

Art and the Perceptive Body

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Spaces shaped by humans – such as cities, choreographies and museums – are psychograms of ideologies about who and what belongs where. Moving with any regularity through such spaces must have an enormous impact on the ways each of us thinks.

Shape-wise, Vienna fans out around the circular Ring Street and its magnified mirror image, the Beltway. Is it a mere coincidence that the dance associated with this concentrically circular city is the waltz? Or that Arthur Schnitzler “choreographed” his shrewd comedy of “social traffic patterns” as a “Reigen” or rondo? And by the way, in case you’re wondering what high society is up to in the Neidhart ballroom frescoes from the year 1407, they’re also dancing the rondo.

Dance is an intensification of the experience of our physical bodies, our social bodies and our psyches moving through space. Vienna, for example, is a city built on a human scale. Opulent semi-nude female and male statuary flag the buildings of the façades they adorn as proportionate extensions of the human body. Private residences, public gathering places, and commerce share the same houses, streets and neighborhoods much as they did at the very beginning of urban life. In most areas, the necessities for daily life can be accessed on foot.

Nevertheless, walking is associated with economic under-development. In the EU, the poorer the country, the more pedestrians afoot.¹

Our physical experiences are largely mediated through car, subway, bus or tram windows, and TV or computer screens. Visual perception dominates over physical, haptic perception. Whereas contemporary dance has long since embraced pedestrian movement, contemporary life has peripheralized the movement of pedestrians.

¹ Wittstock, Birgit, „Revolution auf zwei Beinen“, Falter 49/14, Falter Zeitschrift Gsmbh, Wien, 2014, p. 37.

In the elbowing for funding and space, dance still takes a back seat to the other performing arts. Dance is the Cinderella of the performing arts in Western cultures in general.

What does the position of dance – who dances when, where, and how – and the pedestrian – who moves when, where, and how – say about the position of our bodies in the invisible spaces etched in our psyches? Along what paths do our minds travel when we – no doubt unintentionally – pit cyclists against pedestrians, or dance against the other performing arts?

Within dance itself, does an unconscious sense of center and periphery prevail? Is large better than small, or vice versa, and one form of dance more legitimate than another?

And when we reflect on and talk about our encounters with so-called visual art forms, to what extent is our physical bodily participation even considered?

Visual perception dominates over physical, haptic perception not only in daily life, but also in the way we experience, form expectations of, talk about and evaluate art. If art is something to be “understood” rather than “experienced”, this may account for the fact that many people feel more awkward watching a dance performance than dancing themselves, say, at a party. How do we see the body, how do you see YOUR body, how do we watch dance? And how do we look at art? By what criteria do we evaluate, dare I say do we judge, works of art?

Physical movement is intrinsic to our experience of the visual arts, which we encounter by moving through exhibition and other public spaces. A work speaks to you personally: you stop in your tracks. You move before or around it, shifting your perspective, deepening your engagement. You may in fact be moving in response to it. You step back to take it in as a whole; it pulls you in and opens itself to you. You may feel seen, understood. This could be the beginning of an unforgettable relationship.

No other art form requires such direct physical one-on-one participation from its audience. Yet we are more likely to be attentive to visual, emotional, informational, cerebral dimensions of the interaction than to the fundamental participation, interaction and reaction of our bodies.

If we aren't physically alive to painting and sculpture, to dance, to literature, to music, to theater, to architecture, or to any art, we may "get the idea", but we'll probably miss the experience.

Art cannot be equated either with its themes or its forms. Must art deal directly with social and political issues in order to contribute to the critical process, to change how we "see" the world?

As the 2014 Erasmus Prize winner Frie Leyson poignantly emphasized in her acceptance speech, art can't solve political problems.² But art can open new pathways of perception, shifting the lines along which our minds travel, to perceive more than is visible to the eye alone. Art can literally move us.

What actually happens to us when we are having what we think of as an optical experience? In the next few minutes, we will consider how cultural attitudes and daily practices have colluded to separate seeing from the other senses. This talk ponders strategies for rediscovering our physical, haptic perceptual powers while reading, watching dance, walking, and moving through museums.

The story of dance as a performing art goes hand-in-hand with the story of urban ambling. The fair city of Vienna is a close-to-hand example.

