Beyond Distance: The Aesthetic and Ethical Impact of Touch in Art

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This article explores how a certain kind of art practice involving touch, both literal and metaphorical, challenges the traditional concept of aesthetic distance. Through an analysis of works by artists such as Abramović, Nitsch, and Neto, it argues that touch redefines aesthetic experience as relational, embodied, and ethically charged. Drawing on philosophical accounts of tactility, the paper proposes adapting the concept of informed consent from medical ethics as a flexible framework for assessing ethical responsibility in participatory art. Rather than advocating rigid regulation, it emphasizes the importance of communication, care, and mutual respect. Ultimately, the article contends that in such art, aesthetic and ethical dimensions are deeply intertwined. | *Keywords: Aesthetic Distance, Participatory Art, Touch and Affect, Informed Consent, Ethical Responsibility*

1. Introduction

Aesthetic theory has long privileged sight and hearing as the primary senses for experiencing art. In particular, Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Judgment* (Kant, 1987) articulated an influential model of aesthetic judgment, grounded in the reflective use of our *Urteilskraft* (power of judgment). According to Kant, a genuine judgment of beauty arises from a state of disinterested pleasure (*interesseloses Wohlgefallen* (Kant, 1987, §5)), where the subject is not concerned with the actual existence of the object, but only with its appearance (*Schein*) and form. This judgment is subjective and universal at once, it is not based on concepts or desire, but nonetheless claims communicability (Kant, 1987, §6–9).

> The art of the beautiful play of sensations (which are produced externally, while yet the play must be universally communicable) can be concerned only with the ratio in the varying degrees of attunement (tension) of the sense to which the sensations belong, i.e., with the sense's tone. […] we may divide this art into the artistic play of the sensations of hearing and of sight, and hence into music and the art of colour. (Kant, 1987, p. 193)

Kant also draws a distinction between the *higher* senses – vision and hearing – and the *lower* ones, such as touch, taste, and smell (Kant, 1987, §51). The latter are regarded as too closely tied to bodily needs and personal gratification to provide a basis for disinterested aesthetic judgment. As he writes in §6:

> It follows that, since a judgment of taste involves the consciousness that all interest is kept out of it, it must also involve a claim to being valid for everyone, but without having a universality based on concepts. In other words, a judgment of taste must involve a claim to subjective universality. (Kant, 1987, p. 54)

Such a claim presupposes a certain distance from the immediacy of bodily sensation. Accordingly, touch was excluded from the domain of pure aesthetic judgment, since it was seen as engaging the perceiver too directly and too subjectively.

Nevertheless, Kant's theory is not opposed to all forms of affective or sensory experience. On the contrary, it emphasizes the role of feeling (*Gefühl*) as a mediating link between the faculties of imagination and understanding. In this sense, the disinterested pleasure characteristic of aesthetic judgment is not devoid of emotion, but represents a distinct kind of reflective affectivity, grounded in the free play of cognitive faculties (Kant, 1987, §9). This nuanced view allows for a more complex relationship between sensuous immediacy and intellectual response than is often assumed.

In this paper, I argue that touch – once dismissed as a merely bodily sense – has re-emerged in contemporary artistic practice as a powerful aesthetic and ethical force. Through the analysis of participatory, multisensory, and performative artworks by Marina Abramović, Ernesto Neto, Olafur Eliasson, Carsten Höller, Hermann Nitsch, and others, I explore how contemporary art fundamentally challenges the Kantian paradigm of aesthetic distance. Such works invite or even require the viewer's physical, emotional, or psychological involvement, thereby transforming the passive observer into an active participant.

This dissolution of distance not only redefines the nature of aesthetic experience, but also raises urgent ethical questions. What happens when a work of art physically touches, or psychologically unsettles, its audience? Can such an encounter provoke harm, or leave lasting emotional traces? If so, what responsibility does the artist bear?

Drawing on philosophical discussions of touch and affect (Paterson, 2007; Montero, 2006; Feist, 2017; Perricone, 2007; Plate 2018), I propose an expanded understanding of touch that includes both haptic and affective dimensions. In the second part of the paper, I turn to the ethical implications of this shift. Specifically, I explore whether the concept of informed consent, drawn from medical and psychological ethics, might provide a useful lens for thinking about participant agency and artistic responsibility in works that engage the body, senses, or emotions of the viewer.

