

Haptic Aesthetics as the Possibility of Haptic Epistemology

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The denotative and theoretical indeterminacy make the sense of touch an ambiguous concept to work with. While materiality and relationality, traditionally assigned in philosophical discourses and acknowledged through scientific research, are considered as the inherent dimensions of touch, the paper additionally proposes ambiguity as one of its integral traits. The notion of ambiguity, which encapsulates the tension between contrasting notions in both, the conceptualizations of touch as well as the touch-derived phenomenological experiences, is suggested as epistemically generative, and a vital condition for sensory knowing, especially in aesthetics. This represents the basis for discussing the significance of a non-discursive haptic epistemology in outlining haptic aesthetics and aesthetic experience, which are marked by the necessary openness and inconclusiveness, required for the particular epistemic potential of art. | *Keywords: Touch, Haptic Aesthetics, Haptic Epistemology, Materialism, Alterity*

1. The Ambiguity of Touch

As a sense, “touch is the most ill-defined modality,” write De Vignemont and Massin (2009, p. 633). There are several reasons for that. The challenge in finding a clear or uniform definition is, in large part, due to its manifold presentations and unresolved ambiguities: diversity of sensations, plurality of its perceptual modalities, persisting question regarding what is the exclusive organ of touch, and varying conditions that enable, elicit and accompany touch sensations complicate its individuation as a separate sense, either unimodal or multimodal (e.g., Paterson, 2007; Fulkerson, 2013). In addition, the irregular consideration that the sense of touch as a subject received throughout the cultural and scientific history might add to the instability of consensus surrounding it.

This difficulty is furthered by the number of terms that designate or imply touch, and are often used interchangeably or with slightly varying meaning that will depend on the context and the field of inquiry which employs them (terms like *haptic*, *tactile*, *contact*); as well as by the varied implications and

connotations that come with its usage either in the form of a noun, a verb or an adjective, in addition to its loose synonyms (such as *to feel*, *to grasp*) and the many idiomatic expressions. As such, touch, with all its linguistic derivatives, carries a variety of meanings and connotations.

What complicates it most, though, is the simultaneous eluding of a conclusive definition, even when dealt with in research. The explanandum of different discourses – those pertaining to either a scientific, philosophical, or artistic domain – often tends to oscillate between, on the one hand, literal, exact and narrow (e.g., touch considered strictly in its tactile function as a skin-to-skin materialized contact), and, on the other hand, metaphorical, figural and often indistinct (e.g., touch regarded as a reference to the capacity to be affectively and aesthetically moved). In Paterson's (2007, pp. 6–7) remark, there is a “conceptual slippage between touching and feeling, between touch as cutaneous contact and a more metaphorical notion of being affected emotionally, being ‘touched’”.

As Derrida observes in *On Touching – Jean-Luc Nancy* (2005), which is a work that deconstructs the haptic undercurrents within some of the major philosophical traditions, such “internal multiplicity that disperses the so-called literal signification of touch or the property of the tangible” (Derrida, 2005, p. 109) additionally led to the “inevitable figurality” (*Ibid.*), indicating how the multifariousness of haptic modality has allowed for figurative applications of the notions related to touch. Indeed, the terminology of touch acquires a further semantic expansion when applied in social sciences, philosophy, aesthetics, or art – which is what occurs with many terms-turned-concepts, in particular those evoking the references to the senses and sensitivity. The detailed, localized and segmented treatment of touch – as applied in sciences based on anatomy and physiology – often gives way to a more wide-ranging and aggregate approach, where the underlying premise is generally that of touch as a bodily, widespread sense.¹ As such, based on a perspective that is not organoleptic but rather interoceptive, touch and the haptic more specifically is turned into “a synesthetic modality of perception” (Bartalesi, 2021, p. 24). Additionally, since touching also encompasses the affective and emotional meanings (that is, the notion of touching as feeling) (Paterson, 2007, p. 3), the emphasis is given to the aspects of sensitivity and affectivity, resulting in touch being employed as a metaphor and a figure of sensing, relating, and thinking (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2009).

The assigning of the synaesthetic and interoceptive dimension to touch contributed significantly to the applications of the term in the field of aesthetics. On the basis of its proposed foundational relation to other senses,² it allowed for postulations on cross-modality and cohesion in aesthetic perception, while also establishing a link with the processes of higher order,

¹ However, there are individual body parts – i.e., the hand – that often stand as an emblematic representation of the organ of touch and have received a privileged treatment, resulting in a certain segregation within touch as a figure, as well as in the anthropocentric thinking of touch (referred to critically by Derrida throughout *On Touching* (2005)).

