Art, Aesthetics, and the Sense of Touch

Introduction

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Recognition of the ways that the senses contribute to appreciative experience of art and nature has grown in the last several decades, effectively adjusting or even erasing some of the strictures that had long governed the field of aesthetics. In the past, only vision and hearing were standardly regarded as *aesthetic senses* and therefore appropriate conduits for aesthetic appreciation, as with the graphic arts and music. Older philosophical tradition did not consider the bodily senses of touch, taste, and smell suited to deliver comparable experiences. However, theoretical reconsiderations in both the art world and in philosophy have led to a loosening of those venerable presumptions, sometimes outright rejection. Challenging the old distinction between aesthetic and nonaesthetic senses addresses a number of core aspects of the foundational conceptual framework of aesthetics. These include the notion of aesthetic distance and the kinds of pleasure aroused in appreciation.

The requisite *distance* that was formerly mandated to describe aesthetic pleasure is especially absent with the arousal of touch and taste, for objects of both senses require literal contact with the percipient. (Smell occupies an intermediary position, since one can smell at a distance, as with smoke from faraway fires or the fragrance of flowers carried on the wind.) Inviting objects of the bodily senses into aesthetic consideration, and certainly into venues of art, enjoins audience engagement in very different modes from the traditional contemplative stance recommended for a painting exhibit or attendance at a play or a concert.

Physical engagement challenges older notions of the nature of aesthetic response, for arousal of bodily sensation contravenes the appropriate kind of pleasure that standardly counts as *aesthetic*. The pleasures of touch in particular might seem to be too sensuous to qualify. That is to say, they

represent a kind of pleasure that directs attention to the body of the perceiver rather than to an external object such as a work of art or a scene in nature. Their appeal is thus the satisfaction of individual desire rather than the putatively universal appeal of the true aesthetic. In Euro-American philosophy, such tenets were solidified in the eighteenth century, most systematically by Kant, and continued largely unchallenged until a few decades ago. These older limits are now fading, both in theory and in practice. There remain, however, philosophical doubters that the bodily senses really count as truly aesthetic means to apprehend either art or nature.

The essays in this symposium continue the challenge to tradition and explore the parameters of touch in aesthetic encounters. The opening three articles review the historical prohibition of the bodily senses from aesthetic consideration and argue on behalf of touch, thereby expanding the concept of the aesthetic that has dominated western theory for centuries. Larry Shiner reviews scientific studies of touch and the philosophical barriers to considering touch as an aesthetic sense, ending with a defense of the bodily senses in general. Marc Jiménez-Rolland and Mario Gensollen explore the historical denigration of touch in western philosophy and offer six extensive explanations for the exclusion of touch from aesthetics, taking note of a number of artworks that invite touch. Maša Tomšič pursues a phenomenological approach to touch, linking aesthetics and epistemology.

While galleries, museums, and other venues for art have typically prohibited touching objects on exhibit, a number of contemporary artists positively invite visitors to engage in physical contact with their works. Several articles here consider the works of such artists, some of which have made headlines. Because touching works of art can damage them and shorten their availability for public display, touch is sometimes defiant and used as a protest. And yet, as Ying Wu points out, the radical insubordination of certain contemporary artworks requires that they be touched in order to be appreciated fully. But again, because touching something can alter its make up, the consequences of touching art can be unpredictable. Moreover, because touching puts one in literal contact with an object, it permits experiences that range from pleasant to risky for both the object and the one who touches. Thus there is an ethical element to touchable art that is absent in works that engage the distance senses, a feature that Barbora Řebíková evaluates. Most of the considerations of touch in this symposium have in mind sensations that result from contact involving pressure, tactile qualities such as smoothness, stickiness, solidity. Erika Natalia Molina Garcia expands consideration to include thermal sensations—heat, cold, warmth. Like Tomšič, her approach makes use of phenomenological perspectives to understand aesthetic touch.

It may be a surprise to find music among the objects that engage touch, since music is usually considered the most ethereal and least embodied of the arts. However, two of the articles in this issue address vinyl recordings and how music produced by that technology offers experiences different from digital renderings. Brandon Polite and Elizabeth Scarbrough explore the reasons why some people prefer vinyl records, proceeding from the technology of record

production through an argument about the role of touch in listening to music captured in vinyl. Tony Chackal similarly extols the experience of vinyl, arguing that such records achieve an aura that is illuminated by Walter Benjamin's famous concept.

Recognizing the aesthetic aspects of the bodily senses extends the world of aesthetic sensibility well beyond the art world. Examination of the sense of taste rather naturally opens consideration of food and drink. Eating, of course, requires taste and smell but also touch. Sanna Hirvonen situates her discussion of eating and meal preparation within the debates over everyday aesthetics. Cooking and baking are practices that are historically grounded, with methods and recipes passed down among families and communities. Johanna Schön brings meal preparation and cooking guides into an area of recent controversy by asking how we should regard recipes that are generated by artificial intelligence.

While the bodily senses in general expand traditional aesthetic discourse, philosophical consideration of touch opens a range of consideration far wider than taste and smell because the objects of touch are so heterogeneous. Those who argue on behalf of the aesthetics of smell can refer to perfumes as traditional valued objects; those who defend taste can point to food and drink. In contrast, the sense of touch does not have ready-made proper objects, so to speak, alerting us to consider what kinds of objects especially engage touch aesthetically.

The two essays that round out this symposium explore areas outside the familiar art world that invite touch. Taxidermy, formerly a favorite for exhibition in Victorian Britain, is now more or less relegated to moldering dioramas in natural history museums. Ann Colley examines what exhibits of taxidermied animals once meant and revives our understanding of the urge to touch furs and feathers. In these cases, the desire to touch posed considerable danger both to visitors and taxidermists because the materials required to preserve animal skins are poisonous, presenting a danger more insidious than the risks entailed by touchable art that Řebíková notes.

Extending the objects of aesthetic touch still further, Anna Petronella Foultier considers what are perhaps the most humble objects to touch and treasure—stones. Stones, especially small ones rounded and burnished by sea and wind, are not only a pleasure to hold, contact with them connects us with the earth itself. Ancient artifacts put us in touch with the historical past, but things like stones came into being millions of years before sentient creatures did. Holding them connects us thoughtfully to time beyond antiquity. This final observation reminds us of the intimacy and insight that the bodily contact of touch can provide.

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