

**BEYOND SPECTATORSHIP: AN EXPLORATION OF EMBODIED ENGAGEMENT
WITH ART**

By

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ABSTRACT

According to proponents of the so-called ‘sensory turn’ the varied layers of a person’s experience of the social and material world produced via the senses of taste, touch, hearing and smell have largely been neglected in academic research on art. It is precisely because a person’s embodied and sensual engagement is increasingly being recognised as co-constitutive of the dynamic relationship occurring between people and art that dealing with the visual alone has been found to be insufficient and has brought about a shift in interest toward the other senses.

Working between the disciplines of art history and visual culture studies, this research engages with art in ways that exceed the visual in order to understand the embodied and engaged interactions at work between a person and art. I argue that scholarly investigations of the visual field have, until recently, often avoided explorations of the affective, multisensorial body of a viewer in relation to what s/he sees even though many art practices invite the engagement and participation of the whole body beyond spectatorship only.

In a close analysis of two installations, a land art piece, one video and one entire participatory exhibition the possible ways in which to theorise the involvement of the whole person in aesthetic experience and not only the mind, intellect or consciousness are explored. It is argued that a re-conception of art and spectatorship as embodied interaction provides a far more nuanced understanding of people’s experiences of art than ideologically and interpretative driven ‘readings’ only.

The theme of embodied spectatorship and contemporary art is approached in particular through the lenses of the sensory turn, the pictorial turn, the corporeal turn, empathy theory, affect theory, phenomenology and aesthetic embodiment and engagement. By placing various examples of contemporary art in dialogue with these theoretical perspectives the limitations of traditional notions regarding aesthetic spectatorship are exposed. This leads to the beginning of a broader conversation about the role and status of a whole embodied sensual being in her/his encounter with specific materialities of art.

My basic theoretical standpoint is that a person's embodied and engaged experience is the starting point from which investigations of art can productively proceed. In other words, by means of a predominantly phenomenological approach that describes aesthetic situations and encounters, it is argued that direct experience does not simply contribute to, but rather has a primacy and authority in encounters with art, and should, therefore, be investigated.

Key terms

multisensoriality; ocularcentrism; embodied spectatorship; contemporary art; sensory turn; pictorial turn; corporeal turn; empathy theory; affect theory; phenomenology; aesthetic embodiment; aesthetic engagement; visual tactility

OPSOMMING

Volgens ondersteuners van die sogenoamde ‘sensoriese omwenteling’ is die verskeie lae van ’n persoon se ervaring van die sosiale en materiële (wesenlike) wêreld, wat deur middel van die sintuie van smaak, tas, gehoor en reuk ervaar word, oor die algemeen veronagsaam in akademiese navorsing oor kuns. Dit is juis omdat ’n persoon se beliggaamde en sensuele samestelling as ’n dinamiese verhouding tussen mens en kuns beskryf kan word, dat die eenduidige fokus op die visuele as onvoldoende ontbloot word.

Deur tussen die dissiplines van kunsgeskeidenis en visuelekultuurstudies te werk, benader hierdie navorsing kuns op wyses wat die visuele oorstyg om sodoende die beliggaamde en noue verbintenis tussen mens en kuns te verstaan. My uitgangspunt is dat akademiese navorsing in die visuele veld tot onlangs toe nog verkies het om die affektiewe en multisensoriese liggaam te ontken, ten spyte daarvan dat vele kunspraktyke juis die deelname van die hele liggaam uitnooi.

Deur ’n nougesette analyse van twee installasies, ’n landkunswerk, een video en een uitstalling waarin ’n waarnemer uitgenooi is om deel te neem, word moontlike wyses ondersoek waarop die deelname van die volledige persoon tydens estetiese ervarings, en nie slegs die verstand, intellek of bewussyn nie, ondersoek. Daar word geargumenteer dat ’n herkonseptualisering van kuns en waarneming as beliggaamde interaksie tot ’n meer genuanseerde begrip van menslike ervaringe van kuns kan lei as interpretasies wat slegs fokus op die ‘lees’ van ideologiese betekenis.

Die tema van beliggaamde waarneming en kontemporêre kuns word hier geanaliseer veral deur die lens van die sensoriese omwenteling, die piktorale omwenteling, die liggaamlike omwenteling, empatie teorie, affek teorie, fenomenologie en estetiese beliggaming. Deur verskeie voorbeelde van kontemporêre kuns in gesprek te bring met hierdie teoretiese uitgangspunte, word die beperkinge van tradisionele idees oor estetiese waarneming ontbloot. Hierdie analise lei tot die begin van ’n wyer gesprek aangaande die rol en status van ’n

volledige beliggaamde wese in haar/sy ontmoeting met spesifieke manifestasies van kuns.

My basiese teoretiese standpunt is dat 'n mens se beliggaamde en vervlegde ervaring die vrugbare beginpunt is vanwaar ondersoeke oor kuns behoort te spruit. Met ander woorde, deur middel van 'n oorheersend fenomenologiese benadering wat estetiese situasies en ontmoetinge beskryf, word hier geargumenteer dat direkte ervaring nie net bydra tot, maar eerder 'n voorrang en selfs ouoriteit behoort te geniet in besinninge oor kuns.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Margaret Moore's exhibition *Still sounds* (2008-2011) (Figure 1), held in The Crypt Gallery at St Pancras Church, London in 2012 was a feast for (all) the senses. Combining family photographs printed on large sheets of tissue paper hanging from the vaulted ceiling of the crypt with images projected onto cloth, as well as recordings of songs and sounds originating from Glasgow and the Western Isles, the installation was both evocative and alluring.¹ Adding to the sensual appeal of the experience, the light in the crypt was dark and eerie, the air was cool and moist, the walls were rough to the touch and the smell was slightly musty in the overall dank setting of the so-called gallery.



Figure 1: Margaret Moore, *Still sounds* (2008-2011)

¹ A sound recording of the installation is available at <<http://www.margaretmooreart.com/installations.aspx>>.

Although the olfactory and tactile elements of the space in which the works were exhibited may not have been orchestrated by the artist as part of the work, they undoubtedly participated in the visitor's overall experience of the installation. When standing in the midst of this sensual feast, I wondered how an art historian might investigate not only the possible meanings of Moore's installation, but also the expanding and immersive exhibition space which included far more than only my visual and auditory experience. What methodological tools does the discipline of art history offer for the investigation not only of an individual's multisensorial but also their multi- and trans-medial experience of various kinds of art (if reference may still be made to such a concept)? Is art history's emphasis on how people see art problematic, as has been argued by supporters of the developing discourse associated with the so-called 'sensory turn' (Bacci & Melcher 2011, Di Bello & Koureas 2010, Halsall 2004, Howes 2005, Jones 2006)?² And, if art history is indeed ocularcentric, is the discipline required to adapt its procedures in order to sufficiently deal with works of art whose most interesting characteristics, according to Francis Halsall (2004) and Peter Osborne (2005) at least, are not necessarily what can be seen in them?³ Furthermore, what methodological approach is suited to the analysis of art from the perspective of sensory studies?

1.1 Introduction and background to the study

In his introductory statement to the *Sensory formations* series, the cultural anthropologist, David Howes (2014: [s.p.]) maintains that "[...] the hegemony of vision and privileging of discourse in contemporary theory and cultural studies

² Other noteworthy scholarship in this direction includes the contributions to *Senses and Society*, an academic journal dedicated to the sensory turn and the *Sensory formations* series published by Berg.

³ This may well be true for all or almost all works of art as spectators' imaginations or imaginative interactions with the work are no doubt a key factor in their experience of the work. In this regard, cf. George Taylor's (2006) investigation of Paul Ricoeur's arguments dealing with the imagination in 'Ricoeur's philosophy of imagination'. However, in this study I want to pursue and interrogate Halsall's (2004: 115) contention that whilst what a work of art "[...]" looks like [may be] *the very least interesting thing to say about it* [...] a certain type of art history continues to stare at [...]" [my italics, JL] its visual properties only. This is especially the topic of Chapter 4.

must be overthrown in order to reveal the role all senses play in mediating cultural experience". As a result of this alleged 'oversight' in critical theory, in Howes' opinion, the varied layers of our experience of the social and material world produced via the senses of taste, touch, hearing and smell have largely been neglected in academic research. Evidently, this situation is changing with research concerned with sensorially embodied subjects⁴ recently emerging in various disciplines including history, anthropology, sociology, geography, film studies and literary studies since the 1990s.

A similar critique against the alleged ocularcentrism of visual culture studies (at least in its various early formations) was already voiced in the well-known *October* questionnaire (1996). In this document, amongst the (many) critical assessments of the field, its uncontested privileging of the visual was sharply highlighted.⁵ For instance, the scathing undertone of Martin Jay's (1996: 42) remark that, by the mid-1990s, it seemed that "[a]nything that can imprint itself on the retina has seemed *fair game* for the new paradigm" [my italics, JL] suggests that visual culture studies' emphasis on the visual was already under serious scrutiny.

More to the point, Thomas Crow (1996: 35) suggested that, by that stage – now almost two decades ago – the then "new rubric of visual culture" [my italics, JL] appeared to subscribe to "[...] the view that art is to be defined by its working exclusively through the optical faculties". Apparently, the apotheosis of this view can be seen in the 1950s and 1960s when high modernism "[...] constructed its canon around the notion of opticality" at the same time that it was highly self-conscious – even antagonistic – about its own visuality (Crow 1996: 35). Crow

⁴ Precisely what is meant by the notion of 'sensorially embodied subjects' and its variants such as 'sensers' (Di Bello & Koureas 2010: 3), 'whole-bodied-seers' (Hull 1990: 217) and 'fully embodied beings' (Di Bello & Koureas 2010: 12) is explored further in Chapter 5.

⁵ For the sake of clarity, a short note on terminology is warranted here. Since the emergence of early manifestations of visual culture studies in the 1990s, a variety of terms have been used to designate similar kinds of discussions/courses/programmes. These include 'critical studies', 'visual studies', 'visual culture', 'visual culture studies' and 'visual and critical studies'. Following John Walker & Sarah Chaplin (1995) in *Visual culture: an introduction* I use 'visual culture studies' to refer to the 'discipline' (although I acknowledge that, as yet, visual culture studies may not be – and may not even aspire to be – a discipline in the traditional sense), and 'visual culture' to designate the object of study.

(1996: 35) argued further that, even though visual culture studies (or visual studies, as he referred to it in his essay) analyses far more than the category of so-called fine art, its proponents nevertheless “[...] perpetuate the narrowness entailed in modernism's fetish of visuality” in their approach to what they study.

Along the same lines, although expressed somewhat differently, Tom Gunning's (1996: 49) response to the questionnaire was equally suspicious of visual culture studies' alleged preoccupation with the optical. Gunning (1996: 49) regarded this emphasis to be the field's “greatest limitation” in that an undue privileging of the visual would apparently result in the “[...] reification [of] a division of the senses”. In his opinion, if the so-called hegemony of the visual were to be interrogated historically it might be found that sound, for instance, has had a tremendous effect not only on human experience in general but also visual experience in particular in the late modern period (Gunning 1996: 49).

From the perspective of architecture, Sylvia Lavin (1996: 50) worried that the “isolation of the image” in visual culture studies would render a substantive analysis of architecture, which cannot easily be disciplined “[...] according to the logic of the visual”, all but impossible. For, she argued, architecture does not only possess a visual dimension, but also relates to the embodied, material and structural organisation of the visual. Architecture thus “[...] calls into question the generalizing ambitions” (Lavin 1996: 51) of visual culture studies which is epitomised, for these authors at least, by its alleged privileging of the visual.

Almost a decade after the publication of the *October* questionnaire, some of the submissions in Deborah Cherry's edited text, *Art: history: visual: culture* (2005), indicate that not only has the critique of visual culture studies' alleged preoccupation with the optical not abated but that art history has now come under fire for the same reason (James 2005: 46, Phillips 2005: 113). Cherry points out that scepticism over visual culture studies' “visual essentialism”, to which Mieke Bal had drawn attention in 2003, has migrated to art history. Similarly, Liz James (2005: 46) argues that “[t]he methodologies covered by the

terms ‘art history’ and ‘visual culture’ alike privilege the visual nature of the things discussed, considering them in purely visual terms”. This situation leads Cherry (2005: 5) to conclude that one of the main difficulties facing art history is its inability to address forms of art “[...] that contest, refute or renegotiate visuality [...]”.

James (2005: 46) wants to avoid what she describes as the privilege given by both art history and visual culture studies to the visual nature of the objects or things dealt with in these disciplines.⁶ Her focus is, therefore, on “[...] what happens when art, or the visual, is considered in its interactions with the other senses” (James 2005: 46). In attempting to “exceed the visual”, James (2005: 46) uncovers the ways in which the mosaics in the Byzantine church interact with the physical properties of the church as a whole and how they appealed to all the senses of the ninth-century Byzantine who actively engaged with them.⁷

For James (2005: 46), an investigation of the “active engagement” of the contemporary viewer of the work “[...] upset[s] the modernist conception of the self-sufficiency of the art object in favour of a sense of the art object’s dependence on contingent, external factors such as audience participation”. In other words, it is precisely because a person’s embodied and sensual engagement with the material object under discussion is recognised as co-constitutive of the experience of the work that dealing with the visual alone has been found insufficient to the practice of both art history and visual culture studies.

⁶ Concerned with the physical properties and functions of Byzantine art, James (2005: 45) departs from what she argues is their “usual” treatment as works of art studied in terms of their style or iconography; their similarity and connection to the decorative schema found in Byzantine churches of the same period; their social, cultural, theological and/or political history; and their visuality. Instead James explores sounds, smells (of both the things and the people in the Byzantine churches), textures and even tastes as integral parts of the spiritual practices of which the mosaics form part. Via the practice of kissing doors, columns, relics and icons, touch was “[...] a key element in the experience of any Byzantine worshipper” (James 2005: 48). Through practices of kneeling, bowing, and prostrating themselves, worshippers’ entire bodies were involved in showing respect for the holy.

⁷ Cf. Geraldine Johnson’s (2011) analysis of the primacy of touch in early modern Italian worshipper’s relation to religious objects.

More examples of the attack on art history's exclusion of modes of analysis other than those involving the visual nature of art recur throughout Cherry's compilation (cf. Osborne 2005: 171, Phillips 2005: 113). Subsequently, James (2005: 46) suggests that both disciplines "[...] might want to exceed the visual" and consider how art and visual culture interact with the other senses.

Since its emergence as a "field of study" (Walker & Chaplin 1997: 1), an academic "enterprise" (Mirzoeff 1999), or a "movement" (Bal 2003: 6) (as examples of the various ways in which it has been described),⁸ visual culture studies has evidently consistently been critiqued for its emphasis on the visual whether that is driven by an iconophobia about images, an anxiety over vision or an iconophilia towards both images and vision. In other words, one of the greatest challenges to the future of the field of visual culture studies appears to be its unnecessary ocularcentrism.

It has been suggested that the emergence of visual culture studies in the 1990s provided art history a way in which to update its procedures and become more relevant and innovative thereby loosening its ties to its former essentialist, elitist and patriarchal premises. In other words, visual culture studies apparently attends to some of the problems that have plagued art history, such as its limited field of study and, more precisely, its elitist approach to the study of images and objects labelled as art. But even from the perspective of visual culture studies, however, vision has been regarded as *the* sense in need of critical analysis with regards to its discursive, affective and seductive power. As a result, both art historians and visual culturalists are now investigating images as representations of culture and power as well as the ways in which vision and visuality are discursively produced. In other words, both fields are now centred on discourses about vision.

⁸ The uncertain disciplinary status of visual culture studies is further exemplified by the following descriptions: "inter- or multidisciplinary" (Walker & Chaplin 1997: 1), "cross-disciplinary" (Wolff 1999: 1), "de-disciplinary" (Mitchell 2001: 17), "post-disciplinary" (Mirzoeff 1999: 4), "trans-disciplinary" (Duncum 2002: 14), and "indisciplin[ary]" (Mitchell 1995b: 541).

Halsall (2004: 118) rather pessimistically sums up the situation as follows: “[v]isual culture studies takes the fundamental problem which has lain at the very heart of art history since its modernist foundations – the over-prioritization of the visual – and, in an attempt to cure its symptoms merely extends the scope of this problem more widely than art history ever did”. Equally, Laura Marks (2011: 240) concurs with Halsall that the turn from art history “[...] toward visual culture has left in place the sensory hierarchy that subtends Western philosophy, in which only the [so-called] distance senses are vehicles of knowledge, and Western aesthetics, in which only vision and hearing can be vehicles of beauty”. It would seem, to Halsall and Marks at least, that both art history and visual culture studies avoid dealing with the other senses in their isolation of vision.