² As established largely by Aristotle's treatment of perception in *De Anima*.

that is, affects and cognition. Particularly after entering the lexicon of visual culture, the terms related to touch would integrate the affective-emotional elements (e.g., affectivity of the tactile), while also maintaining the reference to materiality and the specific stimuli, or more precisely, the properties of the world as apprehended by our senses (e.g., motility of the haptic). This can be traced in the earliest discussions within aesthetics (which often conceptualizes touch in relation to vision, or better, vision-as-touch), where Riegl (1985) was the first to theorize *haptisch*, the haptic, employed to denote a close-up vision. The aesthetic application of the notion of the haptic had repercussions in further theorizations; e.g., Riegl's term was adopted by Deleuze, referred to particularly in *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation* (2003), or, in Benjamin's tactile vision (1999).

In contrast, Wyschogrod (1980) reminds of the need for separation of *touch* from mere *sensation*. The particular meaning of tactility which, in her view, "has been hidden both in the classical philosophical tradition, which forces touch into conformity with a general theory of sensation" (Wyschogrod, 1980, p. 193), as in the example of Deleuze, "and in the physiological reductionism of contemporary psychology, which interprets tactility as the complex of interactions among afferent receptors and kinaesthetic acts" (*Ibid.*), neglecting the more abstract and less articulable experiences that arise with touching. To recover the meaning of tactility, Wyschogrod suggests the need for a "break with the conventional schematization of tactility as a species of the genus sensation" (*Ibid.*).

The apparent inconclusiveness of the definitions of touch and the range of applications of haptic metaphors do not merely point at the persisting obscurity of the aspects of touch as a topic, but, importantly, reveal its flexible and expansive capacity as a figure, as well as a concrete empirical subject. Ultimately, by hosting a variety of significations, touch and its conceptual counterparts can challenge the established ways of thinking, concerning not only the theorization of touch itself, but also in regard to the aspects of being in the world, or ways of relating more specifically. This has proven consequential as much for the field of philosophy (Kornel, 2016), through the figurative functions of the concept of touch (touch as physical, metaphysical, spiritual, intersubjective etc.), as for the sciences (Kolenc, 2019).

The suggestion is that the sense of touch benefits from the ambiguous positioning of its conceptions and presentations, to perform its particular epistemically generative function. The latter might be enabled precisely due to the ambiguous placement and the movement between the contrasting sides that such positioning provokes: touch occupies the place of an indisputable and vital constituent of and for our existence (biological, psychological, social) that is firmly grounded in the practical and factual domain (for example, this manifests in *tangible* or *palpable* to appear as synonyms of *real*), while being at the same time a continuously elusive and debatable subject, even with regard to such fundamental questions as what is touch (e.g., Paterson, 2007; Ratcliffe, 2012; Fulkerson, 2013). It stands as a representation of concrete, physical, material, unmediated access to knowing, while facing undecidedness,

questions, reformulations and reconceptualization regarding its status and ontology.

Rather than seeing this tension between contrasting notions and implications of touch as an impediment, it can represent a framework for a discussion on an alternative, ambiguity-based epistemology. The complexity, variety, expansiveness and flexibility of the concept might allow for a greater prolificacy of meaning, marked by openness as opposed to restriction. Either when dealt with from the perspective of the biological and physiological underpinnings, the capacity for affectivity and sensitivity, the site of contact and encounter, or its extensive technological applications, touch always represents, exemplifies, but also embodies the convergence of those various particular epistemologies, simultaneously granting access to evidential knowledge (through materiality), as well as conducting non-propositional thinking. As such, touch can be conceived first and foremost as an epistemic figure, with its particularity of encompassing not only the dimension of thinking, but at the same time sensing and relating.

2. Can There be Aesthetics without Touch?

Regardless of how touch is ultimately outlined as a sense or how it is positioned within the broader sensorium, its feature of being considered a contact sense makes it distinctly marked by materialism. Postulating a materialism of touch also entails a unique and salient relation to the body, present in the conceptualizations of touch from Aristotle, through empiricism, and to phenomenology. As De Vignemont and Massin (2013, p. 1) point out, this “idea of a privileged relation between touch and the body has remained mostly unchallenged”, as much among philosophers, as psychologists or physiologists.

