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Modern aesthetics regarded sight and hearing as the only senses able to produce art; touch, smell and taste might offer merely pleasant configurations of stimuli, but these can never achieve the status of art objects. Which are the arguments for this rejection and are they still sustainable? The paper stresses on general and specific difficulties to work out an aesthetics of touch, smell and taste; some of them can be overcome, others are still waiting for a proper answer. At the same time, artistic movements as well as the changes in the "aesthetics" of everyday life in the last decades prove the necessity to extend the object of the aesthetic theory to all senses. How such a theory might look like is the last issue addressed by the paper.

Key words: touch, smell, taste

1. Why are philosophers reticent about touch, smell and taste?

The haptic sense (encompassing the feeling of touch, temperature, pain, movement and force), the olfaction and the sense of taste have been traditionally neglected in the history of aesthetics. It was argued that there are no art forms that address these senses and that several reasons would make impossible to work out their aesthetic theory: Touch, smell and taste deal with ephemeral and/or consumable objects. Their stimuli and impressions tend to group in synaesthetic configurations: we „see“ tactile qualities, and the gustatory and olfactory impressions are so intertwined that they form together the so-called „oral sense“. The terminology used to describe the experience and the qualities of touch, smell and taste is extremely poor; for example, the language does not make any difference between the transitive and intransitive meaning of verbs (like ‚to smell‘ or ‚to taste‘), and the denominations of the sensory qualities are borrowed from other senses or from psychology. Neither can we express adequately our impressions, nor are we able to keep distance from the subjective (pleasant or unpleasant) character of the experience and to adopt a critical attitude – as presupposition of the aesthetic experience. In addition, touch, smell and taste are (falsely) supposed to lack that structural complexity that would be required to sustain our attention for a longer time in the process of art interpretation.

Ethno-linguistic studies, though only sporadically dedicated to haptic, smell and taste, suggested that the imprecision and meagerness of vocabulary are typical for the Indo-European languages, but ought not to be generalized for all families of languages. As a matter of fact, empirical studies emphasized that other communities have developed a more refined terminology for these (in the Western culture) "secondary" senses, which comes along with their increased contribution to knowledge. In general, touch, smell and taste are embedded in a particular sociocultural and symbolic system, that codifies and regulates specifically the subject's reactions to sensory stimuli and makes impossible an universal response and intersubjective assessment and agreement.

The question about the existence of haptic, olfactory or gustative representations has still not found an unanimous answer in the scientific community. Moreover, the fact that haptic, smell and taste serve mainly to survival and sexual reproduction has at least two consequences: First, the vital character or, in other words, the subject's vulnerability and the powerful erotic dimension of the "secondary senses"

restrict considerably the realm of what may be subject to an aesthetic experience for these senses, in comparison to the visual arts. And secondly, these senses apparently do not contribute to enhance a humanist perspective, because they do not grasp the difference between man and animal; quite on the contrary, they seem to be more developed in the case of primitives and women, whereas civilized humans should endeavor to repress them in favor of the higher, "theoretical senses" (sight and hearing). Last, but not least, the development in our age of exclusively visual and acoustic media sets forth the repression and impoverishment of haptic, smell and taste; these senses continue to be aroused by media, but only indirectly, by means of images and language.

## 2. Why artists then still work with these senses?

The assumption of traditional aesthetics that there are no arts addressed to touch, smell or taste and that gastronomy, perfumery, carpentry, dressmaking etc. are mere handicrafts or, at best, minor (i.e. practical, applied) arts has not prevented creative agents from keeping working in the medium of these senses; nevertheless, it is also true that this artistic ideology still influences the organization of the art universities and of other art institutions (museums, galleries). And reciprocally, designers, perfumers and chefs distrust the verbal effusion when it comes to philosophical art interpretations. The interest of contemporary choreography for phenomenology belongs to the very few exceptions, as well as the appeal of the perfumers from Groupe du Colisée to aestheticians to support their work. The olfactory education, they argued, cannot be left alone to the representatives of the fragrance industry; these do not advocate anything else than the own market interests and remain "ignorant" about the artistic ideologies and criteria of the artistic value.