One of the reasons that researchers of art have begun to challenge the prominence given the sense of sight in traditional approaches used to ‘deal’ with art may be found in the ambiguous status accorded this apparently troubling and troublesome sense in intellectual spheres particularly in the twentieth century. For, human vision has been denigrated by theorists across a variety of disciplines.⁹ Once regarded as the noblest of the senses (for example, by Plato (427-347 B.C.), Aristotle (384-322 B.C.) and René Descartes (1596-1650), even if ambiguously so),¹⁰ vision’s reliability on the one hand in the acquisition of knowledge, as well as its role and status in the production of identity and subjectivity on the other have been questioned in contemporary theory. This denigration of vision in philosophy and cultural theory is masterfully analysed by Jay in his comprehensive text on this topic, *Downcast eyes: the denigration of vision in twentieth-century French thought* (1993). In this extensive text Jay examines the various ways in which twentieth-century French philosophers have critiqued Western ocularcentrism and, in some cases, demonised vision.¹¹

⁹ Jay (1993: 220) proposes that the height of such anti-ocular discourses can be found in the 1960s.

¹⁰ Their positions on the matter are discussed in greater detail in Chapters 2 & 3.

¹¹ Jay (1993: 150) notes that the disillusionment with the privileged position of sight was already evident at the end of the nineteenth century with the invention of various technologies such as the camera contributing “[...] to the undermining of its privileged status”. At the same time, the

Had it not been published in the same year, Jay's book could be regarded as a response to David Levin's (1993: 205) plea in his contribution to the collection of philosophical essays entitled *Modernity and the hegemony of vision* to critically examine the "[...] character of vision that predominates today in our world". According to Levin, "[...] a diagnosis of the psychosocial pathology of everyday seeing" is urgently needed. Vision is apparently aggressive and our ocularcentric culture, he argues, is haunted by "the spectres of patriarchal rule" (Levin 1993: 212).

Levin's explicit 'denigration of vision' is evident in many of the theories that have come to underpin visual culture studies, the analytical field which analyses socially constructed "ways of seeing" (Berger 1972). In this academic sphere vision is regarded as impure and problematic (Rogoff 2002: 24, Bal 2003: 9). William Mitchell (2003: 238), one of the leading scholars of visual culture, has famously suggested that visual culture studies investigates both "the visual construction of the social field [...]" and "[...] the social construction of the visual field" as both components and their intersection are problematic.

Of the various critiques of visual culture that have emerged so far, many are rooted in the intellectual positions of one or more seminal theorists who have denigrated the visual basis of modern and postmodern societies and what was produced by that ocularcentrism. For example, according to Guy Debord (1977) postmodern societies are consumed by the spectacle.¹² For Debord, living in the 'society of the spectacle' means that we live in and through representations and not reality. Similarly sceptical of the intersection of vision and technology, Michel Foucault (1977b) exposed the powerful role vision plays in the

"explosion of artistic experiments" (Jay 1993: 150) that arose hand in hand with these technologies contributed not only to the development of Modern art but also to philosophical attempts to counter spectatorial epistemologies such as 'Cartesianism'. In these spheres, explorations of vision as both embodied and culturally mediated emerged. It was the extreme devaluation of vision by Henri Bergson that, according to Jay (1993: 151), "[...] was to have a profound, if not always explicitly acknowledged, effect on twentieth-century French thought".

¹² In his well-cited text *Society of the spectacle*, Debord (1977: 1) argues that "[...] the entire life of societies in which modern conditions of production reign announces itself as an immense accumulation of *spectacles*. Everything that was directly lived has moved away into representation".

maintenance of regimes of power enabling the production of ‘normative’ or ‘normalised’ subjects in relation to disciplined and repressed societies.¹³ Various visual technologies which enable procedures of surveillance to be executed by a panoptic seer have been found by Foucault (1977b) to be fundamental tools in the production of this self-regulating subject.¹⁴

Furthermore, Jean Baudrillard (1984) aims his critique of the apotheosis of the visual in postmodern societies on the “hyperreal” world of simulations. He argues that simulations – by which he includes all replications constructed in technological societies – no longer represent reality and people stare at screens which reflect nothing outside of themselves. Vision, he argues, functions as a tool for technological power. In this way, as Jay (1993: 384) notes, these theorists respectively reversed (some) former accounts of vision which had praised the ‘nobility’ of sight, exposing instead the harmful effects produced by the privileged position given to vision in the modern world.

It is, of course, not only vision that has drawn such critical and sceptical attention, but also vision’s ‘co-conspirators’ – images – which have been the catalysts of immense debate. For researchers of visual culture, images are problematic ideological tools that possess the power to manipulate our desires as well as our sense of ourselves and others. In their interview with Mitchell, Asbjørn Grønstad & Øyvind Våhnes (2006) refer to the “[...] iconoclasm of some of the ‘grand narratives’ of cultural theory in recent years”. From iconophobes to iconophiles, from theorists of images to their producers, the power of both

¹³ Karen Jacobs (2011: 13) credits Foucault with “[...] writing the history of the subject in relation to the optics of power, in which the gaze comes to serve as a multifaceted tool of social regulation”.

¹⁴ Although it could be suggested that Foucault’s real enemy is not vision but rational power, Levin (1993: 6-7) argues that for Foucault the Enlightenment project on which our modernity is based “[...] has been increasingly double-crossed by the panopticism of its technologies”. In other words, the various technologies (such as “technologies of production [...] sign systems [...] power or [...] the self”) through which power is enforced on us lead increasingly to “[...] conditions of totalization, normalization, and domination” (Levin 1993: 6). It would then not be difficult to assume that for Foucault the hegemony of vision is a strong ally of technologies of control. This is because, as Levin (1993: 7) puts it, in modernity “[...] the ocularcentrism of our culture make[s] its appearance in, and as, panopticism: the system of administrative institutions and disciplinary practices organized by the conjunction of a universalised rationality and advanced technologies for the securing of conditions of visibility”.

images and vision as they operate in postindustrial societies has been both denigrated and valorised.

Aside from the many philosophical and ideological positions that have worked to denigrate vision (and images) in the twentieth century, the history of art is also filled with examples that have, at times ambiguously, confronted ideas surrounding vision either explicitly or implicitly in the production of images. In other words, artists have both “glorified and vilified”, to use Claude Gandelman’s (1991: 151) words, the hegemony of the eye not only in our everyday encounters with the world but also in identity formation. Twentieth-century examples of the ambivalent reference to vision in art would include the film-makers and visual artists of the 1920s, and movements such as Dada, Surrealism and Russian Constructivism. Not only celebrating vision, these “eye-artists” (Gandelman 1991: 151)¹⁵ produced works that, while seeming to exalt sight, reveal their producer’s underlying scepticism of the dynamics of seeing and being seen.¹⁶

¹⁵ Gandelman (1991: 151) borrows the term *Augenkünstler* from Franz Kafka.

¹⁶ The video I discuss in Chapter 6, produced by New-York based artist Casilda Sanchez, is a recent example of this kind of scepticism of vision. One of her works entitled, *As inside as the eye can see* (2010) forms the backbone of the argument in that chapter.



Figure 2: Alexander Rodchenko, Poster for Dzigo Vertov's *Kino Glaz* (1924)

For example, the disembodied eye looming large in Alexander Rodchenko's Constructivist poster *Kino Glaz* (1924) (Figure 2) exposes an awareness of being seen, with the eye – hovering like a planet or satellite in the sky – now the object of the spectator's gaze (Gandelman 1991: 152). As Gandelman (1991: 152) points out, at the time in which this work was produced, many avant-garde artists working in the Soviet Union in the years following the end of the First World War probably experienced a fear, semiconscious or otherwise, of “[...] being watched by the all-seeing party and its police”. The “[...] omnipresence of the severed and fetishized eye” (Gandelman 1991: 152) in the artwork, films

and posters produced at this time is likely then directly related to fears, if not of constantly being exposed and seen, then certainly of continuously being investigated, being known and being under surveillance by powerful others.

Similarly, the First World War registered a great impact on the Surrealists. Having witnessed the massive atrocities committed by so-called civilised people, their subversion of ocularcentrism – apparently the cornerstone of Western culture as variously theorised – may have had a lot to do with their disappointment with the brutality that civil society could produce (Jay 1993: 231).¹⁷ Although largely a disparate group of individuals whose artistic pursuits do not fit comfortably into a single style, there is much evidence to suggest that many of them were committed to subverting or at least questioning vision.

For example, in Salvador Dali and Luis Buñuel's short film *Un Chien Andalou* (1928), in which a woman's eye is sliced open by a razor blade in the early moments of the film, the objectivity of the cinematic method is brought into question (Figure 3). The film extended the ideas Georges Bataille had put forward in his controversial book, *Histoire de l'oeil* (*Story of the eye*) in 1927 which was never published under his name in his lifetime. The opening scene of this pornographic work, aside from shocking and outraging middle-class sensibilities at the time, argues Jenaro Talens (1993: xiii), critiques the presumed neutrality and objectivity of the cinematic method and exposes its inherent ability for deception.

¹⁷ Cf. Jay's 'The disenchantment of the eye: Surrealism and the crisis of ocularcentrism' (1991).



Figure 3: Close up from Salvador Dali and Luis Buñuel's *Un Chien Andalou* (1928)

More importantly, for Jay (1993: 220) the enucleated eye shown in the film represents, metaphorically, the separation of sight from the body in the 'Cartesian' tradition. Bataille's story ends with the severed eye of a priest being inserted into the anus and vagina of the heroine. For Jay (1993: 220) the insertion of the eye back into the body "[...] mocked in advance Merleau-Ponty's benign reembodiment of the eye in the 'flesh of the world'". The eye, formerly elevated to the status of the most noble of the senses, is associated here by Bataille with the "lower" functions of the body (Jay 1993: 222).¹⁸

¹⁸ Furthermore, vision's inability to be objective is exposed in René Magritte's *The false mirror* (1928), in which a viewer is once again confronted by a severed eyeball. Similarly, in both the painted and sculpted versions of *The white race* (1937 & 1967), Magritte critiques the eye's privileged position above the other senses in the sensual body. These artists, in their various ways, deal with the eye as a source of terror, as well as "the trauma of sight" or the "unbearable character of true seeing" (Gandelman 1991: 151).

From these perspectives, vision, it would seem, is already ‘infected’ by the ideologies of the powerful structures that seek to impose their scopic regimes on people’s lived experience rendering our ways of seeing always already ‘inf(l)ected’ in this sense by these constructions. From the perspective of visual culture studies, vision ought to be investigated and its inherent power to deceive (and seduce) subverted.¹⁹ As a result of vision’s somewhat dubious, or at least ambiguous, position in the body from a philosophical, psychoanalytical and aesthetic point of view, challenges to the hegemony of vision in epistemological encounters with the world have evidently brought about a shift in interest toward the other senses.

1.1.1 The other senses

Popular culture is riddled with examples of attempts at overcoming vision in order that people ‘see’ more clearly. For example, the ABC programme, *Dating in the dark* (2009-2011) allowed people (only of opposite sexes) to decide whether or not they were attracted to each other by ‘feeling each other out’, both literally and figuratively, in a completely dark room. Similarly, the restaurant *Nocti Vagus* in Berlin enables people to better hone their taste buds to the food they are eating by serving their customers in complete darkness (*Nocti Vagus* [s.a.]. Blind wine tastings and music performances in the dark by blind performers (such as the ensemble directed by Francisco López),²⁰ are all examples of recent interest in stimulating our senses other than sight.

Such apparent suspicion or ‘denigration’ of vision, to paraphrase Jay (1993), has, to some extent, often resulted in the valorisation of touch. In *Memoirs of*

¹⁹ The sceptical and suspicious opinion on sight is also seen in Biblical narratives. For example, the God of the Old Testament is wrathful and takes sight away, whilst in the New Testament, God the redeemer restores it. For instance, Jesus, who often healed through touching, came to restore sight to the blind (Luke 18: 42-43): “Jesus said to [the blind man of Jericho], ‘Receive your sight; your faith has saved you.’ Immediately he regained his sight and followed him, glorifying God”.

²⁰ Lopez is an avant-garde sound artist and experimental musician. Cf. <<http://franciscolopeznews.blogspot.com>>.

the blind: the self-portrait and other ruins (1993 [1990]) Jacques Derrida contemplates the act of writing without seeing, for instance when one is focussing their sight on something else. In Derrida's case, he is concentrating on the steering wheel of the car. Derrida (1993 [1990]: 3) explains what happens when he writes something on a piece of paper lying on the seat next to him whilst not being able to see it:

A hand of the blind ventures forth alone or disconnected, in a poorly delimited space; it feels its way, it gropes, it caresses as much as it inscribes, trusting in the memory of signs and supplementing sight. It is as if a lidless eye had opened at the tip of the fingers, as if one eye too many had just grown right next to the nail, a single eye, the eye of a Cyclops or a one-eyed man. The eye guides the tracing or outline [*trace*]; it is a miner's lamp at the point of writing, a curious and vigilant substitute, the prosthesis of a seer who is himself invisible.

For Derrida (1993 [1990]: 4) language is constituted by blindness. In other words, since we do not see, but rather hear language, the vocalised word is spoken to and from a kind of blindness or, at least, from the invisible. When writing without seeing, which Derrida (1993 [1990]: 4) praises as an "exceptional", "rare" and "theatrical" experience, what is written is an extension of the invisibility of language and leads to the production of a figure in one's memory. This figure, or image, is "[...] at once, virtual, potential, and dynamic [...]," and "[...] crosses all the borders separating the senses, its being-in-potential at once visual and auditory, motile and tactile" (Derrida 1993 [1990]: 4). It would seem that along with other sceptics of vision Derrida is curious about what is gained when vision is overcome.

Perhaps it is precisely because both vision and images have been taken to be problematic that a turn toward the 'other' senses has emerged, not only in theoretical positions on art and visual culture but also in art practice. Alternatively, perhaps this turn has emerged precisely because daily life is increasingly subject to multimedial and multisensorial experiences. For example, the latest mobile phones no longer merely allow for phone calls to be

made but also function as cameras, music and recording devices, computers, and as the means by which to access the Internet, including, social networking platforms on which people regularly exchange photographs and video clips. 4D technology, where physical effects are incorporated with 3D graphics, is increasingly used in entertainment, marketing and tourist spaces. In this arena, visual and auditory experiences are often enhanced by a smorgasbord of entertaining alternatives including water, wind, smells and movement.²¹ In other words, in the ever-expanding consumer culture in which people in postindustrial societies live many corporations have realised that placing the multisensorial body at the centre of their marketing campaigns can be a highly profitable business.²²

Perhaps it is precisely from such sensory overload that people are driven to retreat inside art museums and galleries, traditionally the site for peaceful contemplation. But in the late twentieth century and early twenty-first century, they would find no such hiding place. For, the art world has not lagged behind popular culture with museum curators having realised that appealing to potential visitors' senses other than sight could bring more feet through their collections. Robert Jütte (2005: 1) notes that in the 1980s there were no less than thirty "hands-on" exhibitions held in Great Britain that appealed particularly to blind people. Since then, a number of exhibitions focussing specifically on human sense perception have been held throughout the world, the earliest of which includes 'The Sense of the Senses' held in the Federal Exhibition Hall in Bonn in 1997 at which the Basel Museum of Design showed works from the earlier exhibitions 'Aroma, Aroma' (1995) and 'Touch Me' (1996).²³ In 1998 the

²¹ For example, fine droplets of water, bubbles, wind, snow, strobe lighting and a vibrating floor are all part and parcel of the London Eye 4D Cinema Experience (The London Eye).

²² Trevor Cox (2014: 34), a professor of sound engineering at the University of Salford and author of *The sound book*, maintains that, driven by consumer electronics, "[w]e are entering a golden age for sound tourism". Suggesting that we "take our ears on vacation" Cox (2014: 34) urges us to become more aware of the "sonic wonders" that surround us. "Being a sound tourist [...]" he argues, can apparently "[...] help us get more out of travel – and help reveal sonic delights in our everyday lives" (Cox 2014: 34).

²³ The participants in this international 'conference-cum-exhibition' cast a wide net across the humanities and social sciences including psychologists, art historians, sociologists, philosophers, writers and artists as well as scholars of theatre, music and media. Some of the more well-known participants were Oskar Negt who spoke about 'Obstinacy and the

'Cinema and the senses' conference was organised by the University of New South Wales, Australia. In the same year a conference entitled 'Audio-visuality before and after Gutenberg' was held at the Kunsthistorisches Museum and IKF in Vienna (Jütte 2005: 5). In 2006 a workshop entitled 'Art and the senses' was held in Oxford, England, alongside an exhibition of the same title. Francesca Bacci & David Melcher's collection of essays, *Art and the senses* (2011), which comprises several chapters written by speakers or participants at the event, was published after that workshop. And, in 2012-2013 Art Laboratory Berlin held an ongoing exhibition series entitled *Synaesthesia* which was also accompanied by an interdisciplinary conference. In other words, it would not be an overstatement to suggest that contemporary artists are increasingly producing works that, "contest, refute and re-negotiate visuality" (Cherry 2005: 5)²⁴ at the same time that theorists across disciplines such as art history, media studies, visual culture studies, philosophical aesthetics and film studies, to name only a few, are investigating the nature of perception and aesthetic experience in specific multisensorial contexts.

