

# the haptic touch of books by artists

One of the effects of the invention of writing was to render irrelevant to a text those elements of language connected with the voice and gesture. Subsequently the invention of printing further rendered irrelevant all elements connected with to the physical aspects of writing. Carlo Ginzberg describes this progressive dematerialisation of the text of all sensory reference as a gradual purification<sup>1</sup>, it might also be described as a bleaching.

## the haptic

In contemporary discourse the word 'haptic' is used in three basic contexts. The most common refers to perception realised through the senses of touch. The second refers to fields of research termed "haptics" that are developing synthetic modes of touch often embedded into digital technologies. The third relates to the theoretical application of 'the haptic' to critical discourse and in particular to aesthetics.

## the forgetting of touch

In his book *The Senses of Touch* Mark Patterson describes the West's reliance on touch as so indirect "it has been argued that touch has not been casually forgotten but actively forgotten, deliberately written out of the cultural history of the West"<sup>2</sup>. Patterson attributes this forgetting of touch to a detached optical abstraction that is historically and conceptually privileged within the West. This relegation of touch to a subordinate role in perception has shaped the nature of western thought and knowledge.

To achieve conscious perception we combine in varying ratios what we sense through our senses. These ratios depend on - the spread of senses available to a person, the cultural shaping of a person's senses and the nature of the environment being sensed. All this occurs within the sensory and intellectual apparatus of the body, a "space" termed the sensorium. Patterson argues that the forgetting of touch has forged a set of idealized, abstracted visual representations that imbedded within discourse has fashioned a set of practices that inscribe the western sensorium.

---

<sup>1</sup> paraphrased from "Clues; Roots of a Scientific Paradigm"

<sup>2</sup> Mark Patterson in his book *The Senses of Touch*

**"an exorbitant privileging of sight" within the West has shaped our making and reading of the mechanically printed book.**

During a series of seminars held in Sydney in 1999<sup>3</sup> Jacques Derrida discussed an outcome of these inscriptive practices, namely, an exorbitant privileging of sight within the West. Derrida made some observations that have a significant bearing on our field, that is artists books, private press, the book arts etc. Directly relating that exorbitant privileging to the arts he remarked that, "there is no production of anything artistic without touching, usually touching with the hand. But if I am not wrong, there is no reception or evaluation of a work of art through touching. We evaluate, we enjoy, we experience works of art through seeing, hearing, and tasting and so on but never by touching. It is a strange situation: production is always haptic, so to speak, but the reception and the experience are never haptic as such". By rendering irrelevant the sense of touch from our reception and evaluation of artifacts we have constrained our perception of them.

One of the primary factors that effects change in the ratio of senses in the sensorium is the technological extension of a sense. For example the development of written forms of language enable us to visually perceive language extending our sense of sight. This increased reliance on sight to 'see' language alters the ratios of the senses in the sensorium, which alters the nature of perception.

Of all the technological developments by the west none to date have effected change in the ratios of the sensorium as significantly as Gutenberg's technology. As a combination of technologies of which the book is an integral part we have celebrated the extensions to our mental capacities effected by Gutenberg's technology, but the book has also played a significant role in the West's exorbitant privileging of sight. The book was and still is made for the eye. Its materials, shapes, formats, almost everything about the book is designed to support visible language in service to the eye. Our touch of books is almost exclusively tactile yet we undertake this tactile touch in the service of the visual. The physical act of reading a book despite being heavily reliant on our senses of touch is primarily if not wholly to facilitate our eyes reading of the language and images placed in a book. We treat the book as an object that functions as a container of language.

---

<sup>3</sup> One of the *Deconstruction Engaged* seminars.

As part of a broader response to the West's exorbitant privileging of sight early-twentieth-century Western poets and artists' looked to the book in pursuit of the tactile. Their engagement with the mechanically printed book was underpinned by a metaphorical haptic touch of the eye. Alois Reigl (1858-1905) writing on the haptic shaped this touching eye. He identified the capacity of the eye to figuratively touch a surface by relying on the memory of a literal touch. Walter Benjamin (1892-1940) picked up Reigl's touching eye identifying that the Dadaists relied on it to give a tactile quality to their works that "hit the spectator like a bullet"<sup>4</sup>. However an outcome of the touching eye can be to relegate touch to a merely tactile role that serves optical perception. The metaphorical haptic touch of the eye is still premised on the exorbitant<sup>5</sup> privileging of sight that pervades Western thought and knowledge. A few of the early-twentieth-century poets and artists did begin to explore the literal touch, a caress, sensitive to affecting and being effected. They point to a haptic touch that is now crucial within an emerging haptic aesthetics.

### **the haptic touch**

The haptic touch contributes directly to perception. There are examples of nomadic peoples making life and death decisions based solely on haptic perception. Jennifer Fisher describes the haptic touch as (quote) the quintessential relational sense... [being] simultaneously relational and sensorial ... [it] extends from actual touch to include an immersive engagement in dimensional space ... it can play a critical role in articulating the extra-visual modalities of aesthetic experience (end quote) <sup>6</sup>. In counterbalance to the haptic touch, the tactile touch serves the eye; its contributions to perception are encapsulated by the optic. Claire Colebrook clarifies that, (quote) The haptic is not the tactile, [it is] not a touch taken by the commanding hand for the sake of the viewing eye and the speaking mouth (end quote).<sup>7</sup> The haptic touch rather, it is an employment of touch that directly contributes to the mix of the senses in the sensorium. It is the active inclusion of touch in an engagement with the corporeality of aesthetic perception and, as a relational sense, the haptic touch allows an artefact, an environment, a place to touch us, to affect us.

---

<sup>4</sup> From "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction".

<sup>5</sup> Discussed by Jacques Derrida during the *Deconstruction Engaged* seminars held in Sydney in 1999.

<sup>6</sup> Jennifer Fisher, "Tactile Affects," *Tessera* 32 (Summer / Été 2002): 17–28.

<sup>7</sup> Colebrook, "Derrida, Deleuze and Haptic Aesthetics," 33.

Laura Marks a haptic critic exemplifies haptic aesthetics concerns, she seeks to touch rather than master an artifact, to navigate over the object and ideas through both the literal and metaphorical haptic touch. This lets her tease out the connections immanent to them. Marks considers the best criticism keeps its surface rich and textured, interacting with things in unexpected ways, moving along textured and porous surfaces of an object, rather than attempting to penetrate or interpret it.<sup>8</sup>

### **Our touch of books.**

Derrida's observation takes on fresh meaning in this context. Our reception and evaluation of art rarely incorporates what our touch senses of the artwork, and this raises questions for those of us who make artists books, a medium that directly involves the senses of touch.

Can we introduce a touch to our artists books that extends beyond the tactile touch?

Is it realistic to consider that the haptic touch might play a significant role in the reception and evaluation of an artists book?

How can we incorporate the haptic touch into book arts, fine arts and literary teaching programs?

The following images from my artists book *From the Deep* exemplify strategies I have adopted that engage the haptic touch in the making, reception and evaluation of artists books.

gathering / assembling a book - relying on the haptic touch

material properties as content - sensed through the haptic touch

touching the indexical print - a haptic touch of the bleed printed page

curved folding realised through the haptic touch

differentiation of pages and properties of the book through the haptic touch

abstraction - the metaphorical haptic touch of the eye

---

| <sup>8</sup> Ibid., [xii-xvi](#).