While I do not argue for rigid ethical protocols in the arts, I suggest that a flexible, context-sensitive approach to informed consent could help artists

navigate the increasingly blurred boundary between aesthetic intensity and ethical vulnerability. My aim is not to prescribe answers, but to raise questions at the intersection of contemporary aesthetics and applied ethics, questions that reflect the evolving complexity of artistic practice in the twenty-first century.

2. Challenging Aesthetic Distance

The notion of aesthetic distance has long shaped the way aesthetic theory conceptualizes the relationship between the observer and the artwork. Emerging in the 18th century and crystallized in Kant's *Critique of Judgment* (1790), this model defines aesthetic experience as one that requires a degree of detachment from both practical concerns and bodily immediacy. In this framework, beauty is appreciated through a disinterested mode of contemplation, which privileges the senses of vision and hearing as the most suitable for such reflective engagement. Conversely, touch – alongside taste and smell – was traditionally marginalized, as it was thought to involve the perceiver too directly and corporeally to allow for disinterested judgment. Aesthetic distance thus became not only a formal criterion for judgment, but also a normative filter for which sensory modalities could be considered artistically legitimate.

However, this does not imply that Kant's model excludes affect or sensibility from aesthetic judgment. On the contrary, it fundamentally relies on feeling (*Gefühl*) as the medium through which the imagination and understanding enter into a harmonious "free play" (§9). The reflective judgment of beauty is thus not a cold intellectual operation, but a distinctive kind of affective response, non-conceptual yet claiming universal validity. While this paper occasionally refers to "aesthetic experience" in connection with Kant, it is important to note that Kant himself did not develop a systematic concept of aesthetic experience as such. His focus remains on aesthetic judgment: a reflective activity of the *Urteilskraft* (power of judgment), which mediates between our cognitive faculties. What later aesthetic theory came to describe as "aesthetic experience" thus reaches beyond the analytic scope of the *Critique of Judgment*, even as it remains profoundly shaped by it. Recognizing this distinction is essential when addressing the role of sensuous immediacy and embodied perception in contemporary aesthetics.

In his influential article *'Psychical Distance' as a Factor in Art and an Aesthetic Principle* (Bullough, 1912), Edward Bullough expanded on Kant's theory by introducing the concept of psychical distance as a necessary condition for aesthetic experience. He argued that excessive proximity – whether physical or emotional – threatens to collapse the boundary between artwork and viewer, thereby corrupting the purity of aesthetic contemplation. In Bullough's view, art demands that the viewer engage with the work as an autonomous object, separate from immediate bodily experience. Vision and hearing were thus privileged because they allowed for such spatial and psychological detachment, while touch, taste, and smell were excluded for engaging the body too directly.

> It has been an old problem why the 'arts of the eye and of the ear' should have reached the practically exclusive predominance over arts of other senses. [...] the actual, spatial distance separating objects of sight and hearing from the subject has contributed strongly to the development of this monopoly. (Bullough, 1912, p. 96)

Bullough further observes that

> The arts and subjects vary in the degree of artificiality which they can bear. [...] In general the emphasis of composition and technical finish increases with the Distance of the subject-matter [...] In a similar manner the variations of Distance in the arts go hand in hand with a visibly greater predominance of composition and 'formal' elements, reaching a climax in architecture and music. (Bullough, 1912, p. 106)

As Bullough makes clear, the dominance of sight and hearing in aesthetic experience is due not only to their perceptual capacity for spatial detachment, but also to the cultural and historical development of artistic forms that reinforce this distance through composition and formal structure. George Dickie, in his critical reading of Bullough, emphasizes that distance is "a necessary and sustaining, but not a sufficient, condition of the aesthetic attitude, and hence is actually only part of the aesthetic attitude" (Dickie, 1961, p. 233). This distinction helps to clarify that psychical distance is not itself an aesthetic response, but a prerequisite for its emergence; one that prepares the ground for disinterested contemplation by suspending practical engagement.

However, contemporary art increasingly challenges this long-standing framework by deliberately disrupting the very conditions that make aesthetic distance possible. Rather than maintaining the traditional separation between viewer and artwork, many contemporary practices actively seek to engage the audience, physically, emotionally, or ethically. This shift reflects a broader reconfiguration of the aesthetic experience, one that no longer centres on disinterested contemplation but on embodied participation, affective response, and relational engagement. As art becomes more immersive, dialogical, and socially embedded, the idea of the viewer as a detached observer becomes increasingly untenable.

