Special section editorial

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This edited collection of articles deals with the body as it is presented, represented, performed, solicited and experienced through an encounter with art. In their different contributions, each author engages with the body as both a research tool and as a source of tacit knowledge. Their focus on the body in the production and reception of art has its roots in what have variously been referred to as the corporeal turn, the sensory turn, and the material turn. In what follows, and at the risk of generalising the nuances of these complex topics, I briefly sketch the premises of these "turns" and, in doing so, elaborate on the theoretical frameworks that underpin our articles.

In 1990 Maxine Sheets-Johnstone (1990:19) used the phrase 'the corporeal turn' to describe the turn towards the body and bodily life in research in the arts, humanities and social sciences. Now a full-blown theoretical position at the foundation of body-centred scholarship, the corporeal turn assumes that experience is the 'grounding source of knowledge' and is committed to a 'dedicated examination of experience as the testing ground of one's knowledge' (Sheets-Johnstone 2009:2). The turn towards the body challenges the rationalist system of philosophy we have inherited from René Descartes, according to which mind and body were conceived as fundamentally separate entities. Not only does the Cartesian paradigm separate mind and body, but it also presents the body as subordinate to the mind, which, it is believed, functions *in spite* of the limitations and inconvenience of the imperfect body (Descartes 1965:28).

In contrast, a philosophical approach that supports the notion of an *embodied* mind acknowledges that anything we think, know and communicate has its basis in bodily experience. If the mind is inherently embodied, then 'reason is not disembodied ... but arises from the nature of our brains, bodies and bodily experience' as George Lakoff and Mark Johnson (1999:1) argue in their ground-breaking text *Philosophy in the flesh: The embodied mind and its challenge to western thought*. This does not simply mean that we need a body in order to think, or to contain our mind. Rather, it is a declaration that

Published by

SCHOOL OF THE ARTS
UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA
FACULTY OF HUMANITIES

DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.17159/2617-3255/2022/n36a21

'the very structure of reason itself comes from the details of our embodiment' (Lakoff & Johnson 1999:2). In other words, we interpret and understand *through* the body and not in spite of it.

"Embodiment" is a key concept in the turn towards the body and features strongly in what I have elsewhere referred to as a 'body-centred interpretative approach' to the arts and visual culture (Lauwrens 2018:85). Instead of inverting the Cartesian hierarchy that positioned mind as superior to body, a body-centred interpretative approach acknowledges that mind and body work in consort – or as an "ensemble" – in the interpretation of art and visual culture. As Vivian Sobchack (2004:4, emphasis in original) puts it '[e]mbodiment is a radically material condition of human being that necessarily entails both the body and consciousness, objectivity and subjectivity, in an *irreducible ensemble'*. Our ability to make sense of art and visual culture relies as much on our carnal existence as it does on our conscious thought. Moreover, analysing *embodiment* rather than merely the material and biological entity that is the body, allows the focus to shift to 'perceptual experiences and the mode of presence and engagement in the world' (Csordas 1993:135). In other words, this approach recognises that bodies possess intentionality and co-exist intersubjectively with others.

The sensory turn occurred at around the same time as the corporeal turn. Since the 1990s, interest in the sensorial dimension of human experience has burgeoned in disciplines such as history, anthropology, cultural geography, film studies, literary studies and art history (see Lauwrens 2012:3). The various perspectives and nuances of the sensory turn, specifically in the arts and humanities, have been further "fleshed out" in the journal *Senses and Society* and in the *Sensory Formations* series published by Berg. One of the foremost champions of the sensory turn, David Howes (2006:114), explains that this research generally 'emphasize[s] the dynamic, relational (intersensory- or multimodal, multimedia) and often conflicted nature of our everyday engagements with the sensuous world'. The premise on which this research is based is that 'the sensorium is a social construction' and that 'the senses are lived and understood differently in different cultures and historical periods' (Howes 2006:113).

One should also add that the sensory turn rejects the visual-centric bias that has dominated western art historical analysis, highlighting instead the ways in which artworks appeal to the whole bodies of their audiences. Searching beyond ideological and semiotic interpretations, the 'presence effects' of images and objects have become as important as their 'meaning effects' (Gumbrecht 2004:xv) with the 'physical properties of images [deemed to be] as important as their social function' (Moxey 2008:132). The discourse on the senses is especially helpful when analysing multimodal and multimedial artworks, which activate modes of engagement beyond the visual.