After Emperor Josef II opened the royal Prater grounds and the Augarten park to the people in 1766 and 1775, pedestrians became a major factor in city planning. Free time and open space to amble did not imply freedom of movement, however. When, for example, the Volksgarten– the People's Garden – was built in 1823, the walking

²<http://www.erasmusprijs.org/?lang=en&page=Nieuws&mode=detail&item=Speech+Frie+Leysen+online>

paths were designed so that the strolling folk could be kept an eye on to ensure that no untoward encounters or insurrections occurred. (Footnote)

In Josef's time, vice squads from the so-called "chastity commission" or "Keuschheitskommission" kept a vigilant watch over all places where people clustered, to circumvent same-sex romance, or commercial transactions conducted by women who walked the streets for a living.³

Using your body to make a living was altogether frowned on. In 1776, the Enlightened Emperor put the kibosh on theatrical dance, and brought a great era of dance development in Vienna to a crashing halt. This is a clear example of disembodied decision-making.

Dance made a comeback under Josef's successor Leopold, and conventions continued to determine how people moved in the public theater of the city and the stage.

The chastity commission was disbanded at the beginning of the 19th century, and replaced by codes of costume and decorum. Recreational walking determined the public shape of the body. On the crowded Corso for example, wide crinoline skirts took up far too much space, and were re-situated to form the ubiquitous back bustle.⁴

And a middle-class woman walking "unattended" was required to carry a special accessory: yes, a sewing basket as a symbol of domestic industriousness.⁵ Women walking in public were subject to suspicion, just like women dancing in public.

What was it about dance that made it suspect? Reactions to the advent of the Viennese waltz are telling. The Viennese waltz was the very first social dance that wasn't a group number, and that had couples facing each other and in close proximity for the entire dance. In 1797, the writer Salamon Jakob Wolf published a treatise entitled "Proof that Waltzing is the Main Source of Weakness of the Body and Mind of our

³ Rapp, Christian, "nichts tun: vom flanieren, pausieren, blaumachen und müßiggehen", Österreichisches Museum für Volkskunde, Wien, 2000, s. 33.

⁴ Rapp, Christian, "nichts tun: vom flanieren, pausieren, blaumachen und müßiggehen", Österreichisches Museum für Volkskunde, Wien, 2000, s. 40.

⁵ Ibid., p. 40.

Generation". The poet Byron described waltzing couples as "two cockchafers spitted on the same bodkin."

We certainly don't judge dance by those standards today. But perhaps we do expect things of dance that it cannot fulfill, leaving us unsatisfied and alienated. Perhaps we can find our way to dance by exploring our own movement experience, namely walking.

What happens when we set out to explore new space – traveling to a strange place, taking a different route to a familiar destination, or creating and inhabiting a new work of art? Moving bodily through unknown territory, things shift in our inner topography as well. We open up new routes for our minds.

The experience of turning an unfamiliar corner and seeing something unexpected is often accompanied by the feeling that anything is possible. Experiencing yourself in a different place and trying it on for size, the unknown view around the bend reawakens your sense of potential, your awareness that things could be different.

At the end of that street, what you discover, and what you have been pursuing all along, is a new view of yourself. It points to what we long for yet fear the most: Change. Change is life itself; change is the death of what we think we know.

Perhaps it is the act of walking or otherwise physically ambulating that is as essential to such transformational experiences as the place itself. Art critic and curator Vitus Weh ponders the role of movement through spaces dedicated to art:

"Today the public space in front of or around museums is a central part of their affective corporeal realm. Visitors "go to the museum". The movement aspect of the visit might well be the most significant. For sociologist Lucius Burckhardt, who founded "Strollology" as a discipline of study, this was indeed the case. Walking serves the exploration of our everyday environments as well as the absorption of new content and knowledge. We've practically always known that most things are experienced and remembered more intensively through connective spatial impressions and physical movement than through hearing a story, reading a book or surfing the

web. This mechanism has been implemented for thousands of years in temple and church grounds, with their meditational passageways, spatial arrangements and zonings. It has also been central to the museum landscape.”

Our automotive, aerial and screen technologies transport us through distances, and distant places to us, while ironically distancing ourselves from our own bodies.

In a landmark treatise called “The Eyes of the Skin: Architecture and the Senses”, architect Juhani Pallasmaa explores what happens to us when we isolate ourselves from haptic contact with our surroundings, or when our surroundings also refuse to speak to us haptically:

“Computer imaging tends to flatten our magnificent, multi-sensory, simultaneous and synchronic capacities of imagination by turning the design process into a passive visual manipulation, a retinal journey. The computer creates a distance between the maker and the object, whereas drawing by hand as well as working with models put the designer in a haptic contact with the object, or space. ... Creative work calls for a bodily and mental identification, empathy and compassion.” (p.14)

As Pallasmaa implies with the title “The Eyes of the Skin”, “seeing” is not a function of central vision alone; our bodies are involved in the act of and reaction to visual perception.