Nowadays, the "secondary senses" enter the art on two ways that, oddly, run parallel: either as synaesthetic artistic experiments or as phenomena of lifestyle. Examples for the first direction provide Land Art (in which man as a sensory whole interacts with the environment), Body Art (occasionally inquires for the acceptable limits of pain in art), contemporary dance (focuses on proprioception and enacts the bodily cogito) etc. Eat Art exerts social critique and playfully deconstructs the traditional association between gastronomic and erotic lust (Daniel Spoerri) or interprets cooking as a mythical-metaphysical genesis (Peter Kubelka). Architecture critics and historians (Juhani Pallasmaa, Kenneth Frampton) criticize the visual fixation of modern architecture, with its flat, mirroring facades and scenic design. Even government programs (e.g. Finland, 2004) define architectural beauty "not just [as] a subjective appreciation of a facade or an object, but [as] a central element in the feeling of wellbeing that citizens can have in their living environment" [1]. And to this feeling of well-being contribute all senses: the smell of the building, the feeling of the consistency, stability and resistance of the materials under the feet, the echo of the paces and the temperature of the inner spaces (both in a literal and metaphorical sense).

Not only artists, but also the aesthetics of everyday life suggests a "hunger" for impressions of the "secondary senses" and the need to retrieve a holistic experience and conception of the body. Cooking was widely transformed from a drudgery to a fashionable hobby for "cuisiniers de dimanche", not to mention the long tradition of enology. Aromatherapy and body workshops are still flourishing on the threshold between science, esoteric beliefs and aesthetic hedonism. And even the industrial production of automobiles, furniture and household goods acknowledged the sale advantages of the haptic and olfactory design and

uses them with success.

Aesthetic theory (e.g. ecological aesthetics and postmodern aesthetics) reacted to these transformations of art and aesthetics of daily life by demanding philosophical aesthetics to reconsider its object, precisely, to extend it to configurations addressed to all senses. However, a look upon which works of touch, smell and taste and how they may be included in the art theory detects considerable difficulties.

## 2. Touch is everywhere.

The perspective of working out an aesthetics of the haptic qualities raises from the beginning the question where we can find works of art based on this sense. In our daily life, the meaning of tactility remains imprecise and is often confounded with the haptic and kinaesthesia. And this results in a certain ubiquity of the touch: On the one side, it seems that no ordinary subject can experience pure tactile works of art, which would be only touched, but not seen; there is a basic tendency to visualize everything we see. On the other side, elements of the haptic system (sense of touch, pain, force and temperature) are actively engaged in our current artistic experience of fine arts, dance and architecture, when we use objects of the applied arts and even when we play music. Should then touch and haptic in general be equated with kinaesthesia and with the performative aspect of creating and experiencing art? Let us take a few examples: What could possibly make Jean Dubuffet's and Yves Klein's tangible surfaces and textures more „tactile“ than the naturalistic imitation of tactile qualities exclusively by visual means in the Flemish still life painting? Or can Body Art fulfill better the artist's proprioceptive self-realization (i.e. the perception of the own body from inside) than any „classic“ painting in which the artist feels the resistance of the canvas at the end of the brush and, by that, his/her own body movements? Where are the borders of the literal tactility and when does touch become metaphorical? Each touche is a sort of tou-cher, in the painting as well as in the music (the keyboard instruments are called in German Tastinstrumente, from Tasten, touch). In the end, art creation in general is a poiesis by means of gestures and no visual art has ever been made without using the hands.

In this case, what might still justify the interdiction to touch the objects in museums (of course, except of practical reasons like preserving the works as material objects)? Why visitors are not permitted to comprehend art creation by repeating with their hands the artist's gestures? An aesthetics of tactility sets at stake the status of the museum itself, as a specific modern institution. Moreover, the thematic enlargement of aesthetics implies to include categories of tactile subjects who have been previously „forgotten“ in the art theory and who concretely or metaphorically “lay their hands” on art works, with or without aesthetic intentions: restorers, curators, users of applied arts, collectors and sponsors, faithful people (who adore religious art by touching it) and others who destroy art.

And yet, if tactile works are to be found overall in the fine (visual) arts, are there also particular examples of works that primarily or exclusively address the touch? The simplest answer would recommend to have a look at the art produced by the blind or destined to them. Upon closer inspection, the theories on the art experience of the blind and the didactic methods based on them take as a model the art for the seers; consequently, the art of and for the blind may be nothing else than an inferior or imperfect art. Fortunately, a new direction seems to be lately ongoing, that reflect on tactility per se, independent of sight.