This transformation cannot be understood merely as a stylistic innovation or a temporary trend. It reflects deeper structural and epistemic shifts within the art world, what has been described as the *spectator turn*. Contemporary art not only invites the audience in, but often relies on their presence, movement, interpretation, or vulnerability to complete the work. Whether through multisensory installations, participatory performances, or affectively unsettling provocations, art today redefines the boundaries of aesthetic experience and challenges inherited norms of perception and judgment.

It is within this context that the notion of touch – literal or metaphorical, physical or affective – gains renewed relevance. Touch does not merely violate aesthetic distance; it reconstitutes it as a site of encounter, exposure, and sometimes risk. What follows is an exploration of artworks that exemplify this shift and expose the complex interplay between bodily immediacy, viewer engagement, and ethical responsibility in contemporary aesthetics.

Already in the 1960s, artists began to explore participatory and immersive practices that radically challenged the traditional notion of aesthetic distance. From happenings and action-based art to early installation and environmental practices, artists sought to blur the boundaries between art and life, and between creator and viewer. The artwork ceased to be conceived as a closed, self-contained object and increasingly emerged as an open-ended event or process activated by audience engagement. A key theoretical precursor to these tendencies was Umberto Eco's concept of the *open work*, first introduced in his 1962 book *The Open Work*. Eco argued that a work of art does not have a single fixed meaning; rather, it acquires aesthetic value precisely through the multiplicity of interpretations that different viewers bring to it. In this framework, the viewer becomes a co-creator of meaning, and the traditional distance between observer and artwork is fundamentally reconfigured. (Eco, 1989)

Marina Abramović's *Rhythm 0* (1974) stands as one of the most radical and widely cited challenges to aesthetic distance. For six hours, the artist remained motionless while viewers were invited to use any of seventy-two provided objects on her body, including a rose, scissors, and a loaded gun. As the performance progressed, audience behaviour escalated from tenderness to aggression; one participant even held the gun to Abramović's head. In later interviews, the artist described the experience as deeply violating and warned that "if you leave it up to the audience, they can kill you" (Westcott, 2010, p. 143). This confrontation did not only transform the aesthetic experience, it exposed both the vulnerability of the performer and the latent tendencies of the viewers, some of whom reportedly fled when the performance ended and Abramović resumed movement.

While less dangerous, Ernesto Neto's *The Edges of the World* (2010), presented at the *Hayward Gallery* in London, also redefined the relationship between body and artwork. (Neto, 2010) Visitors entered a vast structure made of translucent Lycra and filled with pungent spices such as cloves and turmeric. The installation was designed to be touched, walked through, and inhaled, an embodied, multisensory engagement that bypassed the traditional primacy of vision. This immersive sensory environment moved aesthetic experience toward proprioception, olfaction, and kinesthesia.

A similarly tactile encounter was central to Olafur Eliasson's *Moss Wall* (2019), installed at *Tate Modern*. Viewers were invited to touch a large vertical panel densely covered in Icelandic moss. Eliasson, whose work often engages environmental and bodily perception, has said that "we have eyes in our fingertips too" (Eliasson, 2019). Here, aesthetic appreciation depended not on detached visual contemplation but on direct, sensory co-presence with organic matter.

Carsten Höller's *Test Site* (2006), also exhibited at Tate Modern, introduced five giant slides descending from the museum's upper floors. Visitors were encouraged to ride the slides, experiencing art through motion, gravity, and adrenaline. Höller referred to the sensation as *voluptuous panic*, a hybrid of

fear, joy, and altered consciousness (Bishop, 2012). This performative activation of the viewer redefines the art encounter as a bodily event with lasting affective impact.

Other artists have extended this challenge to aesthetic distance into darker, more ethically charged terrain. Hermann Nitsch's *Orgies Mysteries Theatre*, developed over decades, stages ritualistic performances involving animal entrails, blood, and religious iconography. The audience is not meant to touch but to be touched – emotionally and morally – through disgust, fear, and sensory overload (Goldberg, 2001).