It turns out that when you do a close, attentive reading of a literary text, you are also having a haptic experience. Scientist Natalie Phillips, who specializes in cognitive approaches to literature, has observed “... a global increase in blood flow to the brain during close reading, which, she says, suggests that "paying attention to literary texts requires the coordination of multiple complex cognitive functions." Close reading ... most activated parts of the brain that are associated with touch, movement, and spatial orientation. It was as though readers were actually experiencing being in the story.”⁶

These findings have been corroborated in other cognitive science investigations.

⁶ Randolph, Elizabeth, “Distracted Reading in the Digital Age (and What to Do About It)”, Vassar College, Winter 2015, Volume 111, Issue 1, The Alumnae/I Quarterly, Poughkeepsie, NY, p.12.

As *Scientific American* editor Ferris Jabr (2013) explains:

“Beyond treating individual letters as physical objects, the human brain may also perceive a text in its entirety as a kind of physical landscape. When we read, we construct a mental representation of the text. The exact nature of such representations remains unclear, but some researchers think they are similar to the mental maps we create of terrain – such as mountains and trails – and of indoor physical spaces ...”⁷

“In most cases, paper books have more obvious topography than on-screen text. ... Turning the pages of a paper book is like leaving one footprint after another on a trail – there is a rhythm to it and a visible record of how far one has traveled. All these features not only make the text in a paper book easily navigable, they also make it easier to form a coherent mental map of that text.”⁸

As a close reader, I fall into the wormholes between words, and wander in their underworlds before resurfacing into the textured terrain of object-words. What I find is myself expanding into the physicality, the corporeality of poetic language, and the formal and metaphorical uses of space. In ancient coming-of-age stories, the centuries-old themes of art, Adam and Eve’s fall from grace lands them on Earth. Icarus plunges from the sky into the sea, and Persephone is ravished into the Underworld, to return to Earth with an altered consciousness. Isn’t Persephone’s story a metaphor for art? We are pulled in, immersed, and then we resurface, but with our consciousness altered, forever half here and half there.

We are equipped with more means of visual perception than we have until recently realized. In their ground-breaking work on the far-reaching potential of optics-less imaging using “smart” sensors and “skin vision” for – among other applications – eventually developing reading devices for the blind, Leonid Yaroslavsky *et al.* (2010) posit:

“Organisms in nature use a wide variety of visual systems [1, 2]. Most of them use optics to form images, but optics-less cutaneous vision (skin vision) is also found among many types of living organisms. (p.1). ... There are also numerous reports on

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

the phenomenon of cutaneous vision in humans [9–11]. In particular, Ref. [10] provides some quantitative data on the ability of a certain young woman to “see” images using only the fingers of her right hand. It also reports that in a series of carefully conducted tests, this subject demonstrated the ability to detect colours, to resolve patterns in near-contact with her fingers with a resolution of about 0.6 mm and the ability to determine simple patterns within a maximal distance of 1-2 cm from the fingers.”

Professor Yaroslavsky kindly offered me this summary in an email:

“In short, I affirm that human skin is certainly sensitive to optical radiation, especially to its infrared part, which, in particular, gives us sensation of heat. Therefore, the skin should contain radiation detectors and a corresponding neural circuitry. I believe that it will, in principle, be possible to teach people, especially blind people, to use these mechanisms of extra-ocular vision for a kind of reading ... in addition, I believe that electronic devices can be designed that use infrared radiation for assisting blind people to read news and books.”

The pioneers of inner space, traveling and tracing the intricate pathways and interstices of neural circuitry, are changing the ways we think about who we are and how we function, opening new frontiers of potential to be explored.

Nobel neuroscientist Eric Kandel (2012) illustrates differences in two complementary types of optical vision – central or so-called foveal vision, and peripheral vision – by explaining that the ambiguous emotionality of Leonardo da Vinci’s *Mona Lisa* and her smile is invisible to our detail-focused foveal vision, and perceptible only through the holistic analysis of our peripheral cone vision.⁹ (pp. 245-246) Where your focused vision sees just a mouth, your peripheral vision perceives ambiguity.