Working here primarily between the fields of art history, visual culture studies and philosophical aesthetics, this study attempts to engage critically with a few examples of contemporary artworks that, I would argue, "exceed the visual" (James 2005: 46). With regard to recent interest in new kinds of experiential exhibitions, as described above, in which viewers of art are physically or bodily involved with the work and in which their somatic participation is often requested (if not required), one of the main questions that is investigated here is how to understand the interaction between people and multisensorial art. In

dispossession of the senses'; the paper given by Thomas Macho and Dietmar Kamper was entitled 'Either sense or the senses'; and, in the title to his presentation, Hans Moravec announced that 'The senses have no future' (Jütte 2005: 5).

²⁴ Throughout much of the twentieth century, certain artists (or groups of artists) have been rejecting previously upheld notions of what art is and how it is experienced. From Cubism, Futurism and Dada to Happenings, Performance art, Conceptual art and installations, some artists have, for quite some time already been questioning the separation of art from human activities and daily life, as well as the modern notion of the gallery or museum as the locus of contemplative aesthetic experience. The rise of such art practice, which often contains some component requiring and/or inviting participation and engagement from the people who encounter it, has been cited as contributing to the argument that art history can no longer focus only on the visual (Di Bello & Koureas 2010: 10).

other words, one of the problems addressed in this research is how to deal with forms of art whose visuality may be its “least distinguishing” (Cherry 2005: 11) feature. Whilst critics of multisensorial and multimedial types of art may deride it for turning art into just another sensational, multisensory spectacle designed to entertain and overwhelm their postmodern spectators with sensational effects, I will take a different track in this study.²⁵ What are the implications of contemporary installation art, such as *Still sounds* – which invite an engaged and active responder to participate in the work beyond the sense of sight, and that actively encourage multisensory involvement rather than ‘looking’ only – for the ways in which those situations are understood and theorised?²⁶

In the late twentieth century and early twenty-first century, artistic practices have expanded at a tremendous rate, confounding traditional classifications of media and genre. But, it is not only the styles, media and techniques of art that have expanded. Even more significantly, new artistic practices have, at least to some extent, changed the ways in which people experience art. In the new ‘aesthetics of engagement’, which is elicited by these encounters, the whole person is encouraged to interact with a work as opposed to only the eyes in a specifically sanctioned gallery space. In these situations, a spectator of a work of art is thus no longer only a viewer in the usual sense of the word – which implies the use of a person’s sense of sight only – but is instead called upon to participate in an interactive process of meaning-making that is opened up by art.

From the perspective of sensory scholarship, the ways in which artworks are experienced multisensorially has become a popular focus of research as demonstrated in the review of literature in sensory studies given in Chapter 3.

²⁵ Bacci (2011: 12) suggests that the increase in installations and types of art that appeal to, or rather “attack”, our senses may be directly related to the fact that in our daily lives we are constantly bombarded by, not only images, but many forms of sensory stimuli. As a result, it may be that “[...] artworks that feature multisensory stimuli may have a greater chance of being noticed by the public” (Bacci 2011: 12).

²⁶ While it may be argued that the prime topic of the visual arts has mostly been the expression of ideas beyond the visible, most twentieth century theoretical approaches to artworks have neglected what lies beyond representation as Marie-Luise Angerer (2011: 219) suggests. The point in fleshed out further in Chapter 4.

At times, the task of scholarship in this direction has been to investigate people's primarily *multisensorial* experiences of works of art. But this study rejects such a narrow view of aesthetic experience and seeks to uncover ways in which a *whole* person's encounters with art – regarded as engaged, reciprocal and participatory – can be articulated. Furthermore, such studies run the risk of aiming to find one solution to, or to propose one theory of, the 'enigma' of aesthetic experience. My aim, however, is quite the opposite. Instead of attempting to finally and conclusively arrive at a theory of engaged and embodied aesthetic experience, I want to tease apart some of the contesting viewpoints on that experience and to keep them in play – by applying them to certain contemporary artworks – rather than to opt for only one fixed direction.

The more flexible position I take here, of course, runs the risk of appearing indecisive. That is, in avoiding a narrow argument about the nature of our embodied experience of the selected works of art (in other words by not narrowing the argument to either art history, visual culture studies or philosophical aesthetics, or even sensory studies, but rather allowing the discourses regarding aesthetic experience developed in these fields to overlap) it may appear that I have not developed a singular argument. But this is precisely the point. My argument is that embodied experience of art cannot be reduced to one singular discursive direction but must allow for flexibility, uncertainty and even ambiguity. This is because, embodied experience of art is particular, instead of general, arising in the unfolding event-encounter between a specific person and a work of art in its expanding and immersive field.

My focus on particular instances of embodied engagement means that I do not reductively hone in on particular sensory modalities – such as sound, smell or touch – in the investigations of the specific (and perhaps limited) artworks chosen for this study. For, I understand embodied engagement to be far broader than these restrictive categories to which sensory experience is often isolated and reduced. As I argue throughout, embodied engagement with art

emerges from far more than some discrete sensory categories and includes the realm of a whole person's intellect, imagination, personal history, attitudes and beliefs, feelings, emotions, desires and affective reactions which are grounded in specific social and cultural contexts. In other words, the discussions of the selected artworks are grounded in the understanding that a person's engagements with them are shaped and re-shaped by the interaction between a physical/chemical/biological/physiological body living in and influenced by a specific social/political/cultural formation. Summarily, embodied engagement, as I develop the argument here, means that a person is considered to be a unified body-mind entity and the integrated experience of art is a whole-body activity, at once embodied, social and political.

Having said that, it *is* necessary to engage with the sensory modalities to some extent in so far that investigating what people see, smell, touch, taste and hear are useful ways in which to *begin* analyses of embodied engagement with art. However, I want to stress that these initial descriptions of sensory engagement always intersect with other realms of embodied experience (the body's movement in space, the intellect, imagination and memory, for instance) and cannot be dealt with in isolation. Therefore, I avoid isolating the senses in this way by emphasising the interconnected nature of our embodied and synaesthetic experience.

1.2 Statement of the problem and aims of the research

The study has three broad main aims from which its sub-aims arise. They are listed below:

1.2.1 Aim 1

A main aim of this study is to explore and examine the encounter between a human being and art.

1.2.1.1 Sub-aim 1.1

From this main aim emerges the first sub-aim. As should already be evident by now, my entry into the conversation around a person's encounter with art is from the perspective of the sensory turn. This means that in the study I aim to contextualise the sensory turn, by particularly exploring the ways in which it seeks to 'turn' away from existing methods and emphases currently employed in the study of art and visual culture.

The research therefore attempts to synthesise the main arguments put forward in a selection of the literature that has already been generated by key thinkers in this terrain. One of the main critiques that has come to light, and which I carefully and critically examine, is directed against the alleged ocularcentrism not only of Western culture, its philosophical traditions and its associated scientific and technological advances, amongst others, but also more specifically of art historiography and (addressed to a lesser extent in this research) the field of visual culture studies. My aim, however, is not to test whether or not art historiography and visual culture studies over-duly privilege the visual. Rather, the study attempts to set the criticisms against the alleged visual-centrism of these disciplines to work and to explore ways in which to deal with works of art that acknowledge the interactive and multisensorial experience of a viewer or participant in the ways suggested in the literature.²⁷

1.2.1.2 Sub-aim 1.2

This leads to my second sub-aim which is to specifically examine the extent to which a multisensorial approach to art, as it has emerged in sensory scholarship, is a productive way in which to investigate a person's encounter with art. In other words, in what ways is a person's multisensorial engagement with art being analysed in sensory scholarship? Following this investigation, I

²⁷ It must be made clear, however, that I am not suggesting that it is only highly interactive or completely immersive art which expressly seeks to entirely engulf a person that can be theorised from the perspective of a viewer's somatic experience. Investigations focussing on somatic experience and people's reactions to two-dimensional paintings and photographs are equally viable in this discussion.

question the usefulness of investigating only the human senses – if that is indeed what is implied by the terms ‘sensory scholarship’ or ‘sensory studies’ – in trying to understand the nature of the relationship between a person and art. Does our status as embodied human beings only include recognition of our *multisensorial* dimension, as implied by the ‘turn’ toward the senses in the sensory turn? In other words, does embodiment only refer to the ways in which the senses of sight, hearing, smell, taste and touch operate in the process of perception?

1.2.2 Aim 2

From this second sub-aim emerges my second main aim: How can a person’s encounter with art as sensorially integrated, fully embodied and multifariously experiential be understood?

1.2.2.1 Sub-aim 2.1

My first sub-aim here is to investigate what is meant by the concept of ‘embodiment’. Furthermore, how can aesthetic experience be understood as embodied? Moreover, what is meant by an aesthetics of embodiment? And, what are the implications of aesthetic experience understood as embodied for the ways in which art is to be investigated?

1.2.3 Aim 3

My third main aim is to develop a position which enables an examination of aesthetic experience as embodied and engaged, and in which vision is acknowledged as only one mode of this experience functioning in a complex relationship to the rest of a person.

1.2.3.1 Sub-aim 3.1

My first sub-aim here is to demonstrate some of the ways in which a person’s experiences – regarded as engaged, reciprocal and participatory – can be articulated with reference to specific aesthetic situations. In other words, I aim to show that beyond the confines of spectatorship, embodied engagement with art

is produced through the interaction between a material work of art and a multisensorial, whole being whose memories, class, gender, ethnicity, desires, repulsions, volitions, affects, pleasures, ideas, beliefs, associations, imagination, unconscious as well as contextual conditions such as her/his culture and personal history all work together to give rise to a complex experiential event.

1.2.3.2 Sub-aim 3.2

My second sub-aim here is to explore how a person's embodied experience of the specific works I have chosen can be understood and articulated in ways that are not only descriptive but also sufficiently critical and reflexive. In other words, in order to deepen and 'thicken', so to speak, the analysis of the meeting of a viewer and art the encounter must be understood in a critically reflexive manner which takes into account the multifarious meaningful experiences that flow out of the dialogical engagement taking place. For, a critical reflection on that encounter, I argue, cannot be overlooked but indeed gives rise to an understanding of some of the possible meanings that may unfold when one reflects on an experience of a particular work in a specific situation.

1.3 Assumptions

In aligning myself with sensory studies, at least in part, my point of departure is that which is often not acknowledged by semiotic, iconographic and ideologically driven accounts of art, namely, the embodiment of the viewer. In other words, the corporeality of the one who looks at and experiences art, I argue, is often overlooked in such accounts. As Elizabeth Edwards & Kaushik Bhaumik (2008: 11) contend "[...] there is no pure visual object as such but only uses of embodied and sensorially engaged sight". This means that when people look, what they see is altogether influenced by felt "[...] sensations, qualities, affects and emotions which emerge from looking and seeing but cannot be reduced to it" (Edwards & Bhaumik 2008: 11). In a similar way, the architect,

Juhani Pallasmaa (2005: 10) contends that “[t]he role of the body as the locus of thought and consciousness, and of the significance of the senses in articulating, storing, and processing sensory responses and thoughts” cannot be ignored in analyses of the experience and meaning-making potential of architecture. Although it has not been possible to include architecture in this study, the intellectual path that underpins this study follows that taken by Pallasmaa, Edwards and Bhaumik (and many others) whose interest lies in reflecting on the engaged and embodied interaction between human beings and the objects they encounter.

In no sense do I argue that the ways in which visual practices are constructed through the ideological and social field are no longer a concern. I do not argue that experience is not a social practice characteristic to a particular culture and context. However, I do propose that investigations of a person’s encounter with art must proceed from the body (recognised as partly, but not only or entirely, discursively produced) as the site from which unique and personal encounters with art emerges. A methodology from the body is not easily talked about by the socio-cultural researcher working within the paradigm of new art history or social art history. Nevertheless, I am determined to analyse the relationship between a human being in her/his various modes of being, including amongst others, the psychological, physiological and the experiential. Thus, I attempt to engage with vision as embodied, multisensory and visceral. Once again, this does not mean that the argument of vision’s social construction is ignored. Rather, the notion that the body is culturally constructed is regarded here as intertwined with a notion of the human body as a physical/biological component of our personal self. It is my contention that a re-conception of art and spectatorship as embodied interaction provides a far more nuanced account of peoples’ experiences in visual culture than ideologically driven readings only.

It must be clearly stated that I recognise that precisely what constitutes a work of art is, of course, a highly complex issue with the stakes of the debate constantly under revision particularly as artists employ new technologies that

challenge previous definitions of the concept. The rise of installation art, land art, new media, electronic and digital art, for example, which can be highly interactive and immersive, as well as appealing not only to the sense of sight but also to the senses of hearing, smell, touch and taste, and working in combination with the imagination, cognition, and the full human person has transformed not only the methods of production of images but also their modes of reception. Foregrounding the nineteenth-century Wagnerian concept of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* – the total work of art – such art forms confound the separation of distinct institutional disciplines such as the visual and musical arts for example (cf. Finger & Follett 2011).

Nevertheless, despite its contentious status, my focus in this research is specifically on the encounter with visual art, which I conceive of not as a special kind of object (in the elitist sense) more worthy of study than any other object created by human beings, but as an object/s or situation/s that may produce or enable many meanings to emerge. Furthermore, although I discuss a limited set of examples of contemporary art in this study, I do not regard aesthetic experience to be limited to art; nor do I consider aesthetic experience as profoundly different from other experiences. Aesthetics is always relational and contextual, differently understood and configured in differing contexts. Nevertheless, aesthetic experience (which might also productively be considered as imaginative experience) must be critically reflected on, as I aim to do here.

1.4 The research methodology

The research methodology employed in this study combines a philosophical and theoretical approach with (predominantly) my own direct experience and engagement with the works under discussion as well as observations of other people's interactions with them and informal discussions about their experiences. In other words, I have not employed only one method but have

attempted to deal with the works under discussion as a means to unpack philosophical and theoretical perspectives on the nature of the relationships, partnerships and interactions that emerge between people and the specific works under discussion here.

The method used, therefore, is not mechanical or scientific. In dealing with both the literature and the works, I have instead endeavoured to maintain a level of speculation and spontaneity in my arguments. Georges Didi-Huberman (2005: 38) criticises social art history, and to be more precise, Michael Baxandall's notion of a "mental tool kit" employed by art historians in their analyses of art. For, such a 'tool kit', he argues, is often "static" in the sense that it does not take into account the anachronistic aspects of the work (Didi-Huberman 2005: 38). In other words, if a 'tool kit' is rigidly employed "semiotically and temporally" (Didi-Huberman 2005: 38), it overlooks countless possible and complex interpretations of the ways in which the work is anachronistic to its time, effectively overlooking the complex temporalities at work in the image. According to Didi-Huberman (2005: 38), the idea that the art historian's tools are static is even more problematic because it "forget[s] that from the tool kit to the hand that uses them, the tools themselves are being formed, that is to say, they appear less as entities than as *plastic forms* in perpetual transformation." Instead, Didi-Huberman (2005:38) suggests that we "think rather of malleable tools, tools [...] that take on a different form, signification, and use value in each hand and on each material to be worked on".

Margaret Iverson & Stephen Melville (2010) address the same 'problem' of a methodology suitable to investigations of art in their text, *Writing art history: disciplinary departures*. Instead of applying a mechanistic methodology which amounts to "download[ing] the discipline" their approach stresses *writing* art history. In other words, instead of applying or 'downloading' a particular methodology, these authors agree that writing about art should be a 'malleable' process, one always in 'perpetual transformation'. Following their advice, the research approach employed here is not rigidly delineated. Having over many

months and even years thought about, responded to and discussed the works that are dealt with in this study with various people, new insights about them have progressively emerged and continue to do so. Therefore, I do not regard my arguments to be authoritative as they have developed from many discussions with colleagues, students, my supervisor and through observing strangers.

Six main artworks are discussed in this study, five of which form the backbone of the arguments developed in five chapters.²⁸ The works have been chosen based on their engagement with ideas (both scientific and philosophical) surrounding human perception and experience of art and are mainly treated as discreet case studies. In this study I focus in particular on contemporary works of art, whereas the argument that encounters with art ought to be investigated beyond showing interest only in the meanings conveyed to the sighted researcher, can also to be applied to older artworks. For instance, one might ask how an embodied encounter with a Renaissance painting or bronze sculpture informs the meanings generated by these works. However, while there certainly remain opportunities to revisit older forms of art from this perspective, the works examined here have been selected specifically because they allow me to begin the conversations undertaken in each of the chapters. Thus, I reserve the study of historical works of art from the past for future research.

Furthermore, the works that I have selected, for the most part and in differing ways already deal with the topic of sensory experience and question, draw attention to, or renegotiate the priority given the visual sense. If the works that I have used here to develop my arguments in some ways share my own intellectual enterprise I do not regard this as a drawback. In this sense the artists may be thought of as part of the discursive community already thinking about the engaged and active relationship between people and art. On the other hand, the ways in which I write and think about the specific works dealt with

²⁸ Moore's installation *Still sounds* is not discussed in great detail but introduces and closes the study. For purposes of economy, in Chapter 5 I do not discuss a specific work in detail.

here has not, to my knowledge, been addressed previously by other writers. Elucidation of what the works accomplish and from which philosophical traditions regarding vision they draw their inspiration, therefore, brings such insights to light. In addition, it is the very purpose of this study not only to contextualise the particular questions raised by each artist but also to advance ways in which the relationship between a person and the specific works can be expressed critically. And, by extension, the study opens conversations surrounding the emergent meanings of the works, thereby heightening their outreach to other experiencers whose direct engagement may be similar or different to my own. In this way, I become a verbalising extension of the work with which others can participate.