Mexican artist Teresa Margolles exemplifies a radical challenge to aesthetic distance by using forensic materials to provoke intimate, often unsettling, encounters with death, violence, and social injustice. Her installation *Vaporización* (Vaporization) consists of a fine mist made from disinfected water used to wash corpses in the Mexico City morgue. Visitors entering the space must breathe in this vapor, an unavoidable act that transforms them into participant-observers. As Carroll explains, the work not only dissolves the boundary between artwork and audience but also forces a confrontation with ethical questions about visibility, complicity, and necro-aesthetics: "Those brave or curious enough to proceed stepped into a thick fog that converted them into participant-observers, one could not inhale" (Carroll, 2010, p. 103–104). The installation enacts what Carroll describes as a form of "forensic art," raising questions about the re-use of anonymous bodies in aesthetic practice and about the role of spectatorship when "audiences participate in a necro-voyeurism" (Carroll, 2010, p. 104). *Vaporización* thus functions as an exemplary case of aesthetic touch that is neither haptic nor symbolic, but affective and political. The audience is touched, quite literally, by death, as the air they breathe bears the material trace of social trauma. Margolles's practice embodies her claim that *mi ética es mi estética* (my ethics are my aesthetics), demanding that aesthetic experience be understood as ethically saturated and corporeally implicating.

In a different register, Santiago Sierra's performances implicate viewers in systems of exploitation and economic inequality. Bishop (2012) has extensively analysed Sierra's practice as a form of "delegated performance", in which non-professional performers are hired to carry out tasks that foreground their socioeconomic position, often exposing labour dynamics otherwise rendered invisible. Sierra's works, such as *250cm Line Tattooed on 6 Paid People or People Paid to Remain Inside Cardboard Boxes*, are not merely spectacles of endurance or humiliation; they intentionally draw attention to the economic transactions underpinning them. As Bishop argues, "Sierra always draws attention to the economic systems through which his works are realized, and the way these impact the work's reception" (Bishop, 2012, p. 94). Unlike other socially engaged practices that risk aestheticizing inequality, Sierra's performances confront the audience with their own complicity, producing not comfort or consensus but alienation and moral ambiguity.

Together, these examples demonstrate that contemporary art does not merely breach aesthetic distance through participation or sensation, it transforms it into a site of confrontation, vulnerability, and ethical urgency. The once-stable boundaries between artist, artwork, and audience are now subject to constant renegotiation.

Claire Bishop (2012) characterizes this shift as part of a broader "participatory turn," where the viewer is no longer a passive recipient but an active agent. Already in *Participation* (2006), she situated this development as a critique of the capitalist "society of the spectacle," emphasizing activation, authorship, and community as central to participatory practices. These ideas resonate with Umberto Eco's earlier concept of the *open work* (Eco, 1989), in which aesthetic meaning emerges through interpretive multiplicity and active reception. From this perspective, the erosion of aesthetic distance is not a rupture but a deepening of the aesthetic project.

Rather than inviting disinterested contemplation, contemporary art demands presence, responsiveness, and often, exposure. As shown by works of Abramović, Neto, Eliasson, Höller, Nitsch, Margolles, and Sierra, to be *touched* by art today means more than to be moved, it can mean to be implicated, disoriented, or ethically unsettled. Touch becomes not only a metaphor for proximity but a medium of transformation, where aesthetic and ethical experience converge.

3. To Be Touched: Rethinking Aesthetic Experience through the Sense of Touch

Having traced how contemporary art challenges the traditional notion of aesthetic distance through embodied, participatory, and affectively charged encounters, we now turn to how this shift is reflected in contemporary aesthetic theory. Increasingly, philosophers and theorists emphasize that touch is not merely a form of physical contact, but a complex sensory, affective, and communicative phenomenon. As Mark Paterson puts it, "Art can and should be a touching experience. […] Even if we are not permitted to physically touch the work we should at least be touched *by* it" (Paterson, 2007, p. 78). In this view, to be *touched* means not only to make contact with a surface but to be moved, affected, or altered by the encounter itself. Drawing on thinkers such as Walter Benjamin and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Paterson argues that it is through haptic experience that "we feel engaged in the world, and through affect that the world and its objects touch us" (Paterson, 2007, p. 102). Touch, then, is not a lower or subordinate sense but a pathway to aesthetic and existential connection.