This may help to make sense of Pallasmaa’s critique of an architecture created by the eye for the eye:

⁹ Kandel, E. (2012). *The Age of Insight: The Quest to Understand the Unconscious in Art, Mind and Brain, from Vienna 1900 to the Present*. New York, NY: Random House.

“One of the reasons why the architectural and urban settings of our time tend to make us outsiders ... is in their poverty in the field of peripheral vision. Unconscious peripheral perception transforms retinal Gestalt into spatial and bodily experiences. Peripheral vision integrates us with space, while focused vision pushes us out of the space making us mere spectators.” (p. 15) “The very essence of the lived experience is molded by unconscious haptic imagery and unfocused peripheral vision.”¹⁰ (p.14)

We cannot grasp how focused vision works until we release it from duty and see what happens to us while it's on a break, and see how it acts when it comes back. For me it was an accidental discovery that preceded my encounter with Pallasmaa's work by a decade.

Imagine this: You're watching a wild, densely packed William Forsythe choreography. You exhaust yourself, hopelessly chasing after a multitude of details while losing your grasp of the whole. You then rest your eyes on a canvas above the heads of the dancers. All of a sudden, you feel the dancers' movement as if it were something happening to you. You are watching nothing, and seeing everything. You perceive a bow frenetically drawn across a cello through the side of your neck. The sensation of two people vigorously embracing enters you through your crotch. Everything and everybody turns into your body, and your entire body turns into an eye. You can “see” with your skin.

And now, dance had liberated itself from needing to be seen to be experienced.

On my way home after that Forsythe performance, I called a biologist friend who keeps late hours to help me make sense of how I could have seen movement I was not looking at. He explained that it was my peripheral nervous system kicking in, which happens when you relax the hold of your active gaze, i.e. your central vision.

Since then, I've been taking my peripheral vision dancing and walking.

¹⁰ Pallasmaa, Juhani, “The Eyes of the Skin: Architecture and the Senses“, John Wiley & Sons Ltd, UK, 2012, p. 14.

When you walk down a street, and you are looking straight ahead or around on a plane of vision within the scene, you are the mover moving past the buildings, and you are separate from them and from other people.

When, however you lift your gaze above the scene, the buildings and the people move past you, and you are enmeshed in and part of their movement, like water rushing, and you a moving divide in a strong current of movement.

When you lower your sight line again, your eyes are the hands that push the buildings away and hold them at arm's length. You regain a sense of autonomy, of separation. If you gaze straight ahead again and up at the sky as you are walking, your eye searches in vain for a foothold, for something to grasp. You are no longer on the same plane as what lies before you; you are standing on the lower end of a see-saw. Your eyes are the hands and feet that keep you steady and keep things at a distance. With focused vision, you are the mover; with peripheral vision, you are being moved.

This is probably what Pallasmaa is talking about when he says:

“The steadily growing hegemonic claim of the eye seems to go hand in hand with the development of Western self-consciousness and the increasing separation of the self from the world. Seeing separates us from the world, whereas the other senses unite us with it. Focused vision confronts us with the world, whereas peripheral vision envelops us in the flesh of the world.”¹¹ (p.14)

Perhaps it is our habit of being spectators through windows and screens that reinforces an imperative to “understand”, to order and to make sense of what we see, and an uneasy feeling of inadequacy that makes us defensive against and dismissive of art that, speaking haptically, seems to have nothing to say to us.

When we watch dance frontally, following and scrutinizing it with focused vision, are we not trying to pin something down, to “nail it”, i.e. to “get it”? Are we in fact trying to fight against the fluidity of movement, to freeze it, to suspend motion?

¹¹ Pallasmaa p. 14

In his article *Peripheral Visual Awareness: The Central Issue*, behavioral optometrist Steve Gallop (1996) sees the privileging of central vision as a cultural phenomenon, influencing among other things the focus, so to speak, of vision research:

“Thus, despite the fact that most incoming light is processed by peripheral retina and not by fovea, it is the nature of our culture that emphasis is placed on the small details, not the big picture: on outcome, not process: on stasis, not change.

Central/foveal vision is about static details and outcome. Peripheral vision is about movement and process, and it is involved with detecting and understanding the big picture – the context and changes in our environment. ... At least visually speaking, it helps to keep us in touch with our relationship to everything with which we share visual space. Peripheral vision is at the heart of awareness of, and response to, the total space/time volume of our visual environment and all its inhabitants.” (pp. 151-152) ¹²

Your peripheral vision extends your skin's sensors beyond itself, just like you hear things that are not directly touching your ear. You sense motion before you see who's moving. This is a survival mechanism that enabled people to perceive threats before they came into full view.