For the most part, I personally experienced the works chosen for discussion here.²⁹ It was important to do so in order to explore the encounter between artworks and a specific individual. Too often, as art historians, our analyses and teaching of artworks are based on distant viewings of them, either in books, posters or on the Internet. Such viewing contexts and the experiences they generate are cause for investigation in themselves. However, the direct experience of the work was more critical to the arguments developed in this study.

The research is undeniably and unapologetically shaped and influenced by my own position as a sighted, white, hetero-sexual mother and academic. As Sarah Pink (2011: 605) advises, the role of the researcher should be carefully interrogated with special attention given to “her or his [...] situatedness, and subjectivity in the research encounters and the production of knowledge”. Although the crux of this investigation is to suggest an approach that recognises the significance of the complicated relationship between people and the art they

²⁹ It is only Devorah Sperber’s work, *After the last supper* (2005) that I was unable to experience in person. And, unfortunately, the anecdotal accounts on the Internet of people’s experiences are few and far between. Aided to some extent by the many interviews with the artist available online, for the most part, I have had to imagine what it would be like to see her work *in situ*.

encounter, I do not pretend to set forth any definitive or even general theory on art.

But this does not mean that an analysis of active and embodied engagement with art is not relevant to a larger audience. In fact, quite the opposite is true and I want to stress two important points regarding the relevance of the direct experience of an individual to the experience of a wider group. Firstly, although particular and individual, first-hand experience of art is not isolated from the wider realm of human interactions. Instead, taken as constructed in a particular way by the artist, and influenced by wider cultural, political and social attitudes and beliefs, the dialogical engagement between viewers and art is a rich breeding ground for conversations to be developed around the reasons why people have similar (or different) experiences. There are affinities between people's responses precisely because the artist's envisaged a certain response. Secondly and wholly related to the previous point, critical reflexivity is not unreservedly avoided in this approach, for, I would argue, that merely describing direct experience is insufficient to the task of such analyses. By critically investigating wider audiences' responses to particular encounters with art and relating these to philosophical positions not only on art but also on human experience, a broader understanding of both art and historically framed acts of perception can be reached. This is the specific route taken in the analyses of Casilda Sanchez's video work and Berco Wilsenach's exhibition in Chapters 6 & 7.

Finally, this study is mainly carried out in the phenomenological and hermeneutic traditions. In *Truth and method*, Hans Georg Gadamer (2004 [1975]: 113) writes that “[n]either the separate life of the creating artist – his biography – nor that of the performer who acts a work, nor that of the spectator who is watching the play, has any separate legitimacy in the face of the being of the work of art”. The multilayered nature of the encounter between a person and art is the focus of this study. This encounter is treated as a “communion” and a “performance” (Dufrenne 1973 [1953]: 228), an “aesthetic transaction” (Berleant

1970: 88) and an “event” (Massumi 1995) in which an actively engaged participant meets with the material and affective qualities of art. These encounters are considered to be personal and unique yet at the same time shaped by our intersubjective situatedness in particular social, cultural and political contexts.

1.5 Theoretical approach and review of the literature

This research explores embodied subjectivity in relation to art with a specific focus on contemporary artworks that invite active engagement and participation. The study is, therefore, an investigation into ideas of subjectivity and, in particular, notions of embodiment as they have come to light in continental philosophy, art historiography and visual culture studies. The theme of embodied spectatorship in contemporary art is analysed, in particular, through the lenses of the sensory turn, the pictorial turn, the corporeal turn, empathy theory, affect theory, phenomenology and aesthetic embodiment and engagement. Although some of these theories may seem incompatible they are brought into a close conversation with each other in this study in order to understand the nature of embodiment more broadly. Furthermore, by placing contemporary art in dialogue with these theories, the possibility of a richer and deeper analysis of contemporary contexts in which the limits of the notion of ‘spectatorship’ become evident, are opened up.

Theories put forward under the rubric of the sensory turn have predominantly guided this research with some excursions into other relevant intellectual positions as mentioned above. The theoretical turn toward acknowledging the implication of the multisensorial and embodied involvement of a person experiencing art is thus the point of departure for this study. To this end, the study is informed by a number of philosophical texts including the seminal texts of René Descartes (1596-1650), Denis Diderot (1713-1784), Alexander Baumgarten (1714-1762), Immanuel Kant (1724-1803), Jacques Lacan (1901-

1981), Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980), Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961), Mikel Dufrenne (1910-1995), Luce Irigaray (b. 1930) and Arnold Berleant (b. 1932).

Descartes' *La Dioptrique (Optics)* (2013 [1637]), one of the three appendices to *Discourse on method*, has been regarded not so much as a "historical curiosity" as a "[...] foundational text for modern definitions of space, observation and science" (Mirzoeff 2013: 229). In Chapter 2 extensive use is made of Descartes' text in order to give clarity to aspects of his ambivalent stance on vision. This analysis is necessary in order to more clearly understand Merleau-Ponty's critique of 'Cartesianism' which is dealt with in Chapter 5. Equally, Hal Foster's edited volume *Vision and visuality* (1988) has provided useful insights into various perspectives on conceptions of vision by leading scholars of visual culture. In particular, the chapters written by Jay, 'Scopic regimes of modernity' (1988a), and Jonathan Crary, 'Modernising vision' (1988), provide two differing perspectives on the ways in which vision and subjectivity in the modern period have been understood. Another text by Jay that has proven indispensable for this study is *Downcast eyes: the denigration of vision in twentieth century French thought* (1993). In this extensive text Jay examines the various ways in which twentieth-century French philosophers have critiqued Western ocularcentrism and, in some cases, demonised vision.

Jütte's *A history of the senses* (2005) is helpful in understanding and contextualising the historical hierarchisation and distribution of the human sensorium. The division of the senses is also addressed by Howes in *Empire of the senses: the sensual culture reader* (2005). Howes is a professor of Anthropology at Concordia University, Montreal and the Director of the Concordia Sensoria Research Team (CONCERT). His research in sensory scholarship provides useful material for understanding the background and context of sensory scholarship and current research in this field. His other articles, such as 'Charting the sensorial revolution' (2006) and 'The expanding

field of sensory studies' (2013), to name only a few, have proven immensely helpful for the arguments presented in Chapter 4.

In addition, Crary's *Techniques of the observer: on vision and modernity in the nineteenth century* (1990) has proven equally helpful to the study. Crary shows how the ways in which vision was understood in the early nineteenth century signalled a change in the way in which subjectivity had previously been understood. Thus, modernity, characterised by a fast-paced and rapidly changing environment, with rural landscapes being partly replaced by urban landscapes, amongst several other changes to people's lives based on technological inventions required, in Crary's view, a new type of observer.

The debate on the question of the (im)penetrability, or flexibility, of perception in *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* (2001) between Arthur Danto, Noël Carroll, Whitney Davis and others, is unpacked in Chapter 3. In this issue of the journal, contributors offered differing positions regarding whether or not vision can be considered to have a 'history' in the sense that vision itself may have changed, and is constantly changing, at the level of human physiology.

Two texts linking art and sensory scholarship have been used extensively not only in Chapter 4, but also as a way in which to describe a person's encounter with the works discussed in Chapters 5, 6 & 7. Patricia Di Bello & Gabriel Koureas' edited volume, *Art, history and the senses: 1830 to the present* (2010) includes chapters that are concerned with "[...] account[ing] for bodily experiences and the materiality of works of art". In other words, the editors' aim is to avoid ideologically driven, discursive and semiotic interpretations of art and begin a broader conversation about the role and status of the embodied sensual beings that encounter specific materialities of art. This is also the project undertaken by Bacci & Melcher in their book *Art and the senses* (2011). A close examination of this text reveals that, while Howes remains sceptical of the potential of neuroscience to shed light on multisensoriality, many of the contributors to Bacci & Melcher's text embrace the potential of the cognitive-

and neurosciences to provide evidence for the operation of people's senses as they respond to what they see, smell, hear and so forth. In this regard, the text provides a very interesting alternative view to that of Howes and fellow researcher Constance Classen. The texts by Howes, Di Bello & Koureas and Bacci & Melcher, combined with Halsall's (2004) critique of art historiography's ocularcentrism have been useful for contextualising the sensory turn and determining its main disciplinary procedures.

For the purpose of suggesting some ways in which a person's experience of art beyond spectatorship might be articulated, Merleau-Ponty's conception of embodiment is especially useful. Although his main ideas were penned in the 1940s and 1950s, since the turn of this century, interest in Merleau-Ponty's theories on the phenomenology of embodiment is increasingly gaining momentum in a wide array of disciplines as scholars realise their contemporary relevance. In Chapter 5 I draw from three texts in particular, all of which reveal the philosopher's grappling with consciousness and nature, although in different ways as each work marks a particular stage in his philosophical position. *Phenomenology of perception*, published in 1945, was influenced by research being done at that time in psychology and biology. 'Eye and mind', which was first published as an essay in January 1961, was also the last work published by Merleau-Ponty before his sudden death on 3 May 1961 at age 53. *The visible and the invisible*, which Merleau-Ponty began writing in January 1959, was edited and published posthumously in 1964 in French by Claude Lefort. This last text shows the culmination of the philosopher's thinking on an ontology of the flesh. Owing to their importance in elucidating Merleau-Ponty's ontology of vision and embodiment, these three texts are closely examined in Chapters 5 & 6.

In some of the intellectual work currently emerging within the sensory turn there is a specific return to the late nineteenth-century notion of *Einfühlung*. Ellen Esrock, for instance, has drawn on empathy theory in order to investigate the multisensorial and bodily connection between spectators and two-dimensional

works of pictorial art, such as paintings and photographs specifically. Two texts in particular are used in Chapter 6 to develop the argument that a person's full-bodied perception is involved when s/he looks at two-dimensional art. In the article, 'Touching art: intimacy, embodiment and the somatosensory system' Esrock (2001: 234) suggests that bodily boundaries between a person and what s/he sees can be overcome imaginatively through a process of "somatic reinterpretation". The notion of 'somatic reinterpretation' is developed further in her article entitled *Embodying art: the spectator and the inner body* (2010) in which Esrock turns to scientific research to provide empirical evidence for her theories on spectators' bodily experiences of art. It is particularly Esrock's (2010: 221) intention of bringing to light "[...] a way of using our bodies that can occur when we look at artworks" produced in different media and at different times that is useful to this study and in particular the argument developed in Chapter 6.

In their respective accounts of the formation of self-consciousness in terms of vision, both the existential phenomenologist Sartre and psychoanalyst Lacan regard vision to be primarily alienating and hostile, but at the same time a 'necessary evil'. In other words, both philosophers understand vision in negative terms. Sartre's account of 'the look' in *Being and Nothingness* (1956 [1943]) and Lacan's account of the formation of the subject under 'the gaze' in *The four fundamental concepts of psychoanalysis* (1981 [1973]) are closely examined in Chapter 6. Their positions on the hostility of the gaze are contrasted with Irigaray's very different conception of vision in particular in her book, *i love to you: a sketch of a possible felicity in history* (1996) in which she proposes an alternative understanding of looking, not as alienating but as connecting.

Berleant's notions of aesthetic embodiment and aesthetic engagement underpin much of my main arguments. In his first book *The aesthetic field: a phenomenology of aesthetic experience* (1970), which is influenced by phenomenology and American pragmatism, Berleant establishes the aesthetic field as a contextual framework within which questions in aesthetics and the arts

arise. In his subsequent work, *Art and engagement* (1991) his notions of aesthetic engagement and participatory aesthetics are developed further and applied to environmental aesthetics which is useful to my own analysis of a land art work in Chapter 5. Berleant's (1991: 89) support of a "participatory model" of aesthetic experience that is concerned with the interaction between people and art and transcends divisions of subjects and objects is also applied in my analyses of both Hannelie Coetzee's *Buigkrag* (2013) and Wilsenach's *Die blinde astronoom* (2013).

Finally Dufrenne's (1973 [1953]) notion of a 'phenomenology of aesthetic experience' as put forward in his book by the same name is given close attention and is interlaced with Berleant's approach. In *The phenomenology of aesthetic experience* Dufrenne examines aesthetic experience as an affective encounter, or a perceptual unity, that occurs between what he refers to as an 'aesthetic object' and a 'perceiving subject'. It is, thus, precisely his conception of the reciprocal relationship between subject and object that are helpful in advancing a critical reflection on their dialogical engagement.

From the outset I should state that I am not attempting a composite history of the senses as understood in art history, philosophy or represented in Western visual culture, nor do I make any claim to give an accurate picture of their histories in these fields. My discussions may therefore appear lacking in substantial depth if that were taken to be the main aim of the study. For, the literature review and the resulting discussions set out here searched instead for ways in which to understand some of these notions through the lenses of particular works of art. Admittedly, much relevant literature has escaped my attention. In addition, the route taken here has given rise to a broad range of literature being analysed which, at times, may appear incompatible. My hope is that the reader will be open to the arguments developed here which attempt to flesh out the nature of people's previously overlooked embodied engagement with art.

1.6 Outline of chapters

Chapter 1 has set down the introduction and background to the study and has outlined the main aims of this research. The six chapters that follow can be divided into two parts, with Chapters 2, 3 and 4 constituting Part 1. Part 1 focuses on the main debates around ocularcentrism that have surfaced in the literature dealing with visual culture studies and art history from the perspective of the sensory turn. Chapter 2 sets out to closely examine vision's status as ambiguously both 'noble' and unreliable, centring in particular on Descartes' position on the matter. Thus, philosophical scepticism over vision's ability to acquire reliable knowledge and understanding is explored in contrast to the value given to sight in the realms of science and technology.

Devorah Sperber's *After the Last Supper* (2005), an installation consisting mainly of cotton reels, is used as a means by which to interrogate the scientific model of vision and expose its limitations. This chapter sets the groundwork for subsequent chapters by contextualising the autonomy allegedly given the visual not only in modern and postmodern everyday life, but also in the Western philosophical tradition and in modern Western scientific pursuits mainly from the fifteenth century. In other words, in an endeavour to analyse the status of vision, the ways in which sight came to be privileged in these domains and its effect on the construction of a modern Western sense of self are broadly investigated. This entails a brief but necessary investigation of some of the increasingly sophisticated optical instrumentation that was developed in order to enhance visual ability and which played a significant role in the equation of scientific vision and knowledge. This part of the investigation thus seeks to find justification for the alleged ocularcentrism that, it has been suggested, has pervaded modern Western society in the context of a particular scientific worldview characteristic of the Enlightenment project.

Chapter 3 continues the investigation of sight's prioritisation by focussing particularly on a brief account of the philosophical division and hierarchisation of

the senses by considering the ways in which Plato and Aristotle understood the relationship between perception and sensation. The forebears of the Western philosophical tradition are discussed in this chapter in order to show how sight came to be equated, in some Enlightenment quarters, with rational and objective understanding. This equation, as it is shown in Chapter 3, relied – and according to some commentators, still relies – on the premise that sight is a so-called ‘distance-sense’ whilst taste, touch and smell are ‘proximal’ senses. In other words, the arguments presented here analyse ways in which the relationship between seeing and understanding has been understood.

The construction of the so-called rational, objective observer via the *camera obscura* model of vision in combination with ‘Cartesian perspectivalism’ (Jay 1988a & 1993) is shown to have been dismantled early in the nineteenth century. Owing to advanced scientific methods and instruments which subjected the eye to observation and scrutiny, the increasing autonomy of vision is explored in Chapter 3. Based on empirical evidence of the subjective role of the perceiver in the process of seeing, it became increasingly clear that the body is an active participant in the production of optical experience. A brief exploration of the research undertaken by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832), Johannes Müller (1801-1858) and Hermann von Helmholtz (1821-1894) shows that, as vision was more and more closely observed in the early nineteenth century, previous notions of vision were radically reconceptualised. Chapter 3 aims to show the ways in which vision was ‘liberated’ and understood as corporeal and autonomous by the early nineteenth century.

Following on the theme of ‘showing seeing’, which guides my argument in Chapter 2, Chapter 3 examines an installation by Annie Cattrell, *Sense* (2003) as a means by which to explore recent evidence obtained through neuroscience which shows that the eyes operate in a complex relationship to the other senses. In other words, in Chapter 3 I critically examine the potential of neuroscientific research into the ways in which the senses operate at a

neurological level, to assist in understanding human experience as complex and multilayered.

In Chapter 4 the investigation turns specifically to the emergence of the so-called ‘sensory turn’ in academic work in the terrains of the humanities and social sciences. The main aim of the chapter is to contextualise sensory scholarship in order to show its relationship to other ‘turns’ in theorising how humans make sense of their world. In other words, in a close investigation of its theoretical assumptions the chapter seeks to understand the intellectual trajectory from which the sensory turn both emerges and moves away.