Paterson's concept of haptic aesthetics directly challenges the dominance of optical models in Western thought. He foregrounds what he calls the "felt dimensionality" of experience, distinguishing between cutaneous, interoceptive, and metaphorical modalities of touch. These registers encompass not only tactile surface sensations but also internal bodily awareness, memory, and emotional resonance. As he writes, "Touching thereby encompasses the affective, the emotional (the notion of touching as feeling) or

[…] more metaphorical meanings of touch" (Paterson, 2007, p. 3). From this perspective, the power of touch in art lies not merely in literal physical interaction, but in its capacity to mediate empathy, vulnerability, and proximity – qualities central to artistic practices that dissolve the traditional boundaries between artwork and participant. As Paterson poignantly observes, "Despite the inescapable nature of everyday touching and tactile experience, it is astonishing how under-theorized even the immediacy of tactile sensation remains" (*ibid*.).

This expanded conception of touch finds further support in the work of Barbara Montero, who argues that proprioception – our internal sense of bodily position and movement – plays a key role in aesthetic judgment. Professional dancers, she notes, do not evaluate grace or beauty solely through vision, but also through how movements feel from within: "Professional dancers, at least, seem to experience aesthetic qualities proprioceptively and make aesthetic judgments based, at least in part, on proprioceptive experience" (Montero, 2006, p. 232).

Several other theorists have similarly emphasized that touch is not only compatible with thought and meaning but central to them. Richard Feist (2017) argues that tactile experience forms the very basis of conceptual and philosophical cognition. Drawing on Aristotle and Hume, he shows that impressions gained through touch are foundational to how we think, "thought," he writes, "is very much like the trace of touch" (Feist, 2017, p. 35). Even Descartes, despite his mind-body dualism, acknowledged that sensations such as pain or thirst emerge from the "commingling of the mind with the body" (Feist, 2017, p. 38).

Christopher Perricone, building on Bernhard Berenson's (1906) early 20th-century concept of *tactile values*, asserts that artworks engage a *tactile imagination*, without which the formal and narrative structures of art would lack substance. As Perricone puts it, "Without volume, bulk, inner substance, and texture – in short without the stuff of touch – the poetry, character, and plot of an art have no anchor in the world, no place for our imagination to take hold" (Perricone, 2007, p. 91). Berenson had originally developed the notion of tactile values to explain the kinesthetic response evoked by Renaissance painting, claiming that successful works conveyed a sense of touch through optical means.

Finally, Brent Plate extends the discourse of tactility into religious and philosophical dimensions, reminding us, via Eagleton, that "aesthetics was born as a discourse of the body" (Plate, 2018, p. 331), and arguing for a phenomenological understanding of touch that restores its affective and existential richness.

Taken together, these perspectives reposition touch as central to aesthetic theory. Whether through proprioception, affect, or imagination, touch invites us to reconsider the boundaries between body and meaning, sensation and reflection. It redefines aesthetic experience as something not only seen or heard, but felt, both physically and metaphorically.

Beyond its sensory immediacy, touch can also serve as a metaphor for the transformative capacity of aesthetic experience. Artworks do not merely present themselves to the senses; they engage, provoke, and sometimes wound. To be *touched* by a work of art is not merely to feel sentiment, it is to be shifted in one's perception, one's orientation to the world. Aesthetic experience becomes, in this sense, not a neutral contemplation of form but a participatory and transformative event. If contemporary art invites us to touch, it also insists that we recognise how art touches us, ethically, emotionally, and intellectually.

This broader understanding of touch as a mode of response also finds a powerful complement in recent developments in feminist ethics and aesthetics. Drawing on thinkers such as Carol Gilligan, Virginia Held, and Margaret Urban Walker, Estella Lauter argues that the separation of moral and aesthetic judgment must be rethought in terms of relationality, embodied experience, and contextual sensitivity. In her seminal essay Lauter (2001) insists that aesthetic engagement is never purely formal or autonomous, but deeply entangled with identity, vulnerability, and mutual accountability. Art, she writes, offers "grounds for practicing crucial facets of ethical thinking," including empathy, situated judgment, and the cultivation of "mutual responsiveness" (Lauter, 2001, pp. 315–316). Building on Walker's expressive-collaborative model of ethics, she suggests that viewing art can become a rehearsal space for moral imagination: "Art/ethics is neither laboratory nor court," Lauter writes, "but a meaningful field of interaction among artist, subject, and viewer" (Lauter, 2001, p. 334).

