

The Touch of Meaning: Researching Art between Text and Texture

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Abstract

The academic world, at least in the West, has traditionally always been suspicious when it comes to introducing in its quest for knowledge notions of materiality, touch, texture, or “haptics” – in other words what is generally associated with sensory-experience. In the human sciences and the artistic fields the practice of research has always privileged “textual reason” over “sensory texture,” the *textual* over the *textural*. Only in the recent past have so-called postmodern theories of all kinds attempted to overcome the hierarchical dichotomy between discursive reason and embodied thought. Unfortunately, this has very often created an unprecedented ragbag of epistemological confusions and identity crises. This essay shall attempt to explain and clarify the epistemological nature of materiality, touch, texture, or “haptics,” and the role it can play in academic research in the artistic fields with particular reference to ideas developed by French philosophers Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Emmanuel Levinas.

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The academic world, at least in the West, has traditionally always been suspicious when it comes to introducing in its quest for knowledge notions of materiality, touch, texture, or “haptics” – in other words what is generally associated with sensory-experience. In the human sciences and the artistic fields the practice of research has always privileged “textual reason” over “sensory texture,” the *textual* over the *textural*. Only in the recent past have so-called postmodern theories of all kinds attempted to overcome the hierarchical dichotomy between discursive reason and embodied thought. Unfortunately, this has very often created an unprecedented ragbag of epistemological confusions and identity crises. Academic research in the artistic fields has not escaped the crisis, and relatively recent attempts to introduce the idea of merely practical research are ones of the symptoms. What justifies such an idea, it is argued, is that

because embodied forms of communication, expression, or language can be as thoughtful as discursive theory, explanation, or analysis, there is no reason why they could not constitute the very body of academic research. This is where the epistemological confusion begins. We find ourselves questioning the difference between what constitutes academic research, for example in Fine Art, and art practice for a set number of years, or between academic research in design and being a practising designer. To put it crudely, we end up confusing religion and theology, or being a revolutionary and a sociologist. This essay shall attempt to explain and clarify the epistemological nature of materiality, touch, texture, or “haptics,” and the role it can play in academic research in the artistic fields.

Some may argue that the issue of epistemological confusion is, after all, no more than semantic. Still, if we consider the etymology of the English word “research,” it tells us that it comes from the Old French “*re-cerche*,” that is to say, literally, “to find again” or to “retrieve.” What is retrieved in research – and this applies to the artistic fields – is the ways such or such an event, phenomenon, or practice makes sense in the way it does. This operation, so to speak, is done through analysis and explanation. Research, understood in this original sense, retrieves the mechanisms that make an event, phenomenon, or practice become meaningful or significant. In this sense, the nature of research cannot be confined to experience or practice as meaningful as it is.

If academic research in the artistic fields does not want to lose its *raison d'être*, it must to a certain degree analyse and remain explanatory, including when such a research aims at being self-reflexive or in the form of problem-solving. Academic research must therefore ultimately produce a “thesis” that proves and maintain a point by means of explanation. Academic research must remain reflective “about” some-thing, involving thus a serious level of method awareness. This also applies to modes of investigation whose object of research is reflexivity (i.e., about the “self” and its forms of expression) as it can be the case in Fine Art practice. However, the point is certainly not to suggest that “practice” is irrelevant to academic research in the artistic fields, but rather that the practical element in such a research should be understood in terms of meaningful experiential moments within which, from which, or around which explanation or reflective theory should develop. This implies that a certain degree of discursiveness – and therefore “the textual” – is necessary for all academic research in the artistic fields.

The issue, then, is to truly understand the relationship between the

textual and the textural when researching in the artistic fields and what is at stake epistemologically. The relationship between the textual and the textural, we shall argue, must be necessary and complementary. Meaning in art is not the exclusive privilege of the textual, the verb and the word. At the same time, meaning in art is not mere materiality, physicality or gesture. Meaning in art carries a sense of touch at the crossroad between the textual and the textural.

In Western culture, the paradigm of texture has traditionally been contrasted to the image of light and therefore reason. Moreover, as the textural belongs to the sensory world, it could only be epistemologically inferior to the world of reason. This prejudice has tainted Western thought in different ways from Classical Greece arguably up the 19th century. Postmodern thinkers such as Jacques Derrida and Luce Irigaray have traced this ill-conception back to Plato.¹ The latter's "The Myth of the Cavern", from Book X of *The Republic*, works as a metaphor to describe the evolutionary journey of human beings from the obscure sensory world of the inside of the cave, toward the outside where the sun shines in all its Truth.² Against the significance and impact of such an image on Western thought, Irigaray suggests that sensory materiality and modes of thought based on the paradigm of reason, essence, universals and representation should be conceived in terms of complementary difference. To put it otherwise, the metaphysical as understood in traditional Western thought should not be privileged over the physical.