Two interrelated accusations against art history’s purported unnecessary privilege of the visual are explored. Firstly, I explore the assumption that art history’s emphasis on the ways in which people see art is problematic in that the participation of the other senses in the activity of seeing and experiencing art is virtually entirely overlooked. Secondly, I investigate the assumption that, for the most part, art historians allegedly continue to hold on to a notion of aesthetic experience as disinterested and the aesthetic gaze as a disembodied way of looking at art. My concern in Chapter 4 is to bring the conversation regarding a person’s multisensorial and embodied engagement in culture closer to the discipline of art history by investigating the implications of the sensory turn for this discipline.

Chapters 5, 6 and 7 form the second part this study. In Part 2 I propose ways in which the encounter between people, who are aware of their full-bodied interaction with works of art which encourage their engagement and which elicit their imaginative projection and elaboration, can be understood and articulated. In order to do so, I propose that there are at least three ways in which multisensoriality and embodiment can become an integral part of a conversation around a person’s encounter with art. My aim is not to suggest that the three modes discussed in these three chapters are exhaustive or that they represent the only way in which to analyse art from the approach of embodied

engagement with art that (in a narrow view) relies merely on spectatorship. It is more the case that categorising the modes in this way enables me to more clearly understand some of the approaches in multisensorial discourse on art available at present and to suggest ways in which the analyses of art that are enabled via these approaches can productively be articulated and pushed further in an analysis of three different aesthetic occasions or situations.

The approach I take to the analysis of the works of art in Part 2 assumes that a dialogical interaction occurs between a person and a work of art. In other words, my intention is to examine the exchange that takes place between art and its participants. My basic theoretical standpoint is that the image-event taking place in the ‘in-between’ situation – by which I mean the complex and many-sided interaction between the work’s material and affective presentation and a participant or responder – although a challenging task, can productively be articulated.

Coetzee’s land art work, *Buigkrag*, is explored in Chapter 5 by applying Merleau-Ponty’s notions of aesthetic perception combined with Berleant’s notion of participatory aesthetics. I take up aspects of Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological approach to this exploration by describing the aesthetic situation in some detail. I first explore Merleau-Ponty’s notion of embodied perception and thereafter move on to a closer examination of his account of the intimate, chiasmic and corporeal relationship between a subject and the world. For Merleau-Ponty, being embodied means also to be intimately interlaced or intertwined with the world. In other words, in opposition to the subject-object division, constructed in ‘intellectualist’ strains of philosophy, Merleau-Ponty understands a person and the world to be mutually involved and interdependent.

Following Merleau-Ponty’s conception of embodied perception in general, in this chapter aesthetic experience is argued to be embodied, engaged and participatory and to emerge between a person and a work. This means that I

recognise that an experiential encounter with a work of art is produced or emerges from the interaction – which may be an empathic connection – between an embodied sensual/sensory being responding to the work's material qualities – its suggestive gestalt of marks, traces, cues, motifs, and so forth. In other words, rather than denying the involvement of the body in a mode of (disinterested) aesthetic experience, which was one of the ideals of modern aesthetics, an aesthetics of embodiment is stressed here as integral to understanding a person's embodied response to and fascination with art. Acknowledging that a perceiver, or senser, of art is embodied and interacts with the material qualities of an artwork in its extended and expanded environment is taken further in Chapters 6 and 7.

In Chapter 6 I extend the phenomenologically-driven close description of a person's encounter with a work of art by delving into some of the possible meanings that may unfold when the experience itself is analysed in a critically reflexive manner following that proposed by Renée Van de Vall (2003). The investigation centres on a person's sensuous bodily engagement with Sanchez's video *As inside as the eye can see* (2010) in order to show that meaningful interactions with art arise from and through these encounters. Drawing attention to a full-bodied responder's multifarious experiences of claustrophobia, irritation, connection, intimacy, shame, anxiety, comfort/discomfort, I argue that our empathic relationship (Esrock 2001 & 2010) with the video gives rise to a deeper awareness of the various, perhaps paradoxical, modes of vision and visual touch occurring not only in our encounter with the work, but also between the people we are watching. In this chapter I explore the denigration of vision in Sartre and Lacan's writing both of whom regard vision to be primarily alienating and hostile. In contrast to their negative views on vision, Merleau-Ponty's chiasmic understanding of perception is once again brought into the picture to argue that vision connects rather than alienates people from the world. In addition, Irigaray's notion of vision as leading to loving connection is used to support this conception of vision.

In Chapter 7 I embark on a close description and critical reflection on a person's participative interaction with Wilsenach's exhibition *Die blinde astronoom* which staged one's movements through, in and around both its various components as well as the environment in which it was exhibited. Once again, a key theme that emerges in this encounter is the relationship between vision and touch. The particular aim of this chapter is to further deepen a mode of critical reflection on an encounter with a specific installation. My basic theoretical standpoint is that a person's embodied and engaged experience is the starting point from which investigations of art can productively proceed. In other words, by means of a predominantly phenomenological approach that describes aesthetic situations and encounters I argue that direct experience does not simply contribute to, but rather has a "primacy" and "authority", to paraphrase Berleant (1970: 118) in investigations of art. Finally, the exhibition under discussion in Chapter 7 is a fitting way to end the study for the visually extraordinary installations can perhaps, paradoxically, be understood as a critique of the hypertrophy of the visual in modern Western culture, the very topic with which this study begins.

PART I

CHAPTER 2

CAN YOU SEE WHAT I MEAN? SHOWING THE LIMITS OF THE ‘NOBLEST’ OF THE SENSES

The eye [...] through which the beauty of the universe is revealed to our contemplation is of such excellence that whoever should resign himself to losing it would deprive himself of the knowledge of all the works of nature, the sight of which makes the soul live happily in its body's prison, thanks to the eyes which show him the infinite variety of creation: whoever loses them abandons his soul in a dark prison where all hope of once more seeing the sun, the light of the universe, must vanish.¹

It is often noted that the seventeenth-century French philosopher, Descartes is the “founding father of the modern visualist paradigm” (Jay 1993: 69). A “quintessentially visual philosopher” according to Jay (1993: 69), Descartes’ treatise on vision is set out in *Optics* (1637), one of the three appendices to *Discourse on method*. Descartes (2013 [1637]: 333) begins the first discourse by stating that: “The conduct of our life depends entirely on our senses, and since sight is the *noblest* and most comprehensive of the senses, inventions which serve to increase its power are undoubtedly among the most useful there can be” [my italics, JL].

In this chapter I want to tease apart the assumption, held not only by Descartes and Rainer Maria Rilke (as expressed in the quote above), but also by many contemporary commentators on visual culture, that sight is the sense that dominates over the other corporeal senses in daily life, particularly in the reliable acquisition of knowledge. For this reason, sight apparently requires critical attention above the other senses.² The evidence used to support this position on sight has often been taken from the premise that modern Western

¹ Rainer Maria Rilke (qtd Merleau-Ponty 1993 [1961]: 146).

² Cf. the plethora of texts dedicated to analysing the visual. The extensive list would include Jessica Evans & Stuart Hall’s (1999) *Visual culture: the reader*, Marita Sturken & Lisa Cartwright’s (2001) *Practices of looking*, Tony Schirato & Jennifer Webb’s (2004) *Understanding the visual*, the South African text edited by Jeanne van Eeden & Amanda du Preez (2005) *South African visual culture* as well as Nicholas Mirzoeff’s (2002, 2009, 2013) many texts and readers dealing with visual culture, to name only a few.

societies are predominantly ocularcentric³ and have, since approximately the birth of the Renaissance in the fifteenth century, relied mainly on sight for gaining knowledge about the world (Jay 1993, Jencks 1995). As a result of the alleged ocularcentrism that pervades modern existence, a great deal of research on visual culture prioritises sight as the sense greatly in need of analysis in order to expose the ways in which seeing is constructed in and through culture. In other words, it appears that, precisely because sight has been regarded as the most important – or “noblest”, at least according to Descartes (2013 [1637]: 333) – sense in the multisensorial body, not only the objects of vision – images in their broadest sense – but vision itself have been deconstructed and critiqued in visual culture studies and philosophy.⁴ The implication of the Western hierarchisation of the senses and the related privilege accorded sight as the putative foundational sense in shaping the relationship between people and their world is thus investigated in Chapter 2 and extended in Chapter 3. At the same time, it should be noted that I do not attempt a comprehensive history of the ways in which sight came to be privileged in the construction of a modern Western sense of self, but rather very broadly investigate particular moments in the period since the Renaissance that have given rise to the notion that sight is *the* sense that requires critical analysis from the viewpoint of visual culture studies.

2.1 For your eyes only

That visual culture studies is now an attractive and ‘popular’ field of study is already well documented and it is not my intention to sketch this background once again. Nor is it my intention to explore the reasons why contemporary visual life requires analysis at all. Rather, I want to ask whether visual culture

³ Ocularcentrism refers to the primacy accorded vision in acquiring knowledge of the world. In section 2.5 the term is explained in more detail and related to the concept ‘logocentrism’.

⁴ In particular, I am thinking here of Jay’s *Downcast eyes: the denigration of vision in French thought* (1993) which sets out the various ways in which twentieth-century French philosophers and cultural theorists have critiqued Western ocularcentrism and, in some cases, even demonised vision.

studies (in name and in its ‘principles’, as set out by Paul Duncum, for example) has taken for granted the autonomy of the visual in everyday experience?⁵ In this chapter, I question visual cultural investigations whose premise it is that sight trumps the senses of taste, touch, smell, and hearing in the critical investigation of visual culture. Does such a focus on what and how people see relegate the ‘other’ senses to a position of lesser significance or complete erasure in the study of visual culture? Bal (2003: 10) has pointed out that the “visual essentialism” demonstrated by work in visual culture studies since its emergence in the last decades of the twentieth century is one of its most challenging weaknesses. She warns that “[...] with the isolation of vision comes the hierarchy of the senses, one of the traditional drawbacks of the disciplinary division of the Humanities”.⁶

In Chapter 2, I show that Descartes (for whom sight was ambiguously the noblest of the senses), as well as the ancient Greek scholars before him (who both divided and hierarchised the senses),⁷ were sceptical about the accuracy of sight in providing reliable access to knowledge of the world at the same time that they ennobled vision. The underlying theme of this chapter and the next is thus an investigation into the ways in which the nature of the relationship between perception, the senses and the subject has been understood historically.

An attempt to track the entire history of how this relationship has been understood would, no doubt, amount to a task far beyond the scope of what could be achieved in one or two chapters. Therefore, I restrict the discussion to three key focus areas. Entering into this conversation from the perspective of

⁵ Duncum (2010: 6) has succinctly proposed that, based on the literature of visual culture studies so far, seven principles have come to inform his own approach to teaching about art and visual culture. These seven principles – power, ideology, representation, seduction, gaze, intertextuality and multimodality – serve to question what Duncum (2010: 10) quite rightly believes to be the “hopelessly inadequate” formal elements and principles of art – such as space, line, tone, colour, and so on – devised at the beginning of the twentieth century and which he contends are still in operation in many art (and art history) classrooms today.

⁶ Citing the work of installation artist, James Coleman, as well as the Internet, Bal (2003: 10) maintains that neither art nor digital media – now typical ‘objects’ of visual culture – are primarily, or purely, visual.

⁷ The classical division and hierarchisation of the senses is examined in Chapter 3.

visual culture studies and art history,⁸ I examine the ways in which sight came to be privileged in modern Western scientific pursuits. In particular, this chapter investigates the increasing technological development of optical instrumentation to enhance visual ability and acuity from around the fifteenth century which led to the equation of scientific vision and knowledge from the eighteenth century.⁹ In addition, the ‘Cartesian’ understanding of the relationship between the subject and the world and the implication of the invention of linear perspective in painting and drawing in the fifteenth century for the way in which the subject was understood in relation to the world, are investigated here. In other words, I investigate the discursive construction of the subject between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries.

Chapter 3 extends the discussions begun in Chapter 2. Chapter 3 explores the philosophical division of the senses and the more recent research, from the fields of cognitive psychology, neuroscience and neuropsychology, which have brought to light contesting positions on their actual functioning. In both chapters, the ambivalent positions regarding both vision’s ontological status and epistemological reliability are strongly evident. I am aware that the discussions undertaken in these two chapters run the risk of over-simplifying matters regarding the various complicated and complex ways in which sensation, perception and human subjectivity have been understood in this broad period. It is not my intention to deny the various nuanced ways in which this period has been understood theoretically. Nevertheless, it is necessary to highlight particular moments in the evolution and development of the modern Western

⁸ From the outset it should be made clear that my research can be located at times ‘within’ and at other times ‘in-between’ the fields of visual culture studies and art history. Bal (2003: 11) would no doubt describe my position between these two fields as that of an “art-historian-turned-‘visual-culture’-enthusiast”. If this description means that I am a researcher of (popular) visual culture and not art or its history, I would resist the label. If, however, the description refers to someone who critically interrogates both the ‘objects’ encountered in culture as well as the ways in which we deal with and respond to them, I happily embrace this label.

⁹ The link between scientific vision and knowledge is exemplified by the increasing radicalness of rationalism in Kant’s writing. For example, in answer to the question, ‘What is enlightenment?’ he stated “*Sapere Aude!*” or “Dare to know” (Kant [s.a.] [1784]: [s.p.]) in comparison with Leonardo da Vinci’s motto: *Sapere vedere* which could mean ‘know how to look’ as well as ‘to see is to truly know or to know with certainty’.

sense of self in order to situate my later arguments in relation to current theoretical positions on the encounter between embodied participants and works of art.

I take my cue from one of the leading scholars of visual culture, Mitchell (2003), who suggests that researchers of visual culture, vision and visuality ought to ‘show seeing’. Contrary to the emphasis placed by Mitchell on sight, however, my aim is to show that human vision operates in a complex relationship not only to the other senses but also in an inseparable relationship to the entire body, including a person’s personal beliefs and attitudes grounded in cultural and social formations as well as the intellect and the imagination. In this endeavour, therefore, I attempt to expose the limits of showing only the ways in which the alleged ‘noblest’ of the senses – sight – is constructed and shapes our relationship to the world.¹⁰

2.2 Showing seeing

In his contribution to Michael Ann Holly & Keith Moxey’s *Art history, aesthetics, visual studies* (2003) Mitchell (2003: 232) suggests that research in visual studies ought to “show seeing” in a course of action that defamiliarises seeing in order to make vision “[...] show itself, to put it on display”.¹¹ For Mitchell (2003:

¹⁰ In utilising Mitchell’s (2003) notion of ‘showing seeing’ as the thread that runs through this argument, I do not wish to critique his “show-and-tell” (Mitchell 2003: 232) approach or to suggest that he advocates an approach to visual studies that is interested only in the visual dimension of visual culture. For, Mitchell (2005b: 5) argues that “there are no visual media” and that “all media are mixed media”. In other words, Mitchell recognises that we do not interact with media, including paintings, only through optical perception. Instead, he insists that any medium appeals to a variety of senses at the same time, albeit to varying degrees. Therefore, my intention is to take up Mitchell’s challenge to show seeing by showing how seeing is related to the other senses. In other words, I show that the human subject in visual culture is a multisensorial being, whose perception and sensation are influenced and complicated by the multiplicity of being. It is the whole body of the subject, which includes the intellect and the imagination that should be ‘shown’ in critical analyses of visual culture.

¹¹ It is interesting to note that Mitchell’s title is a slight variation on Danto’s earlier article *Seeing and showing* (2001) without making any reference to it. This is interesting because in 2001 *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* published a series of articles dealing with the topic of the human visual perceptual system and its ability, or inability, to change given not only different historical and cultural contexts but mainly as a result of what people see. The different positions

231) showing seeing is necessary owing to the fact that vision itself – the actual process of seeing – is invisible. In no way can one argue that, not only is it impossible to see how the eye works at a biological/physiological level, because “[...] the eyeball [...] is never transparent [...]” (Mitchell 2003: 231), but the ways in which people living in visual cultures make sense of what they see are generally taken for granted and are therefore also ‘invisible’. By problematising that which is naturalised in everyday human experience – in other words, by making opaque that which is taken as transparent and natural – Mitchell (2003: 247) proposes that the task of visual culture critique is to grapple with the complexities of what is taken for granted in “everyday vision”, or what he refers to as “vernacular visuality”.

It is now apparent that one of the main tenets of visual culture studies (in its various manifestations and definitions) thus far is that seeing is an “impure” (Bal 2003: 9) phenomenon.¹² This is mainly because vision is ‘seen’ to have a socio-cultural dimension, requiring analysis of the multiple ‘ways of seeing’ that are constructed in, and by, culture.¹³ As Irit Rogoff (2002: 24) succinctly puts it, discourses of the visual problematise “[...] the centrality of vision and the visual world in producing meanings, establishing and maintaining aesthetic values, gender stereotypes and power relations within culture”. In short, it is now apparent that visual culture studies regards subjectivity as a social construct and, for the most part, aims to make visible the cultural and ideological dimensions of vision (cf. Mitchell 1994, 1995a & 1995b, Mirzoeff 2002, 2009 & 2013, Sturken & Cartwright 2001, Van Eck & Winters 2005).

