AISTHESIS

Scoprire l’arte con tutti i sensi

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THE SYMPHONIC SENSE: THE COMPLEXITIES OF TOUCH

by Matteo Cerri

NEUROPHYSIOLOGIST

Every living organism of minimal complexity uses its senses to explore its surroundings. There are senses such as sight, hearing and smell which enable us to interact with our environment from a distance. They are passive, in the sense that the environment reveals itself through them independent of our volition. However, there is one sense which cannot operate at a distance and which is often associated with a conscious intention to explore our environment: touch. It is difficult to say which sense is the most important, but if we were asked to rank them, there is little doubt that we would be very unlikely to find touch at the top of the list. But this might be the result of our failure to understand and truly appreciate this wonderful sense. Its complexity and significance had been grasped, though, by Aristotle: in his treatise On the Soul, he identifies it as the sense which distinguishes man from the animals.

To understand the importance of touch, let’s try to imagine what it would be like without it. Unlike sight and hearing, whose absence we can briefly simulate, to try to imagine life without touch is extremely difficult, almost impossible. It is touch which sends a costant flow of information to the brain, even though we are unaware of much of it. The unpleasant sensation of losing our sense of feeling is what we have when the dentist gives us a local anaesthetic. That odd numb sensation is caused precisely by the interruption to the flow of information which our brain is accustomed to receive; numbness is what we feel when feeling has been deadened.

But there are many other reasons why touch is such an extraordinary sense. To begin with, we would be failing to recognize its complexity if we treated it as a single sense. What we experience is one, integrated tactile sensation, but in fact the sense of touch does not exist per se. What exists are many types of tactile sensations, each with its own receptors and properties. For example, the ability to distinguish surfaces and their edges is

characteristic of the Merkel nerve endings. It is thanks to them that it is possible to read Braille. The distribution of these corpuscles on the skin enables certain areas, like the lips and fingertips, to read it; other areas are blind to Braille precisely because they are without the receptors needed to see it tactilely. The sense of touch is also linked intrinsically and inextricably to our emotions. In the emotional sphere, any touch can kindle a range of different sensations according to the expectations we harbour. Our sense of touch is in fact our ultimate safeguard. If something touches us without our knowledge, that something could represent a threat to our security and it is our sense of touch which triggers the alarm. If, though, that touch was expected, even desired, such as a mother caressing her child, then not only will it not seem threatening, but positively pleasurable. Yet we live in a society which has a phobia of touching. So much so that we have found it necessary to create a Global Hug Day (21st January), as if this gesture needed a justification. And yet, subconsciously we recognise its value. For example, doctors who touch their patients more frequently during a medical examination are credited by the patients themselves with being the better doctors. But nowadays it is not generally considered good manners to touch someone without permission; and even when this permission exists, as in the case of a pair of lovers, our behaviour is determined to a large degree by social conditioning. In Puerto Rico couples come into physical contact on average 150 times an hour, in Paris 110 times, in Florida twice and in London not even once. It must have something to do with the proverbial British self control. There is, though, a stage in our lives when it is very important to experience the sensation of touch: in infancy. Children who grow up deprived of physical contact with their parents suffer from much higher levels of stress. Indeed, touch is the first sense to develop and it is already active by the eighth week, when the embryo is a mere 1.5 cm. long.

Besides tactile sensations as such, touch is the realm which accounts for our perception of heat and cold, pain and, obviously, emotion. These sensory impressions can access our emotions and condition our behaviour even when we are unaware of it. For instance, it is enough to have a cup of warm tea in our hands to feel more kindly disposed towards others. In fact the idea of warmth envelops much of our emotional code because it is the emotion of human warmth or of the warmth of an embrace which fuses this sensory modality with the emotion of contact itself. It is hardly surprising that we describe a sensitive, discreet person as "tactful", from the Latin tactus, meaning "sense of touch". In

conclusion, touch is nothing short of a symphonic sense, generating an emotional melody by calling into play the range of sensory instruments at its disposal; like an orchestra in which the instruments, singly and in combination, colour the music with which we are brought into contact. And contact is very much the operative word.