Indeed, what appears to distinguish sense of touch from other sense modalities and has been habitually invoked as the main characteristic feature is the specificity of its intimate relation to the body. Tactile and haptic susceptibility spread throughout the sensitive bodily surfaces, involving the outer and the inner ones (i.e., skin, and other tissues), providing varied and extensive sensory information about diverse properties of objects and the environment, as well as one's bodily position, movement, internal states, levels of comfort or discomfort, pleasure, pain etc., and, together with other (perceptual, cognitive) processes, the sense of location in space, bodily awareness, sense of agency. In turn, this appears to contribute to the differentiation of one's body from the other, and from the world in general, being among factors that are suggested to be conducive to the establishment of subjectivity and the sense of self (e.g., Ciaunica and Fotopoulou, 2017).

The body, in Husserl's (1989, p. 61) inaugural phenomenological outlook, “is in the first place, the medium of all perception; it is the organ of perception and is necessarily involved in all perception”. However, it is important to note that materialism of touch should be distinguished from a phenomenology of body, “with its often-mystical reliance on a foundational subjectivity equated with transubstantiation. We can claim to have a private, privileged relation to all

sorts of physical parts of our body, without this having to be especially nonphysical” (Kambaskovic and Wolfe, 2014, p. 120). Due to the intimate and extensive corporeal link, it would seem impossible to remove touch from the possibility of any integrated perceptual experience, and therefore from the aesthetics, especially when the latter is understood as being rooted in sense perception.

The term sense perception, although reduced from the extent of its original usage, is the most common derivation of the Greek word *aisthesis*. Importantly, as Heller-Roazen (2007, p. 22) points out, “*aisthesis* was by no means a technical term in Greek language, and it could be employed in a range of meanings”. This included perceptual as well as affective phenomena, or, any of the “affectations” (*pathemata*) of the body, while in other usages, a metonymical connection was made between *aisthesis* and the definition of knowledge, suggesting that it could be considered as the basis or reduction of *episteme* (*Ibid.*). A comprehensive discussion of *aisthesis* can be found in Aristotle’s *De Anima* (which has been designated as “primarily a treatise on Sensation” [Kahn (1966), as cited in Heller-Roazen (2007, p. 25)]), covering *aisthesis* as a broad-spectrum sense faculty. *Aisthesis* would then encompass both perception and sensation, despite the two being understood as separate processes today.

The etymological and conceptual link with sense perception was central in the understanding of *aisthesis* as a part of theorizing perception, epistemology, and ontology in the period from ancient to early-modern thought (Vichnar and Armand, 2017), that is, until the eighteenth century when Baumgarten re-introduced the term as *aesthetics* (1750; in Gregor, 1983), paving its way as a specific discipline. In *Aesthetica*, Baumgarten defines aesthetics as “the science of sensible knowledge as well as of sensible presentations” (as cited in Wallenstein (2013, p. 55)). As such, aesthetics was considered as a particular kind of knowledge by means of sensitivity. Although generally narrowed to a branch within humanities concerned with the study of beauty, Baumgarten’s aesthetics nevertheless retained the main premise integral to *aisthesis* – a consideration of all senses in their contribution to the production of perception-based experience and sensory knowing.

The fundamental epistemic role of the senses in the context of aesthetics and art is further reflected in the words of Mersch:

When we talk about an epistemology of aesthetics, and in particular of the arts, we are always talking about art’s unique manner of generating knowledge, and thus actually about an aesthetics of production. At its core is the constitution of forms of non-subjective reflexivity that operate exclusively in the realm of the senses. (Mersch, 2015, pp. 168–169)

As opposed to philosophy or science, the primary self-manifestation of aesthetics is *showing* and not *saying* (Mersch, 2015), which implies, on the one hand, the requirement for a direct – material, bodily – exposure, since the conceptual thought cannot access or grasp the aesthetic thought (Mersch, 2015). On the other hand, it also suggests a collective, shared event, based on the presence and involvement (physical, implied, or virtual) of more than one

subject. Both of these implications indicate an unavoidable participation of the modality of touch in the conditions of and for aesthetics. This occurs by ways of the material, that is, bodily and perceptual, engagement, as well as due to the format of an encounter or a contact that the *showing* of aesthetics presupposes.

Additionally, understanding aesthetics “not primarily as a theory of fine arts but rather as a re-evaluation of the sensible in the widest sense, as the domain of sense” (Wallenstein, 2013, p. 52) entails an experience (aesthetic, and with epistemic effects) that necessarily occurs within a condition of plurality, therefore relying on the existence of differences that enable it in the first place. Aesthetics, and its epistemology made possible by the sensory faculties, is fundamentally a matter of senses. However, plurality, with its constitutive differences of subjects, represent some of the key aspects of its possibility.

