Art, Aesthetics, and the Sense of Touch

Thematic Symposium

According to long philosophical tradition, the bodily senses of smell, taste, and touch are not suited to deliver aesthetic experiences. Among other disqualifying features, the requisite "distance" that permits the appropriate kind of pleasure is absent, especially in the case of touch, which requires physical contact to operate. The pleasures of touch, moreover, seem to be too sensuous to be aesthetic. That is to say, they stimulate 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 strictures are now fading, both in theory and in practice, and a number of contemporary artists, deliberately defying traditional norms, invite visitors to experience their works by means of touch, as well as by taste and smell. Indeed, these activities permit indulgence in touching that has always been tempting to visitors despite standard prohibitions (Candlin, 2010). There remain, however, philosophical doubters that the bodily senses really count as truly aesthetic means to apprehend either art or nature.

Nonetheless, touch has entered the aesthetic lexicon in ways that expand attention to the means by which artifacts are understood and appreciated. Attention to the various aspects of embodiment in performance evoke imaginative touch and its internal cousin, proprioception. Appreciation of age and rarity invite proximity if not direct contact (Korsmeyer 2019). Textures of fabrics, utensils, and furniture positively demand touch in order to appreciate and assess their merits (hence the frequent disappointments from online shopping). Philosophers are paying more attention to touch (e.g. Fulkerson 2014), and there is increased interdisciplinary attention to the bodily senses in general (Howes 2022). Both in and out of the art world, the bodily senses are enjoying an upsurge of popularity among both artists and art-going public, and their engagement presents opportunities, challenges, and risks.

ESPES. The Slovak Journal of Aesthetics invites scholars to explore the aesthetic and artistic prospects of the sense of touch. Possible topics include but are not limited to the following:
**Touch and intimacy:** Touch puts one in literal contact with an object. Hence it permits experiences that range from pleasant to risky for both the object and the one who touches. How does this alter or diminish the artistic scope of touch?

**Touch as an aesthetic sense:** The physical contact enjoined by touch reduces or eliminates the famous "distance" that is traditionally mandated for an "aesthetic experience." To what extent does the use of touch in art violate an important norm, or alternatively, demonstrate that the traditional restriction was never necessary?

**Touch and time:** Galleries and museums, public installations, and other venues for art typically prohibit touching exhibits, partly to protect art works. If an artwork summons visitors to touch, need there be protections for its endurance over time? Does touch invite deliberately ephemeral exhibits?

**The display, maintenance, and conservation of touchable art:** All of the above considerations present challenges for art institutions and public displays.

**Bodily senses and their objects:** 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. What kinds of objects especially engage touch outside of the standard art world, and do they suggest an expansion of the concept of art?

**Conceptual shifts:** The sense of touch, along with the other bodily senses of taste and smell, are excluded from aesthetic practices by traditional theoretical treatments. How does the inclusion of touch shift the concept of the aesthetic? What are the gains, as well as the possible problems and losses, of this conceptual expansion?

**Touch and its aesthetic uses outside of art:** While many contemporary artists are newly engaging touch in their works, touching has always played a role in the apprehension of artifacts outside formal institutional settings. What does this tell us about the pervasiveness of the aesthetic power of touch?

**INSTRUCTIONS**

**Types of Contributions**

*Research articles* are original contributions that initiate a debate, offer a point of view on current trends in aesthetics and the philosophy of art, or introduce a scholarly discussion. Contributions to the Research articles section should not normally exceed 7,500 words (including bibliography). An abstract in English should be added of no more than 150 words.

*Interviews* offer a portrait of the life and work of leading figures in contemporary debates. Contributions to the Interviews section should not exceed 3500 words and the proposal must be formerly discussed with the editors before submission.

*Translations* include seminal essays in different languages newly translated into English. The translated essays are selected based on their relevance for the development of current discourses on beauty. Contributions to the Translations section should not normally exceed 7,500 words and must be first discussed with the editors.

**Stylistic Guidelines**

Language of Contribution: English.

The complete formatting instructions are available at: shorturl.at/ftESY. Submissions that do not comply with these instructions will be returned to the author. All submissions will undergo a double-blind review process. Submission via espes.ff.unipo.sk

**Information**

Any queries should be addressed to the editors at: espes@ff.unipo.sk


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