THE BRERA APPROACH – FROM INCLUSION TO PARTICIPATION

by James Michael Bradburne

DIRECTOR GENERAL OF THE PINACOTECA DI BRERA AND THE BIBLIOTECA NAZIONALE BRAIDENSE

By drawing on the Pinacoteca di Brera’s pioneering history in museum education, and on its remarkable Educational Services team – employed as gallery assistants – the past four years have seen the museum’s educational and social programmes develop and take shape until they exemplify what might be described as “the Brera approach”. It is an approach based on respect, both towards the visitors, eager for a moving experience that will transform them, and the museum personnel, whose individual expertise and experience are placed at the service of the Pinacoteca’s varied activities, especially in education.

Respect means putting each visitor at the centre of the museum experience and finding a way to allow everyone to respond to the collection in their own way and in their own time, feeling welcome and relaxed rather than disorientated and excluded. But what does “respecting the visitor” really mean? First of all it means trying to discover what it is that makes each visitor unique and, at the same time, asking how the particular experience of the individual might contribute to the general experience of the museum and to that of other visitors. Then it means imagining the sort of tools that might be made available to visitors so that they can record and share their personal experiences.

A first step in this direction, which we can call “visible listening”, is to make the the experience of the individual available to everyone: preparing new and original introductory material which offers different points of view; then setting aside areas of the museum where vistors can leave drawings or comments and share them on social media.

A subsequent and more delicate step is to listen and work with visitors whose experience of the world is different: people who are deaf or hard-of-hearing, blind of partially sighted,

or whoever has a mental or physical condition which changes the way in which they interact with the museum environment. It is important that these differences should be seen not as deficits for which we need to compensate in an effort to ensure that all visitors correspond to a certain standard, but as sources of information and additional viewpoints which can enrich the experience of other visitors. For example, the stools, which can be placed where you like, might be seen both as a solution for visitors who have difficulty standing for long periods and as a means of encouraging people to view the works of art from a sitting position, chatting perhaps among themselves. The tactile and olfactory information might also be seen as addressed exclusively to visitors with special needs or as features which can enhance everyone’s experience.

It is essential to the Brera approach to pass from the idea of inclusion to the idea of participation, and to learn to ask ourselves not how to “help” but how to “be helped” so that diversity will prove an asset for everyone. Our way of going about this might be described as anthropological. The anthropologist does not judge, but observes. At the Brera we observe in order to discover ever newer resources to be used as a recurrent starting point from which to constantly revitalise the museum experience.

This grassroots approach is most clearly exemplified by the new presentations which are large, legible and above all comprehensible, written not just by experts, but by writers, poets, artists, and even by a cook. Besides these, there are descriptions with tactile features, also in Braille, and new olfactory descriptions which allow the visitor to “scent” the picture. The café, too, has come up with a special menu featuring dishes inspired by the paintings. The Brera has not just one sense, but five! The special introductions for children and families are part and parcel of a whole series of initiatives including treasure hunts, challenges, drawing kits, a suitcase for families - called Piera, and crammed with amusements for all ages - and drawing benches where visitors are invited to try their hand at being artists. The portable stools, as mentioned earlier, enable visitors to linger in front of their favourite paintings and observe them at leisure. The overall aim is to encourage visitors to undertake a self-oriented, self-directed and self-sustained exploration of the Picture Gallery’s rearranged collections.

Franco Russoli believed that a museum was an essential part of our shared identity, just as Fernanda Wittgens considered art to be integral to our shared humanity. While you need a whole village to bring up a child, so you need a whole city to form a citizen. The

Picture Gallery’s educational activities are part of the broader project Occorre tutta una città (We need a whole city) and besides targeting every single visitor and catering to his or her specific needs, they aim to support the entire social group to which each belongs. With this in mind, the Brera is working with the Buzzi Children’s Hospital and with the Vidas Association hospices; it is also involved in programmes for people with Alzheimer’s or Parkinson’s and their carers.