Irigaray deals predominantly with gender-related issues,³ but the idea of complementary difference between "sensory texture" and "textual reason," or "haptics" and knowledge, remains all the more relevant when it comes academic research in the artistic fields. To clarify the epistemological nature of "sensory texture," let us first recall some key ideas developed by one of the most important – if not the most important – philosopher of embodiment, Maurice Merleau-Ponty.

One of Merleau-Ponty's most celebrated themes is that perception is always incarnate, in the sense that there is no such a thing as, for instance, perception of the visual alone.⁴ It is always an integrated operation of the senses. Let us take an example from the visual arts. Identifying an object as a figurative sculpture made of clay does not depend on what is seen alone, but also on the network of relationships between the visual and memories of what it feels to touch such a material; already established knowledge of a particular style, a function or an identity; being aware of a ceramic studio's life; knowing about criteria for the status of an object

as an artwork; what one expects or does not expect when perceiving the object, and so on. All these “invisible” dimensions of what makes the sculpture visible connect to each other and as such constitute a network, in other words, what has already been referred to as “texture.” But what is commonly understood as “texture” and what is the relevance of this metaphor to understanding the epistemological nature of “haptics” in art research? Cathryn Vasseleu defines “texture” in terms of

...a disposition or characteristic of anything which is woven into a fabric, and comprises a combination of parts or qualities which is neither simply unveiled or made up. Texture is at once the cloth, threads, knots, weave, detailed surface, material, matrix and frame.⁵

In the previous century Merleau-Ponty and his phenomenologist followers made the “textural” a cornerstone of their philosophy. They thus developed a proper “philosophy of the intertwining” that celebrated the moment when “object” and “subject” were still indistinguishable – a “chiasm,” as Merleau-Ponty calls it, to which we should return to understand genuine knowledge formation.⁶ In his own words,

If it is true that as soon as philosophy declares itself to be a reflection or coincidence it prejudices what it will find, then once again it must recommence everything, reject the instruments reflection and intuition had provided themselves, and install itself in a locus where they have not yet been distinguished, in experiences that have not yet been ‘worked over’, that offer us all at once, pell-mell, both ‘subject’ and ‘object’, both existence and essence, and hence give philosophy resources to redefine them.⁷

Such a philosophy was at the time a reaction against theoretical approaches that were inclined to separate the thinking subject from the world to which it belongs. The point was to redeem our chiasmic condition in perceptual experience, which had allegedly been overlooked by traditional Western philosophy. “Intellectualism” for instance had ignored sensory-experience and claimed that knowledge ought to be established by a disembodied reflecting consciousness. Another example, “empiricism,” had used embodied experiences in its quest for knowledge, but only as a means by which the theoretical subject could know about reality. As a result the relationship between experience and knowledge had not been conceived as intertwined, but rather in terms of causality. Merleau-Ponty attempted to challenge these latter conceptions by developing his so-called “philosophy of the flesh.” Whether he succeeded or not and

whether he simply replaced the dogmatism of disembodied theories by the foundationalism of the philosophy of the chiasm and, by extension, the textural are no matter to be discussed here. The point, though, is that Merleau-Ponty provided the philosophical tools necessary to understand the embodied epistemological nature of the textural.

Tactile experiences are perfect illustrations of Merleau-Ponty's conception of embodied language. Touching an object is not only a sensory-experience. It is the moment of intertwining between perception and what is perceived, which takes place within the texture of the world – so to speak. In this sense we are not dealing with a passive mode of perception of sense data that simply cause an effect in the perceiver, as the empiricists would have it. On the contrary touching an object is a proper mode of awareness that embodies meaningfulness because of its location within the open field of knowledge, memory, intention, will, and desire, as well as because of different types of perceptual experiences. For example, the modeller who gives shape to a figurative sculpture by touching and retouching the clay does not materialise an already existing form, and therefore an idea. Such a conception would establish a set of hierarchical categories such as the mind, sense-organs, the skin, the clay, and the represented idea. The same applies for the painter and paint, the textile artist and the material, or the interior designer and the scale model.

Haptic experiences in art practice correspond to these moments when communicative awareness and materiality constitute one and the same thing – something that, once again, takes place within the texture of the world. It goes without saying that such experiences cannot be re-produced by theorisation, conceptualisation, rationalisation, or systematisation of any kind. Practice in the artistic fields is not about establishing a general law or operating as a rational system.