This statement could be taken further to argue that, not only are images – or image phenomena in their broadest sense – widely regarded as possessing

on the matter of perceptual change, at the level of neurology and ophthalmology, is explored in greater detail in Chapter 3 in section 3.6.

¹² To regard vision as ‘impure’ is the opposite of neo-Kantian philosopher, Konrad Fiedler’s notion of ‘pure vision’ or ‘pure visibility’ in the sense of formal visual abstraction which he developed in texts such as *On judging works of visual art* (1876). Fiedler considered the development of absolute vision a necessary prerequisite for a cognition that could sort through the chaos received from empirical impressions. In other words, according to Fiedler, vision gives form to what the senses provide to the mind.

¹³ Cf. John Berger’s influential 1970s BBC series published as *Ways of seeing* (1982).

(hidden) ideological agendas, but the ways in which they are seen and understood by viewers are now regarded as culturally mediated.¹⁴ This means that visual culture studies investigates the social strategies of pictorial discourse, or as Mitchell (2003: 238) puts it, the analytical breadth of visual culture studies includes the chiastic concepts of “[...] the social construction of the visual field [...]” and “[...] the visual construction of the social field [...]”. In other words, not only are images regarded as representations of conceptual and discursive fields already circulating in a discursive context, but vision itself is also regarded as ideologically constructed in and through culture and, therefore, as highly problematic. Furthermore, the social field and our social arrangements are fundamentally affected by and shaped by what is seen. For this reason, the ‘problem’ of ‘vision’ and ‘visuality’ has come to occupy a central position in critical approaches (based primarily in constructivist positions) to visual culture.¹⁵

2.2.1 Vision and visuality

The relationship between the terms, ‘vision’ and ‘visuality’, is rather slippery and despite efforts to describe their difference from one another they do not necessarily stand in opposition either. While it is tempting to separate ‘vision’ – which suggests that sight is somehow an exclusively physical operation – and visuality – which suggests that sight is a socially embedded practice – Foster (1988: ix) notes that “[...] vision is social and historical too, and visuality involves the body and the psyche [...]. In other words, just as it is hardly possible to separate Mitchell’s chiastic concepts referred to in the previous paragraph, so too separating the concepts ‘vision’ and ‘visuality’ should best be avoided.¹⁶

¹⁴ Cf. Dirk van den Berg’s (2004: [s.p.]) excellent investigation into what has, rather ambiguously, been considered to fall within the category of “the broad domain of the image” thereby complicating matters for both art historiography and visual culture studies.

¹⁵ The ‘problem of vision’ has, furthermore, led to the so-called “denigration of vision” (Jay 1993) in Western philosophy and art, a topic which I already introduced in Chapter 1 and to which I return in greater depth in Chapter 6.

¹⁶ Many authors have offered slight variations on this definition of visuality. For instance, Van Eeden & Du Preez (2005: 6) define visuality as the “[...] complex relationship of simultaneously

Moreover, ‘sight’ and ‘vision’ could also be differentiated with sight regarded as physiological only, while vision implies something greater than the physical operation of the bodily eyes. Thus, vision could be seen to allude to a far more complex matter than sight alone. Summarily, in its endeavour to show seeing, one of the aims of visual culture studies is to analyse, if not the so-called ‘nobility’ of sight, then surely its immense significance in cultural and social experience.

2.3 Keep your eye on the ball

In keeping with the theme of ‘showing seeing’ I now turn to a work of art produced by the New York based artist, Devorah Sperber who appears to literally make visible exactly what Mitchell suggests – she shows seeing.¹⁷ Evidently fascinated with the science behind vision, Sperber puts the manner in which the physiological process of seeing is widely understood ‘on display’ in a series of mixed media works in which she has painstakingly reconstructed famous artworks. Her remakes of the original paintings consist of multitudes of coloured cotton reels which each represent one pixel in the entire image. Owing

seeing and being seen”. Put somewhat differently, Caroline Van Eck & Edward Winters (2005: 3) define visuality as “[...] the discursive [...] articulation of what is seen by a subject embedded in history”. Whitney Davis (2011: 3) defines visuality simply as “vision-in-visual-culture”. All of the above seem to suggest that visuality is a type of vision specific to humans living in a particular visual culture. (Note that the alleged neurospecificity of visuality is explored further in Chapter 3, in section 3.6). Mirzoeff (2011: 474), on the other hand, defines the term visuality differently. Arguing that visuality is the opposite of “the right to look”, Mirzoeff (2011: 474) traces the use of the term visuality to the early nineteenth century when it denoted the “imaginary practice” of visualising a particular terrain in warfare. With its roots in this context, for Mirzoeff visuality refers to the authority that denies our right to look and condones its own. Visuality is thus “[...] a discursive practice for rendering and regulating the real”, and whose material manifestations include “[...] Michel Foucault’s panopticism, the gaze or perspective [...]” (Mirzoeff 2011: 476).

¹⁷ The artworks discussed in this study have been chosen on the grounds that they appear to articulate intellectual concepts dealt with in the various arguments posed here in visual terms. My aim, therefore, is not a critique of these works *per se*, but rather to apply them as a means to think through the theoretical and philosophical positions unpacked here. In this sense then I acknowledge that my analysis is by no means exhaustive and may inevitably be narrower than that produced by other commentators. Cf. Marilyn Kuschner’s (2005) research on Sperber’s installations. With regard to the way in which I refer to the work here, Sperber’s thread spool installations, and *After the last supper* in particular, operates as a kind of ‘metapicture’ in Mitchell’s (1994: 35) sense of the term in that it comments on picture-making in general. The same can be said to apply to Wilsenach’s installations discussed in Chapter 7.

to the fact that the original paintings are recreated and displayed upside down and on massive scale, the overall effect, when viewed with the ‘naked’ eye, is that the works resemble blurry, abstract colours and shapes, similar to some nineteenth-century Impressionist paintings (for instance, those by Claude Monet or Georges Seurat). Sperber’s abstract forms only become the recognisable iconic image once seen through a viewing device – a clear acrylic sphere, about the size of a baseball¹⁸ – placed at a precisely calculated distance from the work (Figure 4).



Figure 4: Devorah Sperber, *After the last supper* (2005)

¹⁸ Interestingly, this viewing sphere has been referred to on some blogs describing the work as a “crystal ball” alluding to the visionary potential of illusionistic technical devices.

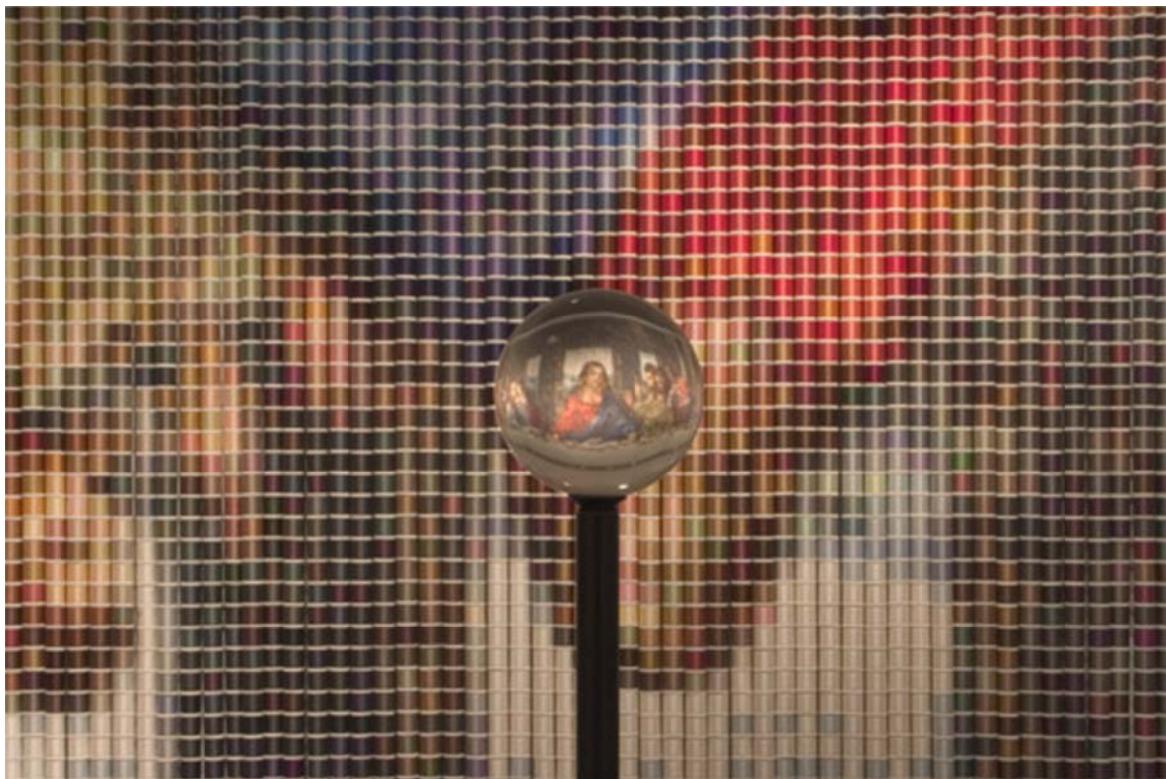


Figure 5: Devorah Sperber, Detail view, *After the last supper* (2005)

In *After the last supper* (2005) (Figure 5), based on Leonardo da Vinci's *Last Supper* (c. 1495-1498), 20,736 spools of thread have been arranged to accurately represent a pixelated version of the original painting, but placed upside-down and flipped 180° around. The viewing sphere placed in front of the sculpture imitates the way in which an image is understood to be reflected onto the human retina in the machine model of physiological vision.¹⁹ In the viewing sphere the spools condense and shrink so that a coherent and relatively clear image is produced. This 'viewer' can be thought of both in the literal sense – as something you look through – or as the person looking at the work. In this way, the installation itself appears to duplicate scientific understandings of the physiological process of human vision, thus rendering the invisible workings of the retina and brain visible according to a scientific model of 'disembodied' vision. But, despite its allusions to 'disembodied' vision, the installation instead draws attention to the *experience* of seeing by which I mean that *what* is shown

¹⁹ Descartes' understanding of the process of vision would be an example of a machine model of vision. Cf. a closer discussion of this notion in section 2.6.1 below.

becomes less significant than *how* it mobilises or activates a person's participation in the performance of the image as an experience rather than only as a site that illustrates the process of sight.

According to the machine model of vision seeing is an activity that takes place between the optic nerves and the brain, both of which are necessary components in the process by which the world becomes comprehensible. Although no recorded photograph of such an image exists, according to this model, an image that is focused on the retina is allegedly inverted and then corrected in the brain, without whose image processing capabilities “[...] pictures would simply be variations in light and dark regions without meaningful associations” (Lester 2000: 20).²⁰

I suggest that in *After the last supper*, as well as in Sperber's other similar pieces, the artificiality and limitations of the machine model of vision are exposed rather than merely demonstrated. Even further than this, the installation allows one to think about the operation and function of images more broadly. The artist transposes a well-known image (at least in Western societies) that was originally created in paint, into an image in another medium – cotton reels and glass. In one sense, then, Sperber has made an ‘old’ image “resurface in [a] new media” (Belting 2005: 310). Hans Belting (2005) suggests that in order to grasp the rich meanings and functions of images it is useful to use a triad of terms: image, medium and body, all of which are intricately tethered to the other. In order to exist at all, images need media – “agent[s] by which images are transmitted” – and bodies – “[...] the performing or perceiving body on which images depend” (Belting 2005: 302). In manipulating an existing and well-known work of art in this way, Sperber draws attention to the “nomadic” characteristics (or even “viral” potential in Mitchell's (2010) terms) of images. Belting (2005: 310) argues that “[i]mages resemble nomads in the sense that they take residence in one medium after another”. In this sense, Da

²⁰ This intricate process by means of which impulses from the optic nerves are transported via the thalamus to the visual cortex, or occipital lobe, located in the back of the cerebrum, takes a mere three thousandths of a second, according to Paul Lester (2000: 18).

Vinci's mural is undoubtedly nomadic as it has 'taken up residence' in many different media as Leo Steinberg (2011) has argued in *Leonardo's incessant last supper*.

In her particular remaking of old images, the work questions the machine model of vision discussed above by pointing out the complex cultural operation that takes place in the process of embodied human vision. For, the blurry image represented by the spools of cotton requires the participating viewer to draw on his/her cultural memory of the original work in order to make sense of it. In other words, by reconstructing a machine model of vision the piece highlights the limitations of such an understanding of vision, according to which vision is a purely physiological matter. The installation reveals that reducing vision to a mechanised neural process merely operating between and by means of the retina and the brain (regarded in this model as mere mechanical organs) overlooks the cultural specificity of vision.

Although the piece requires participants to interact with it, the absence of spectators in the photographs of most of Sperber's works made available online cannot be overlooked. In all the photographs uploaded by the artist as well as the various websites accompanying exhibitions of the work, the spectator/participant has neatly been removed from the clean installation shot.²¹ In Brian O'Doherty's view (1986: 14), "[t]he installation shot is a metaphor for the gallery space". For, in the photographs produced of installations, he argues, "[...] at last, the spectator, oneself, is eliminated. You are there without being there – one of the major services provided for art by its old antagonist, photography" (O'Doherty 1986: 14). In a paradoxical way, the photographs of Sperber's installations exclude the very bodies that are integral to challenging the model of vision she deals with, despite the fact that the body is undeniably crucial to vision.

²¹Cf. <<http://www.devorahsperber.com>> and <<https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/exhibitions/sperber>>.

Once again, Belting's (2005: 310) comments on the body can usefully illuminate the argument that the body is crucial not only to vision but also to images. Bodies, he argues, “[...] are more than merely passive recipients of the visual media that shaped them. Their *activity* is needed in order to *practice* visual media in the first place” (Belting 2005: 311 [my italics, JL]). Belting (2005: 311) argues that images “[...] *happen* or are *negotiated* between bodies and media”. This means that bodies “[...] perform images [...] as much as they *perceive* outside images” (Belting 2005: 311). This understanding of the activity involved in the process of perception appears to be fore-grounded when we participate in *After the last supper*. Seeing is shown here to be less a purely mechanistic process, than a complicated one affected by the historical and cultural position of the subject. The clear acrylic sphere may stand for a supposedly transparent eye, but at the same time, the entire installation calls attention to the identity and contribution of the person looking through it. The work reminds us that the eye is neither transparent nor a machine; its complex operation cannot reductively be compared to a *camera obscura* (as Descartes would have it)²² or a camera taking a series of pictures.²³ For, human vision takes place within the body of a person embedded in a particular historical and cultural context.

Although human vision has long been compared to the workings of a camera, James Gibson (1980: xvi) points out that such an analogy has “perplexing” limitations. In his estimation, the term ‘retinal image’ often used in physiology and psychology “[...] covers up the prevalent confusion about vision [...]” in these disciplines (Gibson 1980: xvi). According to Gibson (1980: xvi), a retinal image could refer to an “[...] optical image on the inner surface of the dark chamber of the vertebrate eye [...]” which is supposedly a static reflection of the world (which is actually in motion) surrounding the observer. “This image [...]” he explains, “[...] could, in theory, be observed if one cut out the eye, peeled off

²² Descartes' use of the *camera obscura* as a model for vision is unpacked in more detail in point 2.6.1 below.

²³ Since its invention, the camera has often served as a useful instrument by which to understand the process of vision. In fact, as Lester (2000: 14) points out, knowledge of how the eye “[...] collects light and focuses it to the rear surface of the eyeball [...]” influenced the development of the camera. For an extended comparison cf. Lester (2000: 14, 15) *Visual communication: images with messages*.

the opaque coating, and held it up in front of an eye" (Gibson 1980: xvi) as in Descartes' well-known illustration in *Optics* (Figure 6).

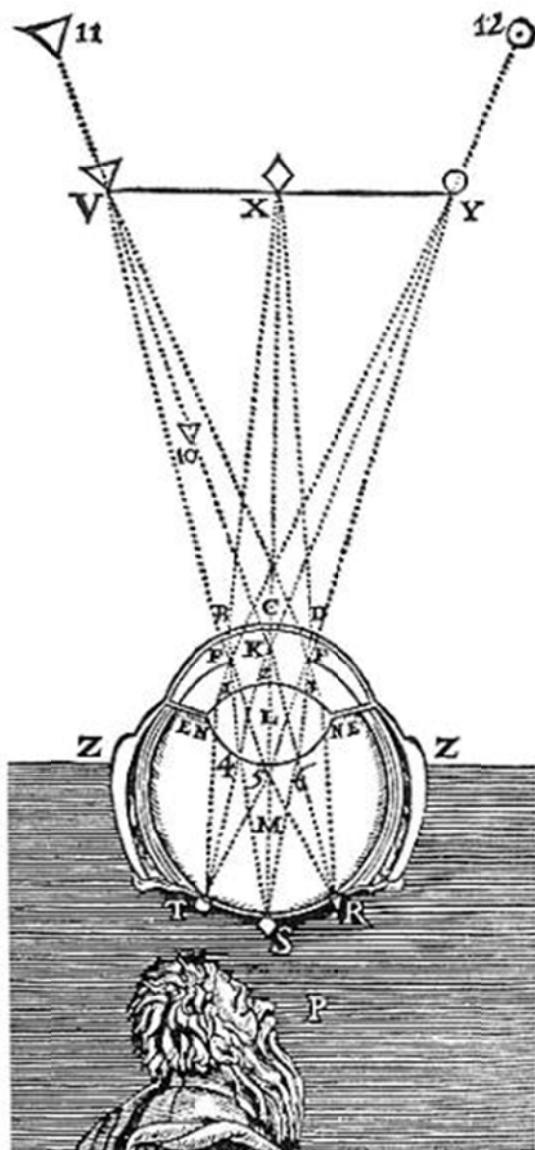


Figure 6: René Descartes, *The eye* (1637)

On the other hand, as Gibson (1980: xvi) points out, the retinal image can also refer to "[...] a sort of physiological image in the mosaic of photoreceptors of the retina, vaguely taken to be analogous to the latent arrested image of photography". This supposedly arrested image is, according to physiology at least, what is then transmitted to the brain. Gibson's (1980: xvi) critique of these reductive accounts of vision involves his own contention that "vision is progressive" and that seeing is a process involving a "flow" of optic information.