3. Haptic Aesthetics

Haptic aesthetics, when understood through the conditions of a literal and physical haptic engagement, would refer to the examination of touch and embodiment in the experience of art and aesthetic objects. As such, it emphasizes the bodily, sensory engagement with artworks, particularly in terms of how the material presence of the object is perceived. While traditional aesthetics generally prioritized vision and ocular perspective, haptic aesthetics would expand the discourse to include the perception of material traits such as texture, materiality, shape, movement, or temperature, underscoring the proximal embodied encounter with art (Diaconu, 2006; Švankmajer, 2014; Driscoll, 2020).

Although haptic involvement is more prominent in some cases than in others, most artistic settings entail aspects of our perception that are enabled by the modalities of touch, i.e., the bodily presence, the perception of space, movement, the perception of the proximity of either an art object, or of other present bodies.³ Overall, through the physical and thus haptic engagement with an artwork, one has perceptual access to the characteristics of the object (texture, weight, movement, shape, temperature, etc.), some of which cannot be perceived by other senses. In this way, another layer of sensory stimuli is added to form the foundation of aesthetic experience, rendering it perceptually more complex and qualitatively singular.⁴ Additionally, when an aesthetic setting involves presence of and interactions with others – be it the body of the artist, or the bodies of other beholders or participants – the experience gets prominently defined by the intercorporeal and social dimension of the encounters,⁵ which also rely on the contact through touch as their interface,

³ In exhibition contexts, the norm for encounters with art objects is most often still a no-touching policy. Nevertheless, contemporary art is seeing an increasing emphasis on tactility, via participatory, interactional, immersive, etc., artworks and exhibition settings.

⁴ See, e.g., the artistic work and writings of Rosalyn Driscoll, addressing explicitly the role of touch in sculpture.

⁵ Performance art often takes on a haptically and corporeally interactive form. Two notable cases in the history of performances are Yoko Ono's *Cut Piece* (1964), or even more so Marina Abramović's *Rhythm 0* (1964). The degree of the bodily exposure varies in the two pieces, as do the specific settings (Ono's piece takes place on a stage, while Abramović stands in the

be it an established physical contact with the body of the other person, or merely the perception of their proximity, their movements in space, or, for example, their specific manner of handling an interactive art object.⁶

In contrast to the visual modes of perception that command traditional art history, haptic implies a close-range, intimate perception of art that is closely tied to embodiment and affect (Paterson, 2007). Due to this, and in addition to other characteristics of haptic perception – the complexity and multiplicity of the sense of touch in terms of its several modalities, its expanded notion as somatic senses, the intimate relation to the body, the affective aspect of touching, and the implications of the two-way process which occurs in the experience of inevitably being touched while touching – touch also represents a compelling model for conceptualizing aesthetic sensitivity.

The employment of haptic as a model, figure or metaphor is a recurrent, even if not predominant, paradigm throughout the history of art, philosophy and aesthetics, where haptic traits are generally attributed either to other modalities, or to the sensorium in general, by assigning a certain way of functioning that is thought to be characteristic of touch to other senses, e.g. seeing as touching, tactile gaze, haptic visibility (e.g., Riegl, 1985; Deleuze, 2003; Barker, 2009; Pallasmaa, 2012; Driscoll, 2020). In such approaches, haptic often still remains theorized in relation to another sense modality (in most cases vision).

On the whole, when the haptic dimension is brought forth in the discourses on the perception of art, it often entails either the emphasis on the synesthetic quality of sensorium, or a general advocacy for haptics, which is frequently also an appeal for a shift from the ocular paradigm. The latter tendency, which generally underscores the proximal, intimate, and affective conditions of aesthetic experience, seems to be preserving the individuation of the senses and merely overturning their hierarchical structure. Such is, for example, the tactile aesthetics as proposed by Spence and Gallace (2011). In their psychological study, they suggest “that tactile aesthetic experiences might be more ‘primitive’ (from an ontogenetic point of view) than visual aesthetic experiences,” leading to a speculation “that visual aesthetics might derive, at least to a certain extent, from tactile aesthetics” (Spence and Gallace, 2011, p. 4).

The other tendency (the one that promotes a synaesthetic view) would appear to advance a more comprehensive and horizontal understanding of sense perception. This might be particularly important in relation to the experience of art, in order to consider properly plural, inclusive, albeit not fixed perception that is based on inter-sensibility, allowing for the openness that is required for aesthetic epistemology. Closer to such formulation is Fisher’s

middle of the room among the visitors). However, in both, the physical boundaries between the artists’ bodies and the bodies of the participating viewers got radically diminished via the direct corporeal engagements and interventions – also blurring the boundaries between the inside and the outside of the artwork.