In taking into account both the sensory experiences that art and visual culture elicit, as well as the materiality of the objects and images themselves, the sensory turn is closely related to the material turn. One of the central claims of those working in material studies is that "things" have agency. This is not to say that things have free will or intentionality, but rather that 'they do have properties and affordances that powerfully shape human subjectivity and activity' (Roberts 2017:[Sa]). Like sensory scholarship, material studies is no longer preoccupied with the ideas that might be 'lurking' behind objects, but instead investigates how they are 'folded in with humans in a vast network of distributed action and intelligence' (Roberts 2017:[Sa]). Accordingly, the notion that all of reality is socially and ideologically constituted has given way to an interest in how things "matter" as co-constituents of our world. In the field of the creative arts, as Estelle Barrett and Barbara Bolt (2013:3) point out, the influence of cultural theory in the 1980s and 1990s 'leach[ed] "matter" out of art'. In so doing, arts' materiality 'disappeared into the textual, the linguistic and the discursive' (Barrett & Bolt 2013:4). On the other hand, a materialist theory on art is concerned with both the embodied practices that 'engage the matter of bodies' and the material practices that lie at the core of creative production (Barret & Bolt 2013:5).

The implications of these turns for enquiries into art and visual culture are immense: from these theoretical perspectives, it *stands to reason* that meaning emerges from our embodied, sensory and sensuous engagement with the material objects of our enquiry. Researchers are not passive spectators of what they are investigating but are themselves somatically entangled with them such that the lived body (of the researcher) must be understood as 'at once, both an objective *subject* and a subjective *object*' as Vivian Sobchack (2004:2, emphasis in original) puts it. In taking this route, the concept of the "spectator" or "viewer" of art is challenged by many of the contributors to this special section. For instance, in her article, Bev Butkow draws attention to the inadequacy of the concept of a "viewer" preferring the term "experiencer" instead. The latter draws attention away from the encounter with art and visual culture as primarily visual and instead 'foregrounds the fundamentally interactive and reciprocal nature of experiencing, as well as the subjective nature of the responses, intuitions and perceptions' that such experiences generate. The "experiencer" is therefore understood as an embodied, or whole-body perceiver who interacts with the material properties of an artwork. As Mieke Bal (2004:42) notes, the perception of art may then be described as 'a psychosomatic process, strongly dependant, for example, on the position of the perceiving body in relation to the perceived object'.

Following an existential phenomenological approach, the articles collected here reflect on the particular (and sometimes personal) experiences of the authors with some offering accounts of their close observations of others. However, these personal reflections are always cognisant of the 'social entailments' of their research and the shared bonds they

have 'with all others and all things' (Sobchack 2004:3). Sobchak (2004:6) unapologetically utilises 'autobiographical and/or anecdotal experience' in her writing on film. She qualifies her method as follows:

> Indeed, grounding broader social claims in autobiographical and anecdotal experience is not merely a fuzzy and subjective substitute for rigorous and objective analysis but purposefully provides the phenomenological – and embodied – premises for a more processual, expansive, and resonant materialist logic through which we, as subjects, can understand (and perhaps guide) what passes as our objective historical and cultural existence (Sobchack 2004:6).

To this end, in my own article I reflect on interviews and observations in the field, while John Steele, Dineke Orton and Bev Butkow utilise autoethnography to represent and situate their own personal experiences and self-reflections within broader socio-cultural contexts. Both ethnography and autoethnography reject the so-called objectivity claimed by some academics, which has been referred to as a 'view from nowhere' (Adams, Holman Jones & Ellis 2022:1). Instead, as Tony Adams, Stacy Holman Jones and Carolyn Ellis (2022:1) contend, autoethnographers 'recognize and embrace the reality that the person and the personal are always present in social life as well as in the processes of research and representation'. In this way, the body-centred interpretative approaches we bring to our topics recognise the social, cultural, historical and political body. We acknowledge that bodies are formed within particular contexts and, likewise, that images are received and experienced in those contexts.

In 'Light on loss in new works by Paul Emmanuel', Irene Bronner considers the representation and presentation of the body in two recent works by Paul Emmanuel, titled *Veil 1954* (2016) and *Carbon Dad 2017* (2020). Both reference the artist's parents (who died at the ages of 86 and 93 respectively) and reflect on Emmanuel's personal journey of caring for them, watching their bodies weaken and fail them. In keeping with themes explored in Emmanuel's earlier works, *Veil 1954* (2016) and *Carbon Dad 2017* (2020) reference transitional experiences in the human life cycle, most pertinently the passage towards death. It is especially the medium he used to produce these two works to which Bronner draws our attention. Emmanuel's use of carbon paper – which is now virtually obsolete – alludes to the material nature of the frail and vulnerable ageing body. By scratching into this flimsy material, and removing the darker carbon film coating, the substance that remains is semi-transparent and resembles human skin. Metaphorically, the carbon remains allude to absent bodies and the futility of any attempt to fix elusive memories as carbon copies. Suspended from the ceiling of the gallery, where they move gently in response to air currents, these works are experienced in-the-round highlighting their corporeal, material presence and eliciting both visceral and psychological responses from the viewer.