It would appear that Sperber's series of installations takes the “[...] perplexities involved in making and looking at pictures [...]” that Gibson (1980: xvii) has pointed to head on. For, the works make demands on our perceptual skills.

Some of these demands may be explained with reference to Michael Podro's (1972: 86) discussion of the different ways in which viewers perceive paintings. Following Johann Friedrich Herbart,²⁴ Podro distinguishes between at least two ways in which we perceive paintings.²⁵ On the one hand, we may experience a kind of involvement in the surface of the painting, in other words, the paint and the canvas. For instance, when looking at Rembrandt's *Christ before Pilate* (1636), “[...] the more we attend to the quality of the homogeneous paint texture, the more suggestions of the texture of the represented objects we seem to catch, silks, masonry, armour, brocades, and rags” (Podro 1972: 87). By looking more and more intently at certain characteristics of the surface of the painting – the brushstrokes on the sleeve of the old man, for instance – we find more details and, consequently, are drawn back to the paint again. According to Podro (1972: 87), the analogy “grows and grows in our minds”.

On the other hand, we may have to look *through* the surface of the painting in order to perceive the subject represented. This seems to be the type of looking required when approaching Sperber's *After the last supper*. For, the pixilated image, made up of cotton reels, interferes with our grasp of the subject matter of the piece. This means that we have to look past the surface – the cotton reels – and “inhibit our attention to it” (Podro 1972: 88) in order to identify the subject.

²⁴ In the first three decades of the nineteenth century, Herbart developed his ideas regarding the operations of the mind and in particular perception. Both extending and critiquing Kant and Schiller's conceptions of perception, Herbart was specifically interested in three issues of perception: “the sense of order, the sense of reciprocity between our propensity to project and perceive, and the functioning of analogy and ambiguity” (Podro 1972: 61). As Podro (1972: 61) explains, these three aspects are all related to the relationship between the “coherence or unity” of the perceived object and the “coherence or unity of our inward states”. For Herbart, it was important to unite the two main conceptions of the mind – as either active (“that it produces what is present to it” or passive (the mind as *tabula rasa*) – as they had emerged in the writings of Leibniz and Locke respectively.

²⁵ Evidently Podro (1972: 88) does not limit the perception of paintings to only two ways, but rather suggests “[...] the intersection of several *Vorstellungsreihen* which have sub-qualities which lead us into and out of each other”.

This is not easily achieved, however, and a subtle reciprocity takes place as the different hues of cotton reels fuse and separate as in many paintings by Monet and Seurat. The point is that the installation draws attention to the complex operations of perception that enable a richer understanding of ‘seeing’ as not mere sight – a physiological process – but as vision – a complex amalgamation of culturally produced prior knowledge and present visual experience.

In considering the surface of the cotton reels, attention to which must be suspended in order that the unified picture already in the visual memory of the viewer be seen, we find an interesting back and forth motion in perception between textural surface and what it becomes. In other words, the actual grainy character of the spools of cotton is perceived at the same time that the spools form a picture. Gibson (1980: xi) has distinguished between our perception of surfaces and the markings on them. Whereas marks on a surface have referential meanings, surfaces themselves have the kind of meanings Gibson (1980: xii) calls “affordances”. In Gibson’s formulation of the different properties and meanings of surfaces and the markings on them, “[a] surface does not stand for anything” whilst markings on a surface do. In other words, a surface – by which he means the characteristic texture and graininess of paper, wood, a wall, and so forth – neither symbolises nor represents something else. Surfaces are not conventional, in that “[t]he various affordances of surfaces, substances, layout, and events get perceived in the course of development of the young animal by maturation and learning taken together, by encountering the surfaces in the habitat, without schooling” (Gibson 1980: xiii). The referential meanings of the markings on those surfaces, on the other hand, are culturally varied and sense is made of them through learning.²⁶

²⁶ Following Gibson’s contention that surfaces do not represent anything beyond themselves, Sperber’s *After the last supper* may be understood as a conflation of the two aspects Gibson separates: surfaces and picture. According to Gibson (1980: xiv), surfaces constitute “the real environment” and can be perceived, while looking at pictures does not qualify as perception, or at least not “full perception”. Gibson (1980: xiv) distinguishes between our perception of the environment and of pictures in the following way: “Depiction simulates perception [...] but it cannot possibly achieve the level of full perception achieved by ambient vision (looking around) and ambulatory vision (moving around [the installation]) in my terminology”. We can thus only perceive surfaces directly. The apprehension of pictures, argues Gibson (1980: xv) is better described as “[...] a kind of *nonperceptual* [...]” experience. In *After the last supper*, however, it

2.3.1 Distant vision

Considered conceptually, the installation also draws attention to the practical fact that distance is a necessary requirement for clear or focussed vision. In physiological terms, the ability to focus clearly on nearby objects, referred to as the Near Point of Convergence (NPC), decreases with age as the lenses in our eyes harden (Near vision complex [s.a.]). If viewed separately from the optical device, the installation is blurry, chaotic, tactile, and, by its sheer size, it is immersive and unclear in the same way as an extreme close-up in a film or photograph may be. It seems that we are too close to the image to make sense of it. If, however, the viewer distances her/himself from the cotton picture, and assumes the required position from which to look at it – through the acrylic sphere which flips the upside down picture right way up and rotates it 180° – the chaotic shapes are transformed into a recognisable image.

This is not, however, only applicable in biological/physiological terms, but also, and perhaps more interestingly, can be considered as metaphorically alluding to the distance that is allegedly required in clear and objective understanding (Jonas 1954: 719). Many theorists have concluded that in Western philosophy sight has often been considered *the* sense able to produce rational and objective knowledge (cf. Classen 2005: 70, Jonas 1954: 519, Joy & Sherry 2003: 261). Hans Jonas (1954: 517, 519), for instance, maintains that owing to the fact that distance works to the advantage of sight (unlike the other senses for which distance is a disadvantage), sight allows the mind to go “[...] where vision pointed”. In other words, for Jonas perceptual distance is able to produce the mental distance that has been considered vital to reaching objectivity.²⁷ Van

would appear that our vision is both ambient and ambulatory in Gibson's terms as, through its sheer size (2.1 x 8.7 m), the viewer perceives the 'picture' (here an environment) through movement. The floating image in the acrylic sphere might perhaps be thought of as Gibson's stimulus for perception. But, even our perception of this picture is not static as our vision constantly shifts back and forth from the large sculpture to the clear image in the sphere.

²⁷ The concept of so-called 'mental distance' is the topic of Hans Blumenberg's *Shipwreck with spectator: paradigm of a metaphor for existence* (1997) as well as Jay's comments on and extensions of this notion in 'Diving into the wreck: aesthetic spectatorship at the *fin-de-siècle*' (2000). Furthermore, see my more detailed discussion of conceptions of sensory distance and sensory proximity in Chapter 3, in section 3.3.

de Vall (2005: 38) confirms that modernity has been considered to be dominated by “[...] a disembodied, rationalized, *distancing* and immobile eye that reigned supreme” [my italics, JL].

It would appear that it is precisely this reductive account of vision as primarily distancing and its subsequent links with rationality that is inadvertently challenged in *After the last supper*. In this sense, the circular viewing device shows far more than merely the way in which the lens of an eye functions. It may also allude to the notion of the mind’s eye of the spectator by way of which (following Descartes) clarity is allegedly given to the world of sensations – represented by the muddled shapes of the cotton reels – through the *a priori* potentiality in the mind to structure perceptions. According to this ‘Cartesian’ paradigm of vision, the viewer of Sperber’s installation must (but indeed cannot) literally detach him/herself from the blurry, immersive and tactile picture and assume the position of the distanced observer. This distancing and separation results in a clear and distinct, albeit minuscule, image afforded the suitably disengaged viewer, in the hopes of turning us into Descartes’ ideally detached spectators. In the viewing device, the cotton reel sculpture wants to (but cannot) become a distanced object to be visually observed. From this so-called ‘objective’ vantage point and by means of imaging technology – the optical device (which also reminds one of the lenses of telescopes or microscopes) – the picture is conceptualised according to the paradigms of science and rationality by means of which the external object is apparently (but mistakenly) rationally perceived (Kromm 2010: 73). In other words, the external world (once more mistakenly) takes shape as an observable whole by means of the optical device which alludes to the misguided assumption that both the physical eye and the metaphorical eye of the mind operate separately from the body of the spectator.

On my reading, the artist’s choice of media – cotton reels, used in the making of clothing or other textiles, and which undoubtedly appeals to the human sense of touch – dislodges the cogency of an epistemological model of perception based

on detachment and separation. Often referred to as a “proximal” (Diaconu 2006: 2; Marks 2011: 239) sense, touch is experienced intimately by the body, and more precisely, the skin. Thus the largest part of the installation, which possesses a textural and tactile quality, appeals to the sense of touch, even if that appeal occurs through the mode of sight.²⁸ On the other hand, the clear image in the optical device – produced metaphorically by the so-called detached and rational mind – is, arguably, the least interesting part of the installation due to its small scale. In this work, it could therefore be suggested, proximity is contrasted with distance, subtly negotiating and challenging the notion of the disembodied rational mind of a perceiver presiding over the sensations received from the body.

As I have already stated, physiologically speaking distance is a prerequisite for clear vision. According to Levin (1993: 3), in concord with the “visionary ambitions of philosophy”, this characteristic of sight metaphorically gave rise to a “detached-spectator paradigm” in modern philosophical thought. Levin (1993: 7) suggests that during the Enlightenment period – often referred to as the “Age of Reason” – ocularcentrism supported the scientific world view which privileged “[...] a reflective, critical rationality [...]. Put somewhat differently, Howes (2005: 5) notes that the scientific “eye-minded, rational world view” which has repeatedly been claimed to have dominated the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries – fundamental to whose varied principles were the desire to order and control the world – was significantly bolstered by scientific investigations via close observation.²⁹

²⁸ I return to the subject of the haptic nature of vision in Chapter 6.

²⁹ The period in Western intellectual history which extended from approximately the mid-seventeenth through the eighteenth century, known widely as the Enlightenment, is characterised by a wide diversity of philosophical thought. Since it is not possible to go into much depth regarding the various intellectual strains that occurred in this period in various countries in Europe, for the most part my discussions of the Enlightenment refer to general tendencies and not to specific theories or doctrines. The contributions of Isaac Newton (1643-1753) to the development of modern techniques of scientific investigation are numerous. For instance, Newton, inspired by Galileo Galilei (1564-1642) “[...] discovered the law of gravity and the laws of motion, made important advances in the understanding of light, designed and built with his own hands a new kind of telescope *and* invented the mathematical technique of calculus [...]” (Gribbin 2006: 233). However, his most important contribution to science was his application of the *experimental* method, whereby ideas were tested instead of remaining speculations only.

An example of the importance given to close visual observation at that time can be seen in the 1600s, as Jane Kromm (2010: 73) shows, where interest in natural history was “[...] grounded in the visual strateg[y] of collecting and describing specimens [...]”.³⁰ In pursuit of objective categorisation and quantifiable specifics, visual scrutiny was utilised to examine every aspect of a specimen. Such sensitive and supposedly detached and rational looking, argues Kromm (2010: 73), resulted in the belief that the expert could “[...] ascertain[...] the order and organising principles of the natural world”. With a view to enable other scientists to understand the classification system, sight played a prominent role in the scientific project of the naturalists and ‘seeing’ from a *distance*, bolstered by a developing rhetoric of observation and illumination through vision,³¹ became a way of ‘knowing’ (Kromm 2010: 73).

The rhetoric of vision’s ability to render the world clear and unambiguous is also evident in everyday language where sight is often metaphorically equated with (clear and vivid) understanding. “We daily experience and perpetuate the conflation of the ‘seen’ with the ‘known’ in conversation”, argues Chris Jencks (1995: 3), illustrating this point with the “[...] commonplace linguistic appendage of ‘do you see?’ or ‘see what I mean?’”.³² Similar phrases that equate seeing and knowing include, ‘from my point of view’, ‘this is my outlook on the matter’ and ‘do you get the picture’ to name only a few everyday examples.³³ In this way “[...] looking, seeing and knowing have become perilously intertwined” (Jencks 1995: 1, 2). Similarly “*Idein, eidos, idea [...]*” writes Derrida (1994

³⁰ For a counter-argument to the dominance of the gaze (in particular “steady scrutiny” and “disciplined contemplation”) in such scientific endeavours, cf. Edward Casey (2007: 15) who maintains that it is an unfortunate oversight to neglect the involvement of the glance in such visual practices. Nevertheless, looking, whether in the form of gazing or glancing, came to be regarded as a way of knowing.

³¹ Cf. Lorraine Daston & Peter Galison, *Objectivity* (2010) whose first chapter is entitled, ‘Epistemologies of the eye’.

³² Equally, commonly used phrases such as ‘see how this sounds/tastes/feels/smells’ lends surprising insight into our unconscious privileging of sight above the other senses.

³³ See also Jay’s (1993: 2) discussion of the prominence of linguistic metaphors associated with seeing in other languages.

[1990]: 12) “[...] the whole history, the whole semantics of the European *idea*, in its Greek genealogy, as we know – as we see – relates seeing to knowing”.³⁴

2.4 Tunnel vision

As if to take up the challenge suggested by Descartes, modern scientific experimentation enthusiastically set about inventing technologies that “[...] serve to increase [...] [the] power” (Descartes 2013 [1637]: 333) of sight. But even before Descartes, of course, scientific developments (since approximately the fifteenth century) sought to expand the possibilities of human vision in order to compensate for its imperfections. These improvements on normal human vision have, to a great extent, been made possible by means of what Paul Virilio (1994) terms the disembodied machine eye by means of which scientific knowledge of the world has indeed expanded dramatically. The invention of the microscope (in the late 1500s) and the telescope (first used in astronomy in the early 1600s) as well as the various other more sophisticated instruments currently available for enhancing people’s capacity to both see and visualise what is invisible to the naked eye, are all evidence of not only the human desire to see more clearly but also of the usefulness of the ‘machine eye’ to the scientific world view that has dominated modern life since the fifteenth century. In our current technological environment, new visual technologies – such as high definition television (HDTV), Google Maps street view and the smorgasbord of other visual digital media available in twenty-first century post-industrial societies – bring the world not only closer to us but also in dramatically higher definition, simultaneously and ironically also distancing us from what is in view, according to the ratio of power of the mediating instrumentation (Virilio 1994). As evidenced in the visualisation techniques developed in the realms of cartography, astronomy, warfare, surveillance,

³⁴ The proliferation of “sight-based paradigms” (Classen 2005: 147) for understanding the world is also evident in Walter Ong’s (1969: 634) contention that “[a]s a concept and term, ‘world view’ [...] reflects the marked tendency of technologized man to think of actuality as something essentially picturable and to think of knowledge itself by analogy with visual activity to the exclusion, more or less, of the other senses”.

medical culture, and so forth, it is difficult to deny that these visual inventions are indeed very rapidly increasing the power of the alleged “noblest and most comprehensive of the senses” (Descartes 2013 [1637]: 333).

In medical science, in particular, the dramatic effects of this desire to see more clearly, deeply and further, are evident in the explosion of ever increasingly sophisticated visual and imaging technologies. For example, optical prostheses such as spectacles and contact lenses compensate for inadequate sight while sonar and scans (sometimes, but not always, non-invasively) are with increasing success able to survey and explore every nook and cranny of the body. In other words, the body has become an object for the probing scientific and medical gaze, poignantly demonstrated on the cover of Marquard Smith’s (2008) publication *Visual culture studies: interviews with key thinkers* (Figure 7).