⁶ E.g., Lygia Clark’s *Bichos* (1960-1973), Robert Morris’ *BodySpaceMotionThings* (1971, Tate Gallery; 2009, Tate Modern), Franz West’s *Paßstücke* (1973–2010).

proposal of haptic aesthetics (Fisher, 1997; Fisher, 2002). Her project is characterized by placing the focus on the experience itself, alongside the artwork as an object of perception. In this sensory experience, the haptic sense is of specific importance, as it entails aspects of engagement that are qualitatively distinct from the faculties of the visual sense. She argues for a reconsideration of the aesthetic field towards a more dynamic conception which sees the term 'aesthetics' move beyond designations in terms of attitude, judgment or theory of art – that is, away from being reduced to style (Fisher, 1997). Instead, the proposal is for aesthetics as a relational form, which encompasses “sensory mediation of social states and cultural formations” (Fisher, 1997, p. 1). Returning to Baumgarten’s denotation of aesthetics as sense perception, and highlighting aesthetic as a term for perception and experience becomes vital in order to think outside the paradigm which was set by modernism with its focus on the visual, and to instead make way for a “sensorially nuanced aesthetics” (*Ibid.*) where the corporeal aspect of the process of engagement can be comprehensively considered.

Haptic aesthetics as outlined by Fisher (1997, 2002) offers a rethinking of aesthetic experience that is concerned with placing emphasis on the relational dimension – along with the sensorial – within perception. In doing so, it aims to move beyond the hierarchy of the senses and to enable an epistemology that is based on the logic of the haptic which “does not totalize” (Fisher, 2002, p. 27) – instead “it is multiple, pre-critical, immanent and inseparable from the plane of experience” (*Ibid.*). Additionally, aesthetic ontology that “validates modes of pre-critical attention” is vital as it enables “the unfolding of perception without the immediate adherence to predetermined closures of judgment” (Fisher, 2002, pp. 17–18).

Importantly, Fisher (2002, p. 22) points out that “[h]aptic aesthetics work primarily on the level of epistemology: how we know. While haptic knowledge-as-affect can contribute to the production of meaning, it is never reducible to representation”. Such conception treats haptic in a considerably different manner than, for example, Riegl’s employment of haptic, which operates as a “stylistic hermeneutic within a visualist approach” (Fisher, 2002, p. 19), and is ultimately not more than a reduction to a metaphor. In contrast, Fisher’s haptic aesthetics refers to actual practices that involve contiguous touching, bodily mobility and perceptual comportment. She highlights that “haptic aesthetics can account for performativity in acts of production and beholding. The perception of relationship and sensorial affect insists on aesthetic experience not as exclusively transcendent phenomenon, but as one with powerfully immanent dimensions” (Fisher, 1997, p. 5).

Touch, by being inherently relational and interactive, provides the aspects of experience that involve perambulation, tactile handling of materiality, encountering other bodies, or bringing the sensations of one’s own body to awareness, be it proprioceptive, kinaesthetic or tactile. Although the haptic might be vital to recover the aesthetic as a “modality of pre-critical cognition” (Fisher, 2002, p. 21), it is important to note that vision is no less

required, and only in combination with movement makes possible the perception of space. Fisher (1997) therefore argues for a necessary synesthetic quality of any aesthetics, and she underlines her view on the sensorium in *constellatory* terms – rather than following the linear logic of hierarchy – where each sense is discernible only in relation to the others.

With its specific demands as characteristically relational, touch can therefore assist in opening the discourse towards an alternative and non-hierarchical understanding of aesthetics. The relational trait of the haptic also implies a shift from a unidirectional and static beholding to a manifold and reciprocal engagement – which aligns with the bidirectional structure of the phenomenology of touch where one is always touched in the act of touching. However, the difficulty is how to translate this logic to the domain of the visual, or any other representation-based framework, without deviating into strictly metaphorical thinking.