The experience of touching in art practice is arguably a form of “stylisation” because of its intended meaningful dimension. What, then, makes haptic experience in art practice different from everyday-life haptic experiences such as rubbing the pages of a book, or feeling a drop of water on our skin? At first glance there is no difference, because touching always gives sense to life. However, touching a particular material such as clay in order to shape it meaningfully, or communicate a message, or fulfil an aesthetic function implies two fundamental dimensions that everyday-life haptic experiences lack: “intention” and “communication.” Everyday-life haptic experiences are not about giving shape to something in order to be shared with an audience or experienced by the public. On the contrary,

haptic experiences in the artistic fields are about intention and communication in the sense that they constitute a proper “language.” The feeling of a drop of water on our skin is certainly a meaningful sensory-experience, but it remains personal unless we decide to “express” such an experience, for example by describing it in words, visually or otherwise.

Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy of the flesh becomes all the more relevant to understanding the meaningful dimension of haptic experiences in the artistic fields, understood in terms of embodied and intended communicative language. Such a language consists of meaningfully experiencing an intertwining, that is, the chiasms that exist between already existing meanings and those to be known. This is how the “texture” of the world may be understood: a chiasmic dimension to which the world of objective knowledge vitally relates. Haptic experiences in art practice are therefore “textural” experiences that take place in relation to what is already determined and recognized – for instance what we know about shape, expression, emotion, function, sign, and so on. Those readable entities and dimensions constitute what may be called the “text” of the world. As such, textural experiences are “pre-”, “post-”, “trans-”, or “meta-textual.”

We may wonder what distinguishes such textural sensory-experiences from those experienced by animals; in other words, what makes them meaningful. Unlike animalistic sensory-experiences, textural experiences in art remain meaningful because of the way they relate to the “textual.” The meaningfulness of textural experiences is not explicit; in a sense, it remains unavowed. The textural nature of sensory-experience within the text of the world or, to put it differently, sensory-experience within a network of relationships made of known entities and those to be known is an orienting experience that takes place against an oriented background. Its textural nature is orienting and therefore meaningful, albeit undecided and yet-to-be-decided.

When Spanish painter Antonio Tapies leaves marks with his fingers on a canvas; when the so-called Young British Artists configure their objects for their neo-conceptual installations; when French designer Philippe Stark makes a scale model to design one of his stylistically Brancusi-inspired tooth brushes; or even when the photographer configures the composition of a picture, the sense of touch contributes to creating that orienting felt-movement that departs from already existing oriented values and identities of all kinds and heads towards new ones to come. Tapies’ marks become noticeable and therefore meaningful; British artist Cornelia Parker’s broken bits constitute an unfamiliar configuration; and

Stark's objects create an original bridge between design and sculpture.



Arita, Japan

The orienting nature of these haptic experiences can also be found in any other meaningful sensory-experience. To look, listen, smell, or even read can all create a meaningful sense of touch, precisely because there is always a chiasmic contact, an intertwined communion that creates meaningfulness when experienced. In fact, vision in Western culture was for a long time considered to be “the noblest of the senses” – arguably for obvious physiological reasons – for its alleged power to give access to objective “truth” or “reality.”⁸ Yet, vision too can have a haptic, textural dimension that makes it meaningfully chiasmic, before the split between object and subject.

Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon (2001), by Taiwanese film director Ang Lee, offer a revealing example of the textural nature of the visual. When I watched the film, I touched with my eyes those extraordinary moments of magic realism when the characters Li Mu Bai, Yu Shu Lien and Jen Yu jump and fly from ground to walls, from walls to roofs, from roofs to trees, and from trees to the sky and water. These are well-known themes in traditional Chinese culture, but the point is that the viewer feels the soft touch of the cat and the weightlessness of the bird. We also “touch” our ears what is perceived when, in some raw moments of realism, swords snap, rub and squeak against each other. All these are instances of synaesthetic mode of perception within a network of intertwined associations. *Con-tacts* are in the process of being made, in the true Latin etymologi-

cal sense of the word: *con* (with), and *tact* (from *tactus*, touch). Meaning unfolds through these situating contacts within a situated context or body of knowledge that will in the process be renewed.