This perspective resonates deeply with the ethical implications of participatory and touch-based art, where the aesthetic encounter is no longer disinterested, but emotionally and ethically charged. In such contexts, being *touched* by art becomes more than a figure of speech; it becomes a call to attentiveness, to responsibility, and to the cultivation of a responsive self.

4. Ethical Responsibility of the Artist: Informed Consent in Art?

Before turning to the ethical framework itself, it is important to clarify a frequent misunderstanding about the nature of informed consent. In medical and psychological practice, informed consent is not primarily a legal safeguard for practitioners nor a waiver of their responsibility. Rather, it is a communicative process designed to ensure that the patient or participant understands what is going to happen to them. The medical professional remains fully responsible for carrying out the procedure *lege artis*. Informed consent, then serves to strengthen, not replace, ethical responsibility (Beauchamp and Childress, 2009).

This clarification is crucial when drawing a parallel with participatory art. The aim is not to introduce a rigid bureaucratic mechanism that would absolve artists of responsibility. Rather, the emphasis lies on the ethical significance of prior communication, especially when an artwork has the potential to affect or *touch* the participant in profound, intimate, or even unsettling ways. Just as medical ethics requires subjects to be informed of possible physical and

psychological consequences, participatory art should recognise that its effects – though not always corporeal – can be transformative, destabilising, or even harmful.

Here, the notion of being *touched* regains its full metaphorical and affective weight: it refers not only to physical contact, but also to being emotionally moved, ethically confronted, or existentially unsettled. Participants deserve to know when such an experience is an intended part of the aesthetic encounter.

As unusual as it may seem, I contend that aesthetics and ethics are today closer to one another than ever before. In particular, the shift in artistic practice – marked by the erosion of distance between artist and audience – has brought ethical concerns to the fore with new urgency.

Yet while ethics traditionally addresses human relations, it remains hesitant to engage directly with the realm of art. There is, as yet, no established field akin to "art ethics" comparable to applied fields like medical ethics or environmental ethics. This raises a fundamental question: should we develop an ethical framework for contemporary art? Has art reached a point where its modes of interaction with others call for ethical constraints or at least ethical reflection? Or should art remain unbound by such considerations?

If we answer the former in the affirmative, then the principle of informed consent – as articulated in medical ethics – may offer a valuable source of inspiration. Informed consent is foundational in medical and psychological contexts, safeguarding individual autonomy, dignity, and well-being. It is grounded in four major ethical principles: Autonomy, Beneficence, Non-maleficence, and Justice (Beauchamp and Childress, 2009, pp. 103–135).

Typically, the process involves five key elements: 1) Disclosure – full and clear explanation of what will occur, including data usage and risks. 2) Comprehension – information must be intelligible and checked for understanding. 3) Voluntariness – consent must be freely given without manipulation or coercion. 4) Competence – the individual must be capable of understanding and deciding; otherwise, consent must be obtained from a legal guardian, and 5) Right to withdraw – consent may be revoked at any time without penalty (Beauchamp and Childress, 2009, pp. 121–135)

The structured nature of informed consent in medicine raises important questions about its potential relevance to art. As contemporary artistic practices increasingly involve the audience's body, emotions, and personal boundaries – through performance, participatory installations, or immersive experience – should artists bear a similar ethical responsibility to ensure that participants understand the nature and possible impact of the work before engaging with it?

Nir Eyal (2014) suggests that informed consent plays an important symbolic role in signalling respect for persons and enhancing the perceived trustworthiness of the research enterprise. Even if it does not always offer the most effective protection of autonomy, its communicative and relational value can help maintain trust in institutions that operate under conditions of

structural asymmetry (Eyal, 2014). This insight is applicable to the art world, where trust between artist, institution, and audience is increasingly at stake.

At the same time, Elizabeth Boyd (2015) reminds us of the limitations and paradoxes of the concept. She provocatively argues that informed consent is often a fiction we tell ourselves in order to proceed with practices that are morally complex. Her critique serves as a valuable reminder that the introduction of informed consent into artistic practice must not be understood as a definitive solution, but as part of a broader ethical reflection on power, risk, and responsibility. As Boyd also notes, doubts about the very possibility of "truly informed" consent were present from the outset. Already in 1975, a *Journal of Medical Ethics* editorial asked: "Is there such a thing as 'truly informed' consent?" – highlighting early concerns about the limits of understanding and the ethical adequacy of consent procedures (Boyd, 2015, p. 44). In clinical research contexts, even medically trained subjects often lacked sufficient understanding of the implications of their participation, leading one critic to conclude that, in practice, "informed consent had little or no meaning" (*ibid*.).