This impediment can be bypassed by focusing on the body as the common denominator in any aesthetic engagement, through the senses in general, and the haptic in particular. In this regard, the haptic stands as a fundamental perceptual faculty to ensure the notion of our bodies in a three-dimensional space, the possibility of corporeal agency, and likewise, the experience of exposure. The related vulnerability (intensified with the effects of pain-pleasure continuum, also conducted through touch) takes place first and foremost on the tactile body's surfaces, including the inner, interoceptively accessible ones. Haptic stimuli signal the level of either a potential threat or promise (that is, an experience of either positive or negative hedonic valence), and it is through touch that we feel the proximity, or better, a diminished distance towards something or someone exterior, whose otherness is beyond our reach.⁷

4. On the Possibility of Haptic Epistemology

The examination of how the sense of touch coarticulates with otherness and aesthetics represents the grounds for outlining a particular way of knowing that is based on ambiguity, as well as the inherent relationality and materiality as its defining facets. These allow for expanding the notion of aesthetics towards a more comprehensive version of aesthetic epistemology or, haptic epistemology as *aesthesis*. Importantly, such proposal is not merely figurative: haptic epistemology can be articulated as ways of production of experience, knowledge and meaning that are grounded in the principles of touch as a specific modality, situated in the broader network of sense perception.

Conceived as such, haptic epistemology relies on the distinctly material and corporeal conditions of the nature of the sense of touch. From a historical perspective, this materiality served as the basis on which touch was assumed to enable nothing less than to determine the existence of something. Due to this, touch has often represented a mark of evidence, either in literal or

⁷ The impossibility of direct, immediate and full contact in touching, and therefore the necessary persisting distance and interruption, or, differentiation and syncope is discussed by Derrida (2005) as well as Nancy (2008, 2009), respectively.

allegorical sense: one has to touch in order to believe, or to know. This is figuratively exemplified, e.g., in the case of the doubting apostle Thomas having to touch the wound in order to dissolve his scepticism. It is also reflected in the philosophical and scientific premises where the materialism of touch has served as the basis for conceiving touch as a carnal, but also foundational sense in regard to broader sense perception (Kambaskovic and Wolfe, 2014).

In addition to the feature of a wide-spread corporeal sensitivity, touch is the perceptual modality that generally requires a greater proximity with what is to be perceived, or, most often – although not in all cases⁸ – a *direct* bodily contact. These conditions necessitate a dynamic of an alternately reducing and increasing distance⁹ between the sensing subject and the environment, which is manifested, e.g., in the motions of explorative touch or intimate caress, or even in the requirements of sensory processes where stimuli have to be intermittent to elicit a neurological response. Without this dynamic (which is spatial, in the sense of distance versus proximity, as well as temporal, in the sense of the rhythmic structure of the movements of approach and distancing), there would be a substantial reduction or even absence of any significant sensation, due to the perceptual habituation to static, invariable stimuli.

Taking into account the prerequisite of contact or close proximity, while considering that touch encompasses the entire bodily structure and is a modality that can never be *switched off*, deactivated or numbed (except in specific clinical cases of anaesthetisation; see, e.g., Cole and Paillard (1998)), this means that one is permanently in a position of bodily exposure. That is, via touch, we have incessant sensorial (or better, haptic, with all its various facets – tactile, proprioceptive, kinaesthetic, vestibular) access to the world, which places the body in a persisting state of openness, bringing about not only perceptual receptivity, but also laying the foundations for vulnerability.

The body is therefore not only the organ or means for perception, conducive of information about the world, but also a site of contact, that is, a site of encounter and exchange. Contacts occurring with touch can be considered in their physical concreteness, as a joining or proximity of two material surfaces,¹⁰ as well as in their constitutional relationality, as an encounter between two differing sides which, in the case of others in particular, implies an encounter with alterity. Haptic epistemology therefore also encompasses the experience of otherness, which is imbued with unpredictability.

Importantly, in the denotation of the body as a site of contact, such site implies an event that is bidirectional (reflexive, transitive). Haptic contact comprises responsiveness – in terms of stimulation of the sensory apparatus, and the production of specific perceptual and affective experiences in the

⁸ For example, in thermic perception, or in sensing via an extension (e.g., a stick, as in the case of Diderot's blind man, in his *Letter on the blind* from 1749 [in Paterson, 2007, pp. 46–47]).

⁹ Also, consequently, variability in the intensity of stimuli.

¹⁰ See, e.g., the notion of surfaces in Bruno's theory of art (2015), and Didi-Huberman's concept of *empreint*, or imprint (2008).

perceiving subject, as well as responsiveness in the sense that it enables an active, outward oriented response, intervention, exertion of influence on the surrounding materiality. This makes touch directly linked to the possibility of agency, and ultimately also to the possibility of modulating and crafting the elements of the environment.