In their article “The learning brain: Lessons for education: a précis”, Sarah-Jayne Blakemore and Uta Frith say:

“One of the vehicles of teaching and learning is imitation. However, we learn merely by observation, even without performing the action ourselves. How is this possible? An important new insight of brain science is that simply observing someone performing an action activates the same brain areas that are activated by producing movements oneself (Rizzolatti, Fadiga, Gallese & Fogassi, 1996). ... Your brain mimics other people's actions even if you don't. Simulating observed actions in the brain might make performing that action easier if and when you come to perform the action yourself. Some aspects of teaching and learning depend upon this effect. Imagine

¹² Gallop, Steve O.D., “Peripheral Visual Awareness: The Central Issue”, *Journal of Behavioral Optometry*, Vol. 7, No. 6, 1996. <http://vision-therapy-pa.com/published-articles/peripheral-visual-awareness--the-central-issue.html>

trying to learn to dance without being able to observe someone dancing first. Learning from observation is usually easier than learning from verbal descriptions... This might be because, by observing an action, your brain has already prepared to copy it.”[\[1\]](#) (p. 463)

Perhaps feeling our way into someone else’s movement is what we can call physical empathy. We apparently do it automatically. So maybe we just need to tune into it when we’re in a museum.

Let’s look for a moment at art that must be seen with the body. I am thinking of Leonart Bramer's “The Raising of the Cross” – “Die Kreuzaufrichtung” – in the Gemäldegalerie. What you see is a familiar biblical subject: The cross onto which Christ has just been nailed is being raised from the ground into an upright position. The journey of the cross from the ground up traces the arc, as we know, of being in the body, suffering, and leaving the body to become spirit. The painter catches the journey $\frac{3}{4}$ of the way up. The faces are not really visible. The real story is in the bodies. What you feel is the brute muscular energy of the men heaving and hauling the massive cross into position, “doing their job”. Christ’s head is sunk; what you feel is utter physical helplessness, that sickening, shameful feeling that some dumb brute has total physical power over you. The most sadly vivid faces in the picture are the faceless forgotten little skulls left to rot in the dust, their bones splayed helplessly next to them. I trust you’ll check it out when you’re upstairs.

Let’s look for a moment at art that takes us walking. I’m thinking of a work by Lothar Baumgarten that Sabine Folie exhibited in the Generali Foundation, called Section 125-25 64-58 Hommage á M.B., 1972-74. It consists of feathers from different North American Indian tribes stuck on a wall. If you leave your frontal perspective and walk alongside the wall, the air your movement moves stirs the feathers to life. As you walk past each of them, they move in response to you. When you feel a live, responsive presence, what you feel when you reach the end – their end – is indescribable. This is the difference between getting the point and having an experience.

Today, visual-haptic art forms are taking on new significance, especially with the dominance of emerging imaging technologies. As Pallasmaa says:

“Perhaps, when the eye is freed of its underlying wish for control and power, then the unfocused gaze of our time can succeed in opening new realms of seeing and of thought.”¹³

And you – You integrate vision with the other senses, for example, when you read poetry aloud. The printed words on the page are only the skin of the poem. The body of the poem is its sound, the sound of your voice as you take it into your body and speak it. Perhaps you feel and hear a dimension of meaning invisible to the eye alone, much as dancers embody the subtler rhythms and harmonies of music, the movement translating itself into an audibly enriched musical texture.

You relax the hold of focused vision when you listen to minimalist music. You let go of the wish that the phrase would stop repeating itself, and fall instead into the body of the instruments, into the colors and textures and depth of their sound palettes. Or when you gaze into a monochrome painting, and the color shifts and parts like clouds, revealing infinite space.

The body is receptive to movement, to voices, sounds, textures and atmospheres – complex, mutable – that cannot be reduced to content. Art with critical content is important. But content alone does not measure up to the power of art. A critique, a politics of art that excludes the needs as well as the perceptive potential of the body, is a contradiction, above all in a critical discourse on the manipulation and the exploitation of the body.

And finally, back to the dance. The question is not what sense you see in the dance, but what senses you see the dance with. As George Balanchine would say, “See the music, hear the dance”. As Merce Cunningham would say, “Sit back, relax, and enjoy it”. And I say, there may not be a point to get, but you may have an experience. To experience something, you need all of you, all of you. Thank you!

¹³ Pallasmaa p.

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