These insights are highly relevant for the ethics of contemporary art. If informed consent is introduced into artistic practice, it must not become a procedural tokenism or a waiver of responsibility. Rather, it should signal a deeper ethical orientation, one that acknowledges the complexity of power, the vulnerability of participants, and the moral obligation of care. As in medicine, what matters is not the form, but the quality of understanding, the relational context, and the sincerity of the communicative exchange.

In sum, the parallel between medical ethics and participatory art should not be understood as a literal analogy, but as a conceptual provocation. It urges us to consider the ways in which art affects people – not only aesthetically, but also ethically – and to take seriously the moral implications of such effects. The question is not whether art can or should imitate the procedural norms of medicine, but whether it can benefit from the ethical orientation that informed consent represents: a commitment to transparency, care, and mutual respect in the context of asymmetric relations. In this light, the artist's ethical responsibility is not fulfilled by adopting legalistic procedures but by acknowledging that participants, like patients, may be vulnerable, and that their engagement deserves both sensitivity and accountability.

5. How Informed Consent Could Be Applied in Art?

Applying the concept of informed consent to art, particularly participatory and performance art, would require adapting the core principles of autonomy, beneficence, non-maleficence, and justice to the specific context of artistic practice. While the unpredictable and subjective nature of artistic experience complicates the direct transfer of medical consent models, several practical adaptations could make informed consent ethically meaningful and operational within the art world.

Disclosure – Artists could provide participants with a clear description of the nature and structure of the artwork before participation. This might include: the type of physical or emotional interaction involved (physical contact, psychological challenge, etc.). Possible emotional or psychological responses (discomfort, vulnerability). Any potential physical risks (fatigue, sensory overload). The right to end participation at any time without consequence. For example, in a participatory interaction involving physical touch participants could be given a written or verbal statement outlining the intended experience and potential effects, ensuring they understand the scope of participation before consenting.

Comprehension – Information about the artwork should be communicated in clear, accessible language, avoiding artistic jargon that might obscure meaning. Participants should have the opportunity to ask questions about the work and its impact. Artists could ask participants to repeat back key elements of the explanation to confirm understanding (similar to medical consent protocols).

Voluntariness – Participation should be entirely voluntary and free from social, psychological, artistic, or any other pressure. Participants should be explicitly informed that they are under no obligation to take part and that their refusal will not result in judgment or exclusion. For example, in performances that involve collective action or peer pressure, participants should have a discreet way to withdraw without fear.

Competence – The artist would need to ensure that participants are capable of understanding the nature of the work and making an informed decision. If a performance or installation involves vulnerable populations (e.g., children, individuals with cognitive impairments), consent may need to be obtained from a legal guardian or proxy. For works involving emotional or psychological stress, the artist could work with mental health professionals to assess whether participants are in a suitable mental state to engage.

Ongoing right to withdraw – Participants should retain the right to disengage from the work at any time without penalty or negative consequence. In participatory art or body experiences, clear exit routes should be available at all times. In works involving direct physical or emotional interaction, participants should be able to signal withdrawal through pre-established gestures or cues. For example, in Marina Abramović's *The Artist is Present* (2010), participants could have been provided with a discreet signal (such as a raised hand) to end the experience without breaking the artistic structure.

While these measures would help safeguard participant autonomy and well-being, they inevitably raise complex and unresolved questions about artistic integrity and the nature of aesthetic experience. Unlike in medical or psychological settings, where the body is the site of intervention, cure, or risk, participatory art typically does not alter the body in a clinical sense. The analogy between medical and artistic contexts is therefore not perfect and must not be overstated. While participatory art rarely poses direct physical harm, its affective and existential impact can be no less profound, and thus no

less ethically significant. What art shares with those contexts, however, is its ability to affect individuals deeply – emotionally, psychologically, and at times existentially. The ethical question, then, is not whether harm in the clinical sense is present, but whether certain kinds of experiences deserve prior awareness or consent because of their transformative potential.