In ‘Embodied encounters with Anthea Delmotte’s performance of *Return to Chaos’*, John Steele discusses his direct experience of one of Anthea Delmotte’s deep trance-state paintings. Created for the 2016 instalment of AfrikaBurn, *Return to Chaos* was produced over the period of a week, with Delmotte painting in sessions each evening. Whilst music ranging from heavy metal and grunge to live classical rock was being played, Delmotte entered into a deep-trance state while painting a 30m long canvas. Apart from the artist’s own intentions in creating the work, Steele reflects on his empathic connection with the artist, the performance, and the other people who were also present. He shows how the site (the Tankwa Karoo), listening to the music, and watching the artist enter into a deep trance-state whilst painting, all combined in his experience of the performance. Both Bronner and Steele draw attention to the material qualities of an artwork, arguing that this materiality facilitates particular interaction and responses from the viewer/perceiver/experiencer.

Like Steele, Dineke Orton takes a specific interest in the “event” of viewing and experiencing art. In their view, the artwork is not a container of meaning and the viewer does not passively absorb that meaning. The artwork emerges through an interaction between object and person in the expanding field of the encounter. Its meanings are generated as much by what it is made of (it’s materiality), and what it contains (it’s narrative content), where it is exhibited (the force fields that surround it) and the other spectators. In her article ‘From the physical to the digital: Encounters in the KKNK online gallery’, Orton explores curatorial processes and techniques that facilitate a corporeal engagement with online exhibitions. She draws on her own experience of producing an online exhibition of artworks originally curated for an arts festival where the atmosphere would be dynamic, exciting, and highly sociable. Under normal circumstances, these two-dimensional artworks and three-dimensional installations would elicit quite distinct bodily modes of interaction. Orton argues that while one assumes the online interaction with art to be a disembodied one, it is a fundamentally bodily experience that can be enhanced if attention is given to specific design strategies. By way of a close analysis of the virtual exhibition of the Klein Karoo Nasionale Kunstefees in 2020, she recommends different ways in which this experience can be heighted. Orton thus attends to the modes of embodied engagement that are made possible by the way in which the artwork is made public and experienced, focusing on the possibilities afforded by the online mode rather than on its limitations.

Bev Butkow’s article ‘embodied-enTAnglements/enTAngled-embodiments performaTIVe encounters with materials, creative process, and the artist-woman’s body’ gathers together some of the threads explored in the previous articles. Her focus is on materiality, the artwork as an event, and the viewer as experiencer. Working as an autoethnographer with the aim of understanding her own artistic process, in this article Butkow explores

her own immersive encounter with the work in the Origins Centre Museum at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits). By carefully and creatively analysing and reporting on her own bodily responses and her heightened bodily awareness in the presence of the work, Butkow does not speak for an imaginary viewer, but only for herself. Nevertheless, her analysis shows that the people she encounters might potentially experience similar responses to her own in the shared public space of the exhibition. Butkow refers to her installation as a 'constellation' that, through the use of multiple multisensory materials, 'activates' one's senses. Likewise, in the text itself she creatively utilises 'visual activations' by playing with text alignment, capitalisation and visual poetry to evoke a bodily response in the reader.

My own article titled 'Haptic modes of engagement in Willem Boshoff's *Blind Alphabet*' takes a more hands-on, ethnographic approach. The article reports on a series of interviews I conducted with people who are blind, as well as sighted people who were blindfolded while they touched selected sculptures in Boshoff's well-known installation *Blind Alphabet* (1990 – ongoing). While Boshoff's work has already received much critical attention, this literature has mainly focused on the conceptual underpinnings of the work. My intention, on the other hand, was to give a voice to those for whom the work is created – people with visual disabilities. Asking individuals to describe the temperature, texture, weight, size, material, and smell of the sculptures, allowed me to dig deeper into the nature of touch as an aesthetic experience, as expressed by people who rely predominantly – though not exclusively – on touch to navigate the world. By analysing the forms of engagement that *Blind Alphabet* solicits in those who may touch (and not see) it, the research revealed aspects of the sculptures that are unavailable to sight. Thus, apart from commenting on the hegemony of sight in research on art, Boshoff's installation foregrounds the body as the locus of perception, thought and consciousness, and highlights the role of the senses other than sight in shaping experience, understanding, and meaning.

Placing the body at the centre of discussions on art and visual culture is not a new endeavour; others have already done so, especially in a global context. The articles gathered together in this special section aim to contribute to the discourse on this vital mode of understanding our engagement with images and objects specifically in the South African context. In navigating the different ways that the matter of art comes into being from the perspective of scholars, artists, and experiencers, we hope that others will take up the challenge to advance research on art beyond the visual and beyond the discursive, and into the uncomfortable territories that are, as yet, uncharted.

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