We can now better understand the epistemological nature and role of textural experience in academic research in the artistic fields. Haptic moments in art practice can hardly constitute the entire body of academic research in so far as the latter precisely seeks to establish the degree to which the *textual* can be renewed by the *textural*, which, in turn, can only be meaningfully experienced within the textual world of objective knowledge. Academic research in the artistic fields sets itself to retrieve, analyse, explain and, indeed, *re-search* the ways the textural relates to the textual. A degree of objectification is therefore as necessary as sensory-experience is vital. This is not to say that Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of the flesh or idea of "con-tactile" nature of human consciousness would justify academic research in the artistic fields to remain entirely practical. The embodied nature of thought in creative haptic experiences or indeed in art practices in general is not a reflection "on" or "from" such experiences or practices. Again, the latter are textural but not textual. If textural experiences express or communicate a meaningful chiasmic moment, they do not reflect on the way they do so by relating to their contexts or, to use Merleau-Ponty's expression, the "objective world." As chiasmic experiences between touching and what is touched, or between practice and what is known, or, even further, between thinking and what is thought, *textural* experiences do not lay out the extent to which they contribute to knowledge, in other words to the text of the world. Although initially oriented, that is, taking place within the known world, textural experiences are fundamentally orienting – for the known world to be renewed. Textural experiences are therefore by nature ambiguous and elusive, albeit epistemologically vital.

Emmanuel Levinas's conception of sensory-experience confirms in a different way the elusive albeit epistemologically vital nature of textural experiences. Identity expresses itself *ad infinitum*, in constant mutation between the sensing and the sensed. The one who senses is the Self and the sensed is what he calls "alterity" – the Other. In *Totality and Infinity* he formulates such a conception of alterity in relation to vision, identity and expression:

The way in which the other presents himself, *exceeding the idea of the other in me*, we here name face. This *mode* does not consist in figuring as a theme under my gaze, in spreading itself forth as a

set of qualities forming an image. The face of the Other at each moment destroys and overflows the plastic image it leaves me, the idea existing to my own measure and to the measure of its *ideatum* – the adequate idea. It does not manifest itself by these qualities... It *expresses itself*.⁹

In *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence* the same alterity is defined in relation to “contact” and “thinking”:

To be in contact is neither to invest the other and annul his alterity, nor to suppress myself in the other. In contact itself the touching and the touched separate, as though the touch moved off, was always already other, did not have anything in common with me.¹⁰

When Merleau-Ponty would emphasize the intertwining between the touching and the touched, Levinas would stress that the experience of the textural is the means by which self and otherness express themselves. Both philosophers, however, bring to light the epistemological potential of textural experiences and therefore the relevance to understanding their role in academic research in the artistic fields. Again, this is not to suggest that acknowledging the epistemological potential of textural experiences should pave the way for an ideology designed to dictate the course of academic research in the artistic fields. Nor should analysis and explanation aimed at constructing objective knowledge be the principal motivation of such research. Academic research in the artistic fields that incorporates practice demonstrates, on the contrary, the complementary, differential relationship between the textural and the textual or, to put it otherwise, between the paradigm of chiasm, intertwining and contact, and that of objective knowledge, identity and representation.

Academic research in the artistic fields is no matter for the theorist alone; nor is it for the artist alone. To reflect on textural experience no doubt requires experimenting practice; at the same time it cannot be confined to practice. Unless we redefine the meaning of the word, any “research” involving textural experience must take account of the context within which or against which it takes place, that is to say the textual.¹¹

Notes

1 See for example Jacques Derrida in *Margins of Philosophy* (1982), trans. A. Bass, Brighton: The Harvester Press; and Luce Irigaray in *This Sex Which Is Not One* (1985), trans. C. Porter, New York: Cornell University Press.

2 See Plato, 'The Republic', Book X in *The Essential Plato* (1999), trans. B. Jowett, TSP, pp. 378-416.

3 See Luce Irigaray in *An Ethics of Sexual Difference* (1993), trans. C. Burke & G. C. Gill, New York: Cornell University Press.

4 See Maurice Merleau-Ponty 'The World as Perceived' in *Phenomenology of Perception* (1992), trans. C. Smith, London: Routledge, Chap. 1, 2, & 3, pp. 203-345.

5 See Cathryn Vasseleu in *Textures of Light* (1998), London: Routledge, pp. 11-12.

6 See Merleau-Ponty in *The Visible and the Invisible* (1987), trans. A. Lingis, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, pp. 130-145.

7 *Ibid.*, p. 130.

8 See Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes – The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (London: University of California Press, 1993).

9 See Emanuel Levinas in *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority* (1979), trans. A. Lingis, Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, pp. 50-51.

10 See Emanuel Levinas in *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence* (1981), trans. A. Lingis, The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, p. 86.

11 Numerous publications on art practice as research have been released in the past decade, amongst which the latest editions *Method Meets Art: Arts-Based Research Practice*, by Patricia Leavy (New York: The Guilford Press, 2015); *Practice as Research in the Arts: Principles, Protocols, Pedagogies, Resistances*, by Robin Nelson, ed. (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); *Art Practice as Research: Inquiry in Visual Arts*, by Graeme Sullivan (London: Sage, 2010); *Practice-led Research, Research-led Practice in the Creative Arts*, by Hazel Smith and Roger Dean, eds. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009).