A society bereft of memory lives in a state of social dementia, and when it can no longer make sense of its present because it no longer has access to its past, the result is confusion, disorientation and chaos, manifesting itself as intolerance, extremism and social unrest. Some time ago the municipal schools in Reggio Emilia showed that the secret of memory is documentation, and documentation is what the Brera approach undertakes at all levels: from restoring long-forgotten museum archives from over seventy years ago to publishing the biographies of great Brera directors; from drawing on the Brera’s history to produce comics, children’s books and even stamps to developing the museum website which hosts not just Brera Stories – an indepth look at oral accounts of the museum’s past – but also MyBrera, a collective oral account of three generations of museum employees.

The purpose of a museum is constantly to permeate the present with an awareness of the past, as a basis on which to construct the future. Memory is frail and needs to be continually revived if it is to play an active part in creating a future which is just, moral and sustainable. In a world that has witnessed the return of slogans which we assumed had been discredited a century ago, one in which intolerance, hatred and extremism are on the rise, the museum has a fundamental role. If we want to continue to place our hopes in a future worthy of our children’s expectations, we cannot allow the past to be forgotten. And for the museum, this is not merely a hope but a moral obligation:

Because the Brera is not the “hortus conclusus” of the collector, the museum of exquisite artefacts: the Brera is a national gallery with a rich and varied history, created by Napoleon for “the education of the people” according to a central Enlightenment ideal which we, its heirs, must not betray.

So Fernanda Wittgens declared in 1957.

EVERY FORM HAS AN INNER CONTENT: FROM ARTWORK TO ITS MENTAL VISUALIZATION

by Valeria Bottalico

ACCESSIBILBITY EXPERT AND CURATOR OF TACTILE TOURS

"Strictly speaking, form is the dividing line between one surface and another: that is its outer meaning. But since everything which is outer encloses […] within it an innerness – more or less evident -, every form has an inner content", as Kandinsky remarks in Concerning the Spiritual in Art.

If we take some pieces of cardboard, seeing or touching them for the first time, we would only see random forms. But if we move them about and assemble them differently, we will end up by recognising the outline of something familiar. This suggests how important it is to distinguish between knowing and recognising. Within us we possess forms which allow us to recognise objects without knowing or seeing with our eyes. In our mind, the forms are caught, recognised, examined, corrected and filed away behind our everyday experience. In short, we have a mental picture of them.

This need to find meaning is apparent not just in the way we touch and look at objects, but in everything that we perceive: here vision is a metaphor for all the images and all the ways by which we understand, or try to understand, the world. Sensory richness, education, the variety and repetitiveness of experience enable us to identify the common features which distinguish an object.

Our first cognitive act is to identify the form. Our perception of the world derives from all our senses but touch is the one most used, albeit unconsciously: it completes a visual and auditory impression and provides further information to enable us to understand our surroundings. Tactile language is the child's earliest form of communication, so for each one of us it is the language of love and relationship. It is our hands we mainly use to do everything: weigh, write, type, model, stroke, communicate, lightly brush, grasp, hug, know, count, classify, greet, squeeze, hit, even read.

It is not just objects which tactile exploration acquaints us with; it is also works of art: if accompanied by an accurate verbal description, touch helps us create a mental picture. Form is what provides most perceptual, cognitive and symbolic information because it defines outline, surface, size and general composition. Tactile exploration presupposes two important intellectual functions: abstraction and memory. Tactile memory is different from visual memory because sight takes in and recalls the whole, whereas touch registers only the detail. But an initial hasty exploration leads on to a subsequent, more detailed summation of features.

In recent years, museums have been equipping themselves to make their collections more accessible, or rather, more user-friendly. A museum is a meeting place where people can enjoy the cultural heritage intended for the public. Everyone has the right to access this heritage under the most favorable conditions. There is no such thing as the 'typical' visitor, only many 'types' of visitor since each is different and unique in their own way. Accessibility means the right of every citizen to enjoy the cultural heritage: it refers to everything and it is not a once-and-for-all acquisition but evolves and needs to be constantly reviewed in the light of the visitors' experience. It is achieved through the combined efforts of all parties and relies, first and foremost, on a vision which promotes and fosters knowledge and participation.

