individuality of a particular object and its singular history" (Saito, 2022, p. 155).

4.3 Touch and the Aesthetics of Nature

As Emily Brady writes, "Touch is one of the most intimate ways we explore nature [...] touch gives us the feel and texture of our world, and invites bodily engagement through our face, hands, and feet, and in some cases, our whole body" (Brady, 2003, p. 125). For example, when exploring the countryside, we may contemplate the feel of the tall grass brushing our legs as we walk through a meadow or, hiking in a mountain preserve, we may attend to the textures of the rocks we grip as we climb a difficult trail. On a sunny day at the beach, we may delight in the feel of the warm sand under our bare feet and the breeze stroking our body before we plunge into the waves and feel them push us back. Although these experiences could be dismissed as *mere sensory pleasure*, I believe there can also be a cognitive dimension to some instances insofar as we can become focally aware of their specific qualities and entertain such qualities in reflection either at the time we experience them or later in recollection.

I want to offer one final example of an aesthetic experience of touch in nature, because it involves an intertwining of exteroceptive, haptic touch with body-oriented interoceptive touch. Sailing a small boat on an inland lake is a wonderfully multisensory experience, involving the view of the distant shore beneath the arc of the sky, the constant slapping sound as the boat cuts through the water, and, of course, the fresh, watery scent of the air. But sailing is also an especially tactile experience. The whole body is engaged, from hands busy setting the sails and rudder for the right course, the torso leaning this way and that as one tacks and feels the wind pushing the boat along and the water gently rocking it until the time comes to tack again. Most of these haptic and bodily experiences are simply physically and

emotionally satisfying in the way that successful moves in any sport can be. But in my experience, when I have set a course and sit back to feel the boat running smoothly under me and the breeze caressing my face, I feel an aesthetic satisfaction akin to the feeling I have on hearing a lovely melody that repeats with subtle variations. And I look forward to the next bodily experience of tacking to a settled course again, just as I would look forward to hearing an admired musical phrase again.

4.4 The Aesthetics of Social Touch

One might think social touch is solely a matter for ethics rather than aesthetics. But I agree with Marcia Eaton, Elizabeth Schellekens, and others who insist on a close link between ethics and aesthetics (especially an ethics of care rather than an ethics restricted only to rights and justice, deeply important as those are). As Yuriko Saito argues, the care relationship and aesthetic experience share similarities since both "require attention to the particularity of the other, open-minded responsiveness, and imaginative engagement," with the result that "cultivating an aesthetic sensibility [...] nurtures ethical attention and respect for the person being cared for" (Saito, 2022, p. 5).[21]

I believe the key elements for thinking through the aesthetic aspects of social touch among adults are equality and reciprocity between the individuals concerned with respect to who is touching whom, in what context, where on the body, and in what manner. Of course, touch in many human social interactions involves an alternation of active and passive touch whether between parent and child, horseplay among adolescents, handshakes, hugs and kisses between adults, and, of course, the intense and deeply pleasurable interplay of sexual touch. Unfortunately, as we have learned too well, there is also unwanted sexual touch as well as aggressive and violent touch, although some of the latter is controlled and ritualized, as in contact sports.

Most interpersonal touch in everyday social interactions, however, is not aesthetic in a strong sense; it is often a matter of ritual (a handshake) or a mode of communication (a pat on the back). In a school or clinic, it often expresses support and concern (a nurse touches a patient's arm). Or it may be an exercise of professional skill (a therapist massaging a client). But almost any of these interpersonal touch situations could lead to a momentary shift of attention to the qualitative nature of the touch "for itself" in a way that makes it a modestly aesthetic experience, either positive or negative. An amusing instance of a negative judgment of aesthetic touch quality occurs in the Broadway comedy (later film), *The Man Who Came to Dinner*, in which the curmudgeonly protagonist, confined to a wheelchair after an accident, snarls at his nurse: "Take your clammy hands off my chair. You have the touch of a sex-starved cobra!"

[21] As Saito points out, even an everyday conversation has aesthetic as well as ethical qualities, as philosophers from Simmel to Dewey to Davidson have noted. A successful conversation includes such aesthetic characteristics as suspense, surprise, cohesion, conclusion (Saito, 2022, pp. 79–80). And, I would add, depending on whom the conversation is with (a close friend, a colleague, a physician, a therapist), its linguistic aspects and aesthetic quality may be signally enhanced by appropriate types of touch.

I want to close the discussion of the aesthetics of social touch by mentioning a relatively new avenue for exploring the aesthetics of social touch that has been opened-up by contemporary neuroscience. This is the discovery of a special set of touch receptors (CT-fibers) that respond to slow, gentle stroking between humans, commonly referred to as a caress. CT-fibers are a special subset of C-fibers tuned for interpersonal touch and they respond maximally to gentle stroking at a rate of 3-10 cm per second.[22] Stroking at this rate has been experimentally shown to result in a diffuse, pleasant sensation, although faster or slower rates do not (Linden, 2014, pp. 78–79). As in other touch examples we have considered, most caress-like experiences are simply pleasant or unpleasant, but, in the right context, if one were to attend to such an experience with a discriminating focus on the quality of the experience itself, it could become aesthetic.[23]

5. Conclusion

In this paper I have tried to show that despite many challenges, the sense of touch is a rich field for exploration in philosophical aesthetics. I began by discussing aspects of the nature of touch relevant to aesthetics and responding to the claim that the sense of touch is purely sensory and cannot be the basis for genuine aesthetic experiences. Then, using an expanded, scalar version of Robert Stecker's *minimal conception* of the aesthetic, I canvased selected opportunities for an aesthetics of touch in sculpture and architecture, craft and design, everyday aesthetics and nature aesthetics, and finally in the realm of interpersonal touch. In the case of several examples of these opportunities, I indicated some ways in which certain touch experiences may at times move beyond the level of the purely sensory or practical into the kind of engagement worthy of the name aesthetic, if only at a modest level. Yet, I also noted that in a few cases, such as the feel of a raku tea bowl as used in the Japanese tea ceremony, one might be willing to invoke Burke's phrase, the *beautiful in feeling*. Even if a sceptic about the aesthetic potential of touch finds some of my interpretations extravagant, I believe I have given sufficient arguments and examples to show that touch merits the attention of philosophical aesthetics.

I would add two caveats. The first is that nearly all our sensory experience is *multisensory* so that separating out the tactile aspects can be extremely delicate, whether at the neurophysiological and psychological level or the philosophical level. The second caveat derives from the fact that philosophers can no longer rely solely on intuition but must make their reflections take place against the background of the best current empirical research. Given that the various sciences dealing with touch and its network of multisensory connections are currently highly active and continually come

[22] In general, there are two basic types of nerve fibers (A and C) that transmit information from touch receptors in the skin to the brain. There are the fast-transmitting A-fibers which tend to be emotionally neutral and transmit the sharper aspect of pain, and the slower transmitting C-fibers, which integrate tactile information with its emotional tone and transmit the duller, throbbing aspects of pain (Linden, 2014, pp.78–80).

[23] CT-fiber research raises several important questions for the philosophy of perception with implications for aesthetics (Fulkerson, 2016).

up with new discoveries, the task of developing an aesthetics of touch is likely to be a particularly demanding one. Even so, I believe it would be well worth the effort.

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