By considering the aptitude for responsiveness – for receptivity as well as action – haptic epistemology can be viewed as relying on aesthetics as sense perception (*aesthesis*), while also being conducive to (the possibility of) *techné*. That is, tactile and haptic means allow not only for sensorimotor stimulation and the consequent experience of materiality (and even the subsequent affective and hedonic experiences), but also action, which manifest in either active haptic exploration, intervention into the materiality, or ultimately, the making and production. In this regard, an important convergence of sense perception and technicity occurs in art (which cannot be entirely separated from its status as *techné*). Conversely, technicity itself, “as a cultural and symbolic attitude, is constitutively rooted in the aesthetic dimension of human experience” (Dalmaso, 2019, p. 69).

The reason why this convergence, culminating in the field of artistic production – and the related processes of reception or sharing – is particularly relevant, is that art offers a possibility of a distinctive epistemology. This is not meant merely in reference to the (technical) knowledge underpinning the practice (which makes the link between otherwise contrasting notions of *epistémè* and *techné*). More importantly, it refers to the specific modes of knowledge production, characteristic of the engagement with art, which pertain to broader sense perception, but can be exemplified fittingly by discussing the functioning and the related figurative attributions of the sense of touch.

In the case of haptic epistemology, its aesthetic basis implies that the generation of knowledge occurs by means and through processes that do not pertain to the “realm of the discourse” (Mersch, 2015, p. 8) – discourse being the early and habitual requirement for the concept of knowledge. As Mersch points out in *Epistemologies of Aesthetics*, “‘aesthetic knowledge’, should it exist, must either have gone *through* speech – the privileged form of expression in science and philosophy – and be translatable into speech or it must remain obscure, an insolent misuse of the word” (*Ibid.*). In line with the requirements that allow aesthetic knowledge be brought from obscurity, haptic epistemology can provide a framework to overcome the imperative of “discursiveness and methodology [as] the main criteria for the production of *epistémè*” (Mersch, 2015, p. 9). While this would hold for any aesthetic epistemology, in particular in the context of artistic production, there are nevertheless specific structural and functional qualities of the sense of touch that can further promote the bypass of the typical reliance on discourse, as well as contribute to the distinctiveness of the aesthetic experience as an experience – one that is based not only on the perceptual processes but also necessarily on the condition of exposure and openness (Brincker, 2015).

The question of aesthetic experience is, in most theories, addressed predominantly from the perspective of receptivity, which in turn makes aesthetic *epistemai* dependent on reception or interpretation, that is, assigning of a certain “meaning” (Mersch, 2015, p. 12). Mersch proposes that if, instead, the focus is shifted to aesthetic production, as opposed to only reception, this requires implementation of understanding the artistic thinking in terms of “*thought as praxis* and as a performance” (Mersch, 2015, p. 11). On the corporeal level, such view directly binds to the agency and activity as facilitated by the sense of touch, as well as to its transitive structure.

Furthermore, Mersch (2015, p. 12) underlines the necessity to inspect the specificity of “medial practices with which art both experiments and operates”. It is important to note that, here, media are not understood as apparatuses; rather, they are that which “instantiates,” and “makes something appear” (Mersch, 2015, p. 13) – akin to Aristotle’s notion of the role of the medium, including the body, in the functioning of the senses. Although still grounded in the material, the medial corresponds to the performative; it is what prompts and conducts the event that is the production of the aesthetic knowledge (Mersch, 2015). Accordingly, this allows for articulation of thought in another medium. The *praxis* and the performative operation, as well as the medial aspect of the processes of aesthetic epistemology are reflected in the faculties of touch: touch is a sense with a uniquely pronounced active dimension. This dimension enables and promotes the aptitude for movement, exploration, engagement, agency – which trigger and generate the motion or medial event in the production of aesthetic knowledge occurring through practice as opposed to discourse.

Another key aspect of epistemology of aesthetics, as outlined by Mersch (2015), is aesthetic reflexivity. Importantly, this does not refer to reflection on the work of art on the part of the observer, but rather to the inherent process at work in the work of art itself. Parallel to this integral aesthetic reflexivity is the reflexivity that is also found in the bidirectional structure of touch. In line with this defining feature – the inevitable auto-affective reference to oneself in the experience of touching – haptic epistemology likewise works under the unavoidable condition of reference to itself, or flexing on itself. What becomes available through this process of reflexivity is not identification of some fixed, inalterable knowledge or meaning (of the artwork; or, a self-enclosed identity, in the case of a subject). Instead, access is given, via *praxis* and performing of this internal process of reflexivity, to the experience of indeterminacy, ungraspability, and alterity.