Providing participants with too much advance information may indeed interfere with the ambiguity, surprise, or emotional resonance that many powerful works of art rely upon. If participants are told in advance that they may feel disoriented, exposed, or unsettled, the experience may be cognitively framed in ways that preclude genuine openness or disrupt the unfolding of affect. In this sense, ethical communication risks becoming an interpretive prelude, which can dilute the aesthetic encounter rather than enhance it.

This is why the approach sketched here should not be understood as a rigid or universal protocol. The diversity of participatory art, ranging from playful interactive installations to intense multisensory or psychologically provocative performances, suggests that different works call for different levels of ethical preparation. A minimalist installation that gently alters spatial awareness may require only minimal orientation, while a performance that actively destabilizes emotional or physical boundaries may warrant more structured dialogue with participants. What matters is not uniformity but sensitivity, an ethical attunement to the kind of experience being offered and to the conditions of those engaging with it.

My aim is not to prescribe a new bureaucracy for the arts, nor to shield audiences from every form of discomfort. On the contrary, art often derives its critical and aesthetic force precisely from unsettling or confrontational encounters. But this does not absolve artists of responsibility, particularly when their work touches others not only metaphorically, but literally or psychologically.

The next step might be to explore whether different types of artistic engagement – physical contact, psychological provocation, or sensory overload – require different thresholds of informed consent or ethical reflection. Should a quiet installation be subject to the same expectations as a performance involving bodily exposure or emotional intensity? Addressing such questions may clarify both the scope and the limits of informed consent as a tool in contemporary aesthetics.

Ultimately, this article does not attempt to resolve these tensions but to acknowledge them, and to propose that applied ethical frameworks, particularly those developed in medicine, psychology, or research, may offer a productive source of inspiration. If participatory art invites us to engage with others in vulnerable and unpredictable ways, then perhaps ethical reflection should be part of the artistic process, not as a constraint, but as an extension of care.

6. Conclusion

The exploration of touch in contemporary art reveals a significant conceptual shift, one that challenges the traditional framework of aesthetic distance as formulated in Enlightenment aesthetics. Whereas Kant's model of disinterested contemplation prioritized the "higher" senses of sight and hearing and excluded the tactile, contemporary artists increasingly embrace touch as central to aesthetic experience. Works by Marina Abramović, Ernesto Neto, Olafur Eliasson, Carsten Höller, and others demonstrate that direct bodily or emotional engagement with art can produce not only legitimate but also transformative aesthetic experiences, ones that activate the viewer physically, affectively, and existentially.

This aesthetic reorientation, however, brings with it new ethical demands. As art enters into intimate contact with the viewer's body, senses, and emotional life, the boundary between aesthetic experience and personal exposure becomes blurred. In this context, the artist's responsibility cannot be limited to formal or conceptual concerns. When an artwork has the potential to disorient, disturb, or emotionally unsettle participants, ethical questions inevitably arise. Who is accountable for what is felt, triggered, or endured?

Drawing on principles from medical ethics – autonomy, beneficence, non-maleficence, and justice – this article explored how the concept of informed consent might be cautiously and flexibly applied in participatory and haptic art. Rather than proposing a rigid protocol, I have suggested that artists consider context-sensitive ways of informing participants about the nature and intensity of their engagement, particularly when the work involves physical contact, psychological provocation, or sensory overload. Such gestures of ethical attention need not diminish artistic freedom; rather, they may affirm the dignity and agency of those who make the work possible through their embodied participation.

Still, introducing informed consent into art raises unresolved tensions. Too much disclosure may pre-empt or dilute the aesthetic effect; too little may risk violating the participant's sense of safety or autonomy. The challenge lies not in eliminating this tension, but in navigating it with awareness. What is needed is not regulation, but reflection, a deepened ethical sensibility that matches the expanded aesthetic scope of contemporary art.

Ultimately, this article has argued that the ethical and aesthetic dimensions of touch-based and participatory art are not opposed but entangled. As art evolves to include proximity, immersion, and affective intensity, it simultaneously calls for new forms of ethical care. While the application of informed consent to art remains an open and context-dependent question, its discussion opens a broader space for developing an ethics of contemporary art, one that responds to the vulnerabilities it creates without undermining the experiences it seeks to evoke.

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