Another difficulty of the tactile aesthetics refers to the issue of originality. How can „original“ works of art for the touch be produced, without having to repeat a previous experience? The novelty may be opened in two ways: by varying either the modalities of the gestures or the object of the touch. In the first case, the subject may try to investigate and perform by touch the same operations, but in different ways. As a result, touch might produce at best an art in the Roman and medieval meaning, as the art of doing something, like the *ars navigandi* or *ars amandi*, yet by no means be a creative production (π\_\_\_\_\_). As a matter of fact, the disabled persons use to improve till perfection the automatic performance of certain activities, but, doing this, they neither aim to reach the state of a disinterested contemplation, nor enjoy the variation of their own gestures.

Secondly, the „artist“ may attempt to invent new materials, that are enjoyable or “interesting” for an investigative touch, just like the perfumer creates fragrant materials with new characteristics. However, in this case, the meaning of being artist has to be redefined, and the romantic separation or even conflict between the craftsman/engineer and the artist has to be revised. Such development is supported by the contemporary rapprochement between art and technology; not only media artists find in technology new forms of expressions, but also economy involves artists and designers in research programs that target to produce new materials. If artistic creativity has been validated as an essential potential for technological development, this still does not elude the question what might ground the aesthetic value of a tactile object or material – is it only the pleasure of touch?

### 3. Smelling art

Unlike the quasi-ubiquity of the tactile arts, the aesthetically valuable fragrances are clearly confined to a particular art: perfumery. While touch seems to „adhere“ unobtrusively to other senses (particularly to sight), losing by that its specific character, perfumery cannot be replaced and not even be reconstructed approximately by any other art. The visual representation of smells in art and their literary descriptions have, from the perspective of their experience, nothing to do with an olfactory art, but merely with the meaning of smells and with the suggestion of atmospheres. An olfactory work of art ought to be smelled concretely and therefore felt, either in a closed space or in a garden or at a flacon.

In the realm of olfaction, one of the main difficulties consists rather in the lack of a specific education and sensibility. The discrepancy between the philosophers' and the perfumers' experience (as far as it may be reconstituted on the basis of their scarce aesthetic reflections on this topic) is glaring. [2] As a rule, the philosophers categorically rejected any use of fragrances as frivolous, dangerous and embarrassing and conceived the olfactory feeling as a mere subjective (sensuous and sensual) pleasure; on the contrary, the perfumers understood their creation as a formal and abstract art of composition, similar to the music.

Already the experience of the blind calls into question the classical idea about artistic experience as a synthesis between sensory delight and intellectual interpretation. For sightless subjects, hedonism and intellectualism are juxtaposed, instead of reconciled into a synthesis. Kant's difference between the pleasant, the beautiful and the good becomes blurred. A sculpted human face is likely to be judged as beautiful by the blind if it respects certain proportions (harmony) and if it reproduces correctly the concept of a particular human type (man, woman, child etc.); as a consequence, it will be also considered pleasant for the touch. Similarly, when smelling a scent, the impressions form a mixture of hedonistic judgements, biographical associations, fantasies about fictitious worlds and, perhaps,

a sharp apprehension of the formal composition of the created fragrance.

In this case, it is not originality any more that may cause a problem for artists (as previously for touch), given the unlimited number of possible combinations between the fragrant materials, but the technical control of the smell diffusion in a closed space (including its desodorisation afterwards), as well as the composition of complex structures (odorous „symphonies“) with several – simultaneous or successive– smells. These difficulties explain why smells are still parsimoniously used in film and theatre performances. Last, but not least, psychological research proved that artificial fragrances can only seldom be identified without any support of visual or verbal stimuli.

#### 4. Gastronomic judgements

The deficit of recognition and thus the impossibility to repeat and deepen the experience of the same object (as a presupposition for the aesthetic experience) is also a common tactile experience: some blind were not able to recognize their own sculptures only a few days after they had made it. This does not at all apply to eaters. Despite the innumerable variants of a particular dish, one experiences spontaneously the feeling of repetition and usually does not encounter any difficulties in naming the dish; and even when this is completely new, the subject is still able to subsume it under a general category. The obsessive and restless quest for the name of the object and the situation in which we felt it for the first time –a typical phenomenon for the olfaction– is, in spite of Proust's madeleine, rather rare in the realm of taste.