In his examination of the specificities of artistic research, Mersch expands further on the inexhaustible openness as a process that is inherent in epistemology of aesthetics:

Analogous to sceptical philosophy, we might call this a ‘zetetical’ process: It is not an ‘inquiry’ or ‘investigation’ in terms of proceedings, but a search that also researches itself, its medium or ‘language’ as well as the researcher itself. And while doing so, it constantly exceeds borders and finds new divisions and partitions. Zetetic searching is endless. (Mersch, 2017a, p. 38)

This can be placed in parallel to Puig De La Bellacasa's (2009, p. 299) observation, noting that "[t]hinking with touch does not assure resolution; it opens new questions". Similarly, Aumiller's proposal of haptic scepticism reminds how touch disrupts any anticipation of sensory knowledge, "by offering us something more or less or otherwise than what we envisioned" (Aumiller, 2021, p. 8). However, the proposal is that this ambiguity, in the case of touch, is not merely conceptual, but rather integral to the functioning of touch as a sense. Correspondingly, thinking in the arts and consequent aesthetics, as Mersch highlights, is rooted in practices of incessant deconstruction and doubt, ultimately likening it to the zetetic research which "is based – in contrast to scientific 'heuristics' – on a fundamental *openness*, including an *openness for the unknown*" (Mersch, 2017b, p. 7).

In line with this "openness to the unknown and unexpected" (Mersch, 2017a, p. 38) that defines epistemology of aesthetics, aesthetic experience can be framed as an encounter with something new, indeterminate, or unknowable – a type of epistemic encounter where the subject is confronted with an experience that surpasses their immediate understanding. In this sense, aesthetic experience can be understood as a category of perceptual encounter (Brincker, 2015), but one that opens the subject to the unknown, the other, and as such to a sense of ambiguity or uncertainty. This perspective also aligns with the notion of touch as an encounter with the radical alterity of the other, as discussed in depth by Derrida (2005).

5. Epilogue

Haptic epistemology, while grounded in *aesthesis* and corporeal materiality, emphasizes an epistemic encounter with the world that is open, unpredictable, and relational. In this framework, touch functions as a means through which we come to know the world – both ourselves and the other – in a way that is crucially different from, e.g., visual or auditory knowledge. Deconstructing the understanding of touch as the exemplar of a sensuous mediator between matter and thought, or the basis of all other senses (as established in Aristotle, and continued throughout the phenomenological tradition), arguing instead for the interruption in sensitivity as provided by touch – and senses in general – is relevant not only for ontological differentiation (Derrida, 2005), but also because it reminds that art does not, or should not "respond to preexisting modes of sense perception but engender new sense experiences" (Marks, 2014, p. 270).

In aesthetic experience, while a work of art is initially encountered through the senses, its meaning or epistemic content is not directly or immediately given. Similarly, in haptic epistemology, touch works as an embodied form of knowing where the acquired knowledge comes through the sensorial engagement and feedback from the object or the other, but is also marked by ambiguity. Just as art allows for a type of knowledge that is not fixed but mutable, and emerges in the encounter, touch involves a dynamic process where meaning is shaped through sensory interaction and feedback loops that are nevertheless not final, conclusive or predictable. In this sense, haptic

epistemology parallels with aesthetic experience as a way of knowing that acknowledges the open-endedness of understanding.

Therefore, both touching and aesthetic experience involve ambiguity, in the sense that the outcomes of either cannot be pre-anticipated or controlled. In the case of art, what is often encountered is a sense of indeterminacy, where the meaning of the experience emerges through engagement, although not as a final or exhaustive resolution of the *meaning* of an artwork. Similarly, in touching, while we perceive physical properties, resistance, materiality, and even unexpected sensations that remind of the distance between ourselves and the object or the other, we are in turn also confronted with their unresolvable or inaccessible difference.

The component of ambiguity allows to focus on the epistemological potential of haptic aesthetics – potential in terms of its innate generative capacity, as well as in terms of its further implications or expanded ramifications. More precisely, ambiguity of the sense of touch installs the possibility of aesthetic experience, in which materiality, as grounded in the sensory perception (of, e.g., space, movement, proximity, surfaces, bodies), is also structured by relational dynamics, uniquely defined by the exposure and vulnerability as conveyed by touch. In other words, touch is instilled with the experience of alterity, making each event of touching an encounter with the other and unknown, thus representing an inexhaustible and unresolvable epistemic pursuit.

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