I have studied the question of the accessibility of our cultural heritage very thoroughly, not least thanks to the tactile itineraries which I have planned for several important Italian museums (including the Peggy Guggenheim Collection in Venice, the Accademia Carrara of Bergamo, the Musei Civici of Bassano del Grappa, and the Archaeological Museum of Milan, in collaboration with Aster which provides the educational services). This is why I believe it is vitally important first of all to select what, i.e. which artwork, it is possible to touch, bearing in mind a number of general criteria: the state of conservation and the material; the position, one affording unrestricted access and allowing tactile exploration to be conducted safely and easily; the size, such as to enable the work to be read as a whole; its legibility to touch.

The museum visit must be gratifying and pleasurable. It must allow the visitor to acquire new skills, encouraging him to go back over and build on what he has learnt. Even more, the museum must allow the artworks (or their reproductions) to be explored tactilely; it must ensure that its staff is efficient, properly trained and dedicated; it must provide

different itineraries for adults and children, and allow visitors the chance to take part in laboratory activities. A replica conducive to touch can certainly prove a valid alternative to the original, all the more effective the closer it is to reality. And to be effective, a reproduction in relief needs to be clear and with precisely defined planes so as to convey the image from the eye to the hand.

It is important, ultimately, that accessibility is not merely confined to tactile or technological tools. Accessibility means devising activities, both optical and haptical, to assist our vision, so that we can arrive at a knowledge which is not only formal but critical and aesthetic, too. In a word, by responding cognitively and emotionally to a work of art, we get to experience something new in life.

SCULPTURE: EXPLORING MYSELF AND THE WORLD WE LIVE IN

by Rabarama

SCULPTOR

Art is indistinguishable from being: not a job or a hobby, but a true vocation. The need to express myself through sculpture, rather than simply resorting to the written word, took root in me at a tender age: following in the footsteps of my father (painter and sculptor) and mother (potter) I was amazingly lucky to be introduced early on to other, uncommon forms of communication and to be free to choose the one which suited me best. Contact with clay stirs all that is deep and primordial in me, so that I am in harmony with myself and with my deepest emotions and can then express them through the creation of a work of art. My father would always remind me that the important thing is to have a message to put across; so long as the message is clear, how it is conveyed is not important, because it will be understood by everybody. Through my sculptures I try to say something about myself, my quests and my feelings, in relation to the world in which we live today - one full of marvels, but also of horrors which we need to address.

Once I had settled on my means of expression, I plotted, as it were, my course of study so as to follow my inclination, enrolling first at the Liceo Artistico in Treviso and then at the Accademia di Belle Arti in Venice. As soon as I had completed my studies, I did my best to feature in as many exhibitions as possible, until I found a gallery prepared to sign my first exclusive contract; and it was this that gave a real boost to my career, particularly internationally. Now I work independently and manage my professional dealings myself. Hard work, dedication, and a love of what I do form the bedrock of everything I have been able to achieve, year after year, and I am happy to say that my creative strivings have continued to advance and bear fruit.

Everything hinges on man; he is the cornerstone. At first I thought of man as merely a biological computer whose preordained fate was inextricably tied to his genetic composition; the matrix, founded on primordial beliefs and traditions, did not allow of self-

determination because it was fixed from the outset. But thanks to my travels and ongoing studies, often of ancient philosophies and cultures, I have broadened my knowledge and now see a glimmer of hope: the last word has not been said, we can discover our individual direction by attending to our deepest self. It is essential to access our inner energy and to allow this energy to connect with all the creatures and vital forces around us. So, if at first my answer to the question, “Why are we here?” was pessimistic, I am now firmly convinced that there is a purpose, though it passes our understanding. The first step is to arrive at self-knowledge so that our inner light can spread and free itself from our physical body. This is the focus of my research at the moment: only by releasing ourselves from fears and earthly ties can we attain to a condition of perfect completeness.

Paola Epifani, known professionally as Rabarama, at the Museo Omero for the Biennale Arteinsieme 2019 with the exhibition “Rabarama e i giovani artisti” (“Rabarama and Young Artists”) from June to September.

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