No discussion on the feasibility of a gastronomic aesthetics may ignore the so-called relativity of the tastes, an objection that has been for centuries invoked by philosophers against gastronomy as an art. Even though this topic addresses a real issue, it has been obviously overemphasized. Moreover, the adage “de gustibus non disputandum” needs twice a corrective: Contradictory judgements and passionate controversies on the value of works are known in other arts, too, epitomized by modern art and contemporary music. And if the judgements of the gastronomic taste were completely lacking a general character, then it would be absolutely impossible –or fraudulent– to make recommendations for certain restaurants, to give them marks or rank them – which is the task of gastronomy critic. The critics's taste would be as justified as of any other of us, instead of being founded in the immanent gustatory or aromatic qualities of the edible.

As a matter of fact, the subject is multiply influenced when he/she chooses and evaluates the food quality: apart from practical considerations, visual advertisements (of food or body images) may play here as important a role as social ideologies and ethical or religious beliefs. From the perspective of the sensuous experience, a meal resembles to a Gesamtkunstwerk addressed to all senses and served by all sorts of auxiliary arts, related to the vessel and the cutlery, the flower arrangements and the visual presentation of the edible. As for food itself, this arouses the appetite through its colors, smell, consistency and even sound (e.g. crispy). Finally, is noteworthy the problematic character of the taste categories; intercultural studies suggest that the four basic taste notes: sweet, sour, bitter and salty might be a cultural construction, too.

#### 5. Western oculocentrism as a cultural and historical process

Conceiving aesthetics as part of the philosophy of culture and not as a theory of an universal (ad liminem transcendental) subject leads to other two reasons why haptic, olfaction and the sense of taste have been generally

neglected so far in the aesthetic theory: Western metaphysics understood being as a permanent presence and stated civilization as the ideal of humanity.

5.1. Since the ancient Greeks, Western philosophy brought together being and time: the longer something lasts, the more being it implies; and the higher its ontological status, the more valuable it is. Transitory goods are deceitful and minor. As a result, the fine arts, whose material agent is (quasi-)permanent, had to slide almost naturally into the center of the aesthetics. Later on, the theory of music, theatre and other performing arts emphasized the value of the transitory; permanent material objects were replaced by repeatable performances of the "same" work of art.

To some extent, cooking recipes and scent formulas are similar to music, theatre and literature: Here, too, one encounters experts who are able to represent the work only by reading its verbal and numerical transcription, just like a musical ear "hears" the music by reading its score or a choreographer "sees" the movements in the Labanotation. The translation of gastronomy and perfumery into another system of signs serves to disseminate their know-how, but also to archive and thus to preserve them from oblivion, even if as phenomena they cannot be reduced to the language they are saved in – just like all others performing arts.

Given such similarities with the classical performing arts, why are perfumery and gastronomy not considered forms of art? One cannot blame for this neither a less long tradition of these occupations, nor the inferior social status of their authors (let us think about the halo of glamour that surrounds the perfumers), but rather the ephemeral character of their works and the impossibility (up to now) to record and reproduce them technically. The question if this impossibility is fundamental (de jure) or merely historical (de facto) breaks the frame of an aesthetic interrogation and should be left to technology.

5.2. Modern civilization has been described as the process of an increasing limitation of touch [3] and olfaction (desodorisation) [4]. At the end of this process, the „secondary senses“ were banned from the public space in the realm of privacy and considered irrelevant for our knowledge. Although the epistemological priority of the so-called „theoretical senses“ (sight and hearing) undoubtedly has irrefutable biological reasons, the contemporary oculo-centrism should not be considered a fundamental and eternal characteristic of humanity, but –at least partly– the result of a historical process undergone by the Western culture. It is often said that haptic, smell and taste are more „animal“ than sight and hearing, that is, that they respond to deeper bodily needs. However, to see and hear are no less basic biological necessities and the pleasure they cause has repercussions on the entire body, on its tonus and several vital functions. Besides, even if other animals have finer organs of perception for touch or smell, man is still the only being who developed art forms on their basis.

A stronger argument in favor of the traditional hierarchy of the senses and thus for the prominent vital function of haptic, olfaction and taste may be formulated in a negative way: one can survive when sight and/or hearing are missing, but not without touching (or being touched), without smelling and, obviously, without eating. Civilization proclaimed as ideal the man's autonomy and independence from the nature. The liberation from instincts implies a metaphorical equation sight = power: the higher the position one conquers, the best one can see and control the world that lies, ordered and classified, at his/her feet. If vision empowers to knowledge, it also impoverishes the sensory diversity and makes reality feel less real: the visual "sujet de

survival" –with Merleau-Ponty's expression [5]– loses contact to the environment, world becomes an abstraction and, with it, the own body as well. The place from which the world opens itself to the domineering gaze lies outside the world. Correspondingly, distance and contemplation characterize the classical aesthetic subject. With the attempt to rehabilitate touch, smell and taste, a „defenestration“ of the subject takes place; man descends again in the middle of the world and its whirl.

#### 6. Outlines of an aesthetics of the „secondary senses“

In an aesthetics of the „secondary senses“, liberty is deprived of its negative meaning, as in-dependence from the others and as ab-straction (in the meaning of pulling oneself out of the world), and becomes an *Einstimmung*, a kind of tuning and resonance with the environment. Liberty realizes the subject's belonging to an encompassing whole; man's "dependence" of what surrounds him refers to its positive feeling of a primary reliance or confidence in the world and in other beings as well. Living in the world and eventually being subject to experiences condition the subject's self-fulfillment. Due to the complex cultural, symbolic and social dimensions of the "secondary senses", their aesthetic experiences do not necessarily have to be narcissist, as some might assume, quite on the contrary. Though a reflected positive attitude toward senses should still be regarded as crucial to the aesthetic experience, the ecological aesthetics emphasized the ethic dimension of a reflexive hedonism: sensory pleasure constitutes a criterion of good life, both of the individual and the collectivity.

How far art may go (e.g. when dealing with pain) is, to some extent, relative to the codes of a society at a certain moment. The aesthetic ideal ceases to strive after the production and interpretation of some aesthetic values that supposedly exist apart from moral, theoretic, religious or economic purposes, but aims to reach an encompassing understanding of how all senses, and particularly touch, smell and taste, may be used aesthetically in the frame of their more or less relative vital, social and cultural context. As a consequence, the border between aesthetic and non-aesthetic experiences, between everyday and artistic experience becomes permeable and removable, although it does not disappear. The „vertical“ and „abstract“ aesthetics determined that border from above (in a speculative manner), like the Kantian triad of good, beautiful and pleasant in the Critique of judgement; the „horizontal“ aesthetics interprets art from within the concrete experienced situations. And these situations are comparable to fields of forces, in which what attracts the subject is invested with a positive value, what rejects it, with a negative. In any case, the difference between "good" and "bad" configurations of stimuli remains, and value hierarchies as well.

The situational character of the theory not only prevents from generalizing the aesthetic border (in the attempt to produce a general definition of what is art and what not), but it also takes into account the practical purpose of the object (e.g. in the architecture, design etc.). The practical use of the object over a long period of time and the interaction of the object with the body (clothes, furniture) change its physical characteristics and induce a specific aesthetics of the degradable, vulnerable and of temporality; used objects can create poetic atmospheres, the aesthetic quality (of wine etc.) grows in time. Some of the art forms addressed to the "secondary senses" imply a double hermeneutics: interpreting the scent used by a person requires to understand the formal olfactory composition, but also the person's motivations to wear it; the same applies to the tattoos. Finally, several art forms that work with haptic,

olfactory and gustatory stimuli are synaesthetical; correspondingly, their philosophical-aesthetic theory should be able to deal with connotations, associations and metaphors, yet without becoming literature.

[1] Paavo Lipponen, *Architecture and Public* (Europäisches Forum Alpbach, Architekturgespräche, 2004, manuscript), p. 5.

[2] Edmond Roudnitska, *L'esthétique en question* (Paris: P. U. F., 1977); Harold Osborne, "Odours and Appreciations", *The British Journal of Aesthetics*, 17, 1 (Winter 1977), pp. 37–48.

[3] Norbert Elias, *Über den Prozeß der Zivilisation. Soziogenetische und psychogenetische Untersuchungen*, 1 (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1997).

[4] Constance Classen, David Howes, Anthony Synnott, *Aroma. The Cultural History of Smell* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994).

[5] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Le Visible et l'Invisible, suivi de notes de travail* (Paris: Gallimard, 1993), ref. on p. 179.