Figure 7: Photographer unknown. Cover image of Marquard Smith's *Visual culture studies: interviews with key thinkers* (2008)

Since the late twentieth century, Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI) and Functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging (fMRI) technology is rendering the interior of the body not merely visible but visualised in three dimensions using equipment far more sophisticated than that represented in Figure 7. Unsurprisingly, HDTV technology has been used in medical theatres for some time already to enhance surgical visualisation.³⁵ In her critique of the imaging technologies used in the field of medicine, Barbara Stafford (1991: 48), already more than two decades ago pointed out that these instruments have the ability to “turn [...] someone inside out”, a frightening concept to say the least. Stafford (1991: 47) shows that the impulse to scientifically open up and master the body (via the sense of sight) is rooted in the eighteenth-century desire to “attain the interior of things” particularly through dissection. In order to expand objective understanding of its (invisible) workings, the body, or “the immobilized specimen under scrutiny” as Stafford (1991: 48) puts it, is made available for exploration and mapping, with neither the chance to “hide” nor “escape”.³⁶

³⁵ Cf. Van de Vall's (2003) discussion of Mona Hatoum's *Corps étranger* (1994) to which I briefly refer in Chapter 6, section 6.2.

³⁶ The *Body Worlds & the Cycle of Life* exhibition that has already travelled through Asia, Europe and America reaching African soil in 2012 is a more recent and chilling example of the ways in which the scientific and medical gazes succeed in “turning someone inside out” (Stafford 1991: 48). The specimens on display – which include whole bodies, individual organs and transparent body slices – are real human bodies preserved by means of ‘plastination’, a preservation process invented in 1977 by anatomist, Dr. Gunther von Hagen. Advertised as an educational exhibition designed to teach both children and adults about the workings of the human organism (Von Hagen 2013), the immobilised dead bodies on display, possessing no individual or personal identification, are made available here for scientific pursuits. An unsettling thought at best, I did not take my six year old son to the exhibition which offers free entrance to children younger than five, evidence of the organiser's belief that the exhibition is suitable and its sight's acceptable to be viewed by young eyes and minds. One of the labels at the entrance to the exhibition justified the lack of identification of the bodies on the displays in the following way: “[...] because the exhibit focuses on the nature of our physical being, not on providing personal information on private tragedies” (Von Hagen 2013). Apparently all the body donors “[...] wanted to contribute to the medical enlightenment of lay people” (Von Hagen 2013). Wondering about the effects of the means by which such enlightenment is achieved, I observed one boy, who I estimate to have been seven years old, looking horrified at the sight of a man's head sliced open like a fruit, from the top of his head, through his forehead, between the eyes, through the nose, the centre of the lips and chin so that a cross-section of the brain could be seen on the inside of either section. A few times, the boy asked his father: “[...] so he was dead when they cut his head in half?” Cf. <http://bodyworlds.co.za/faq/> for more information about the exhibition>.

Undeniably living in Martin Heidegger's (1889-1976) "Age of the World Picture" (1977)³⁷ – according to Jay (1988b: 309), one of the most influential critiques of ocularcentrism – we are witnesses to the compression of space and time as a result of the speed with which pictures now travel across the globe.³⁸ Juhani Pallasmaa (2005: 21) suggests that as space and time fuse together in this way "[...] we are witnessing a distinct reversal of the two dimensions – a temporalisation of space and a spatialisation of time". This means that space is now being understood in a 'time-like' manner and time in a 'space-like' manner. In other words, what should be understood in terms of space and measurement is now approached through categories of duration and succession, and *vice versa*. The effect of this phenomenon is evident in people's desire for immediacy in contemporary life and the production of spatial rather than temporal identities. Furthermore, for Pallasmaa (2005: 21) sight is the only sense "[...] fast enough to keep pace with the astounding increase of speed in the technological world". The consequence of living in "the world of the eye" as he puts it, is that now life occurs "[...] in a perpetual present, flattened by speed and simultaneity" (Pallasmaa 2005: 21).³⁹ It would seem then that, as Rilke

³⁷ In this essay Heidegger (1977) argues that a fundamental characteristic of the modern age is that the world has been turned into a picture. By 'picture' he does not mean a copy of the world in the form of an image, but rather "[...] the structured image that is the creature of man's producing which represents and sets before" (Heidegger 1977: 134). In other words, postmodern people are regarded by Heidegger as the creators not of reflections of reality, but of reality itself. In this way "[..] the world [is] conceived and grasped as a picture" (Heidegger 1977: 129). As Richard Kearney (1988: 2) puts it, "[..] there is a fundamental difference between the image of today and of former times: now the image *precedes* the reality it is supposed to represent". As a result, reality has become but a "pale reflection" of what it is given to us via media-manufactured images (Kearney 1988: 2).

³⁸ According to David Harvey (1992: 261-307), because images have become a commodity, time and space have compressed. He explains that "[..] a rush of images from different spaces almost simultaneously, collaps[es] the world's spaces into a series of images on a television screen [...]. The image of places and spaces becomes as open to production and ephemeral use as any other [commodity]" (Harvey 1992: 293). Commenting on the resulting so-called 'crisis of representation', Pallasmaa (2005: 22) concludes that this situation has led to a "[..] panicked hysteria of representation in the arts of our time".

³⁹ In response to contemporary life, where images flicker around and past us – as if they were 'on speed' – it has been claimed that people do not contemplate and reflect on what they see anymore. For example, James Elkins' book, *How to use your eyes* (2000), aims to make the reader aware of things that are often overlooked, and to point out what is fascinating about them. Elkins (2000: ix) explains that the book "[..] is about learning to use your eyes more conceretedly and with more *patience* than you might ordinarily do. It's about *stopping* and taking the *time* simply to look, and keep looking, until the details of the world *slowly* reveal themselves [...]" [my italics, JL]. The premise of the book is that humans no longer 'linger' on images, being enticed by the constantly changing landscape of multitudes of pictures that are simultaneously

noted in the third decade of the twentieth century (in the quote given at the beginning of this chapter), sight is indeed the sense citizens of the twenty-first century would surely not be able (or want) to live without.

2.5 Ocularcentrism and its discontents

It is, however, not only in late twentieth and early twenty-first century societies that sight is presumed to be *the* much needed sensory faculty. Modern Western culture, it is often noted, has been dominated by a scopic regime whereby understanding of the world is acquired predominantly through the sense of sight (Coleman 2007, Jay 1988a: 3, Jencks 1995). According to this view, since the rise of the modern period and its associated increasing advances in visual and visualising technologies, as discussed earlier, people apparently interact with the world through visual practices to an ever greater extent.⁴⁰ In particular, as has been shown above, a shift toward equating seeing with knowledge has taken place with the birth of the age of scientific Rationalism cited as its pivotal moment (Levin 1993, Coleman 2007).

The term *ocularcentrism*, coined by Jay, refers to the privilege accorded the sense of sight above the other senses in modern and postmodern societies and entails the assumption that our everyday practices are mostly dominated by what we see. Jay (1988a: 3) explains that “[...] beginning with the Renaissance and the scientific revolution, modernity has been normally considered resolutely

vying for our attention. In a similar vein, Ivan Illich (2000: 21) refers to contemporary culture as the epoch of “the show”, suggesting it best to “guard” the eye when in the presence of images on screen. Equally, Mirzoeff (2009: 3) points out that museums now offer “experiences” rather than opportunities to meditate on images. If we agree with these authors, it would appear that one of the results of the exercise of ‘showing seeing’ may be the realisation that the ability to *slow seeing* requires some degree of nurturing in twenty-first century observers, at least in the eyes of these authors.

⁴⁰ Foucault’s (1977a) term “*dispositif*” is applicable here. For, the visualising technologies that have increasingly become more sophisticated in the modern period are certainly in the service of the various mechanisms and knowledge structures that maintain power in modern, post-industrial societies. In *The confession of the flesh* (1977a), Foucault uses the term to refer to the various devices, machinery, apparatuses, scientific statements, and so forth that control human behaviour. The point is that people increasingly live within systems of technologies, and more precisely visual technologies, which serve to maintain and enhance forms of power.

ocularcentric [...]. The claim that modern Western societies have been predominantly ocularcentric seems, to some extent at least, to parallel Derrida's (1997 [1967]) claim that modern and postmodern societies are essentially 'logocentric', with speech privileged above all else. For Jay (1988a & 1988b), however, it is not so much speech but sight that is unduly prioritised in the pursuit of gaining and interpreting knowledge. According to Gandelman (1991: 151), Jay's postulation that postmodern societies are ocularcentric is "perhaps more perceptive than Derrida", for in "[...] postmodern society it *is* the sense of sight and the visual that are *overduly privileged*" [my italics, JL]. Evidently, in the Western philosophical tradition, ocularcentrism reached a high-point in the rationalist paradigm of the late eighteenth century (Kavanagh 2004: 445). Even further than the mere privileging of sight, however, ocularcentrism has also been considered the "[...] privileging of an objectifying 'way of seeing' associated with modernity" (Macpherson 2006: 97). In other words, it may not merely be problematic that sight is privileged but that the particular 'regime' of seeing (a rationalized, disembodied, detached, alienating, controlling and/or dominating way of seeing in the service of powerful others) that is engendered as a result of that privilege warrants specific attention.

That sight is "overduly privileged" (Gandelman 1991: 151) is, of course, the opinion only of *some* commentators on modern culture. Other dissenting voices are discussed below. However, perhaps a compelling argument to support modern Western societies' alleged reliance on sight more than on any other sense organ in the body may have occurred as a result of the fact that, from a physiological perspective at least, the human system for sight has been shown to work in highly complex and sophisticated ways. Paul Lester (2000: 13) points out that "[...] more than 70 percent of all the sensory receptors in the human body are in the eyes". As a result, hearing, smelling, tasting and touching in combination are activated through the other 30 percent of the body's receptors (Lester 2000: 13). Moreover, scientific research has indeed shown that "[...] the eye is able to accomplish its tasks at a far greater remove than any other sense, hearing and smell being only a distant second and third" (Jay 1993: 6).

Even before the medical sciences had been able to successfully show the skilful physiological workings of the human eye, vision's authority was already recognised (even if often sceptically so), particularly in the terrains of art and philosophy. For example, Da Vinci (qtd MacCurdy 1955: 199) stated that “[...] the sense which is nearest to the organ of perception functions most quickly, and this is the eye, the chief, the leader of all other senses [...]”.⁴¹ Similarly, in his *Anuli*, a dialogue written sometime before 1436, the architect and art theorist who set out the principles of linear perspective, Leon Battista Alberti, maintained that the eye was “[...] more powerful than anything [...]. It is [...] the first, chief, king, like a god of human parts” (qtd Johnson 2011: 61). Even though these arguments were primarily not about sight itself, but about the question of which art form (painting, poetry, sculpture or architecture) was superior – known as the *paragone* debates – sight was evidently held to be an important sense in determining that position.⁴² Marsilio Ficino, a Renaissance physician, humanist philosopher and translator of Plato's writings (Iverson & Melville 2010: 46), regarded sight as more important than touch which he associated with ‘baser’, carnal forms of love. Contrasting touch with the supposedly more elevated, spiritual love that he associated with vision, in *Commentary on the symposium of Plato on the subject of love* written around 1470, Ficino claimed that: “[t]he love of the contemplative man ascends from sight into the mind; [while] that of the voluptuous man descends from sight into touch” (qtd Johnson 2011: 61). Although Jay (1988a: 3) does not hide his scepticism of overly simplistic generalisations, he nevertheless maintains that “[...] it is difficult to deny that the visual has been dominant in modern Western culture [...]”, concluding that “[...] we confront again and again the ubiquity of vision as the *master* sense of the modern era” [my italics, JL].

⁴¹ The quotation is from *The notebooks of Leonardo da Vinci* (1955), which are arranged, translated and introduced by Edward MacCurdy.

⁴² Cf. Judith Dundas' (1990) discussion of Michelangelo's position on the merits of painting and sculpture in particular.

The argument that the modern period has been predominantly ocularcentric⁴³ has, however, been a magnet for controversy. For example, Crary (1990: 57) notes that, although the Enlightenment is often posited as the era which prioritised the visual organisation of knowledge (and its explanatory power),⁴⁴ with the *camera obscura* paradigm of vision often employed to demonstrate this privilege, vision was more accurately always regarded as being “[...] in the service of a nonsensory faculty of understanding that alone gives a true conception of the world”. But, the hegemony of vision posed in terms of the *camera obscura* model of vision and subjectivity is debatable and, for Crary specifically, problematic. “It would be completely misleading [...]” notes Crary (1990: 57):

[...] to pose the *camera obscura* as an early stage in an ongoing autonomization and specialization of vision that continues into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Vision can be privileged at different historical moments in ways that simply are not continuous with one another. Situating subjectivity within a monolithic Western tradition of scopic or specular power effaces and subsumes the singular and incommensurable procedures and regimes through which an observer has been constituted.

Similarly, in *Vanities of the eye: vision and early modern European culture* (2007) Stuart Clark complicates the matter of the alleged ocular hegemony of the early modern era. Considering specifically the period beginning in the 1430s and ending around the 1670s, Clark shows that far from being resolutely ocularcentric, the era was marked by a crisis of confidence in the reliability of the eye in intellectual experience. In other words, looking was regarded as untrustworthy, even as the period was characterised by a paradigm dominated by visual pursuits.

⁴³ To be clear, the fact that human vision could be controlled and trained, improved by and integrated into technology is undoubtedly a key factor for the rise and domination of ocularcentrism. This extends beyond the introduction of visual aids like the microscope and telescope. Due also to the theoretical geometrisation of optics, the instrumentalisation of vision facilitated its application in a variety of fields in developing and explorative technologies, from warfare to astronomy, cartography, surveying, navigation, and so forth.

⁴⁴ The explanatory power of vision is evidenced for instance, in the rise of technical illustrations of scientific texts, and well as practical technology (with the *Encyclopédie* as a prime example).

Even earlier than this, Plato's position on the nobility of sight is ambiguous to say the least. For, while celebrating vision (Jonas 1954, Kavanagh 2004),⁴⁵ the ancient philosopher was simultaneously sceptical of the reliability of all sense perception, especially sight.⁴⁶ As Jay (1993: 27) notes, vision in Plato's philosophy referred to the inner eye of the mind and not the actual eyes, insisting that "[...] we see *through* the eyes [...]" and "[...] not *with* them".⁴⁷ Plato's allegory of the cave demonstrates his sceptical position regarding the nobility of sight. Although the prisoners escape from the cave and go into the world where they eventually face the sun (representing enlightenment), "[...] their normal sense perception in the cave is of the fleeting and imperfect shadows cast on its walls" (Jay 1993: 27). Thus, Plato's allegory serves as a warning against the illusions produced not only by "our imperfect eyes" (Jay 1993: 27) but also all the senses, as the prisoners must leave their bodies behind as their souls ascend into the intellectual world beyond the cave.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ Scepticism over vision's alleged epistemological reliability goes back even further than the fifteenth century. For Plato (1974 [380 B.C.]: VII 507), sight was "[...] by far the most costly and complex piece of workmanship which the artificer of the senses ever contrived". Furthermore, according to Plato, of all the senses, only sight possesses a theological dimension through its connection with the sun via light: "[...] the sun is not sight, but the author of sight who is recognised by sight" (Plato 1974 [380 B.C.]: VII 509-510).

⁴⁶ And before Plato, as Levin (1993: 1) points out, although fragments from the writings of Heraclitus (500 B.C.) and Parmenides (475 B.C.) reveal that "[...] philosophical thinking in the Western world was drawn to the tuition, the authority, of sight", there existed nevertheless, even at that time, evidence of these philosophers' fear of "[...] placing too much trust in vision and its objects" (Levin 1993: 1).

⁴⁷ Here we note a possible correspondence between Plato's account of the role and function of the eyes as mere tools in vision and Descartes' later theory. For, Descartes suggested that an eye be taken from a dead person or animal and placed over the pinhole in the camera obscura to become the lens (Descartes 1984, vol 1: 166). This disembodied eye – "[...] all of whose parts you know to be entirely transparent [...]" – produces a picture of the natural objects outside on the opposite wall of the camera obscura (Descartes 1984, vol 1: 166). For Descartes, this experiment confirmed the disembodyment of vision, and, as Crary (1990: 39) argues, points to the decorporealisation of vision at the same time that the *camera obscura* as discursive object represents a "metaphysics of interiority".

⁴⁸ But it was not only the ancient Greeks who were suspicious of the power of vision. In some cultures it is a common belief that people have the power to look at others in a particular way and thereby cause them harm. For example, in North Africa and the Middle East the *khamssa* (also sometimes referred to as 'Fatima's hand') is an amulet whose purpose is to ward off the power of the evil eye. It is believed that this talisman – which depicts an eye inserted into the palm of the hand – will mirror the look of the evil eye thus causing it to ricochet back upon itself and ultimately blind it (Gandelman 1991: 4). An eye represented as part of a hand has also symbolised clairvoyance. This transferral of the eye to various other parts of the body, such as the hands, arms torso, and so forth, is termed *Heterotopic* eyes (Boshoff 1997: 36).

In order to guard against the illusions the imperfect eyes might regard as truth, Democritus (c. 460-370 B.C.), even before Plato's warning, blinded himself in order to see more clearly with his intellect (Jay 1993: 27, Kavanagh 2004: 447). On the other hand, demonstrating his paranoia over the loss of vision, Roger Bacon (1561-1626), founder of the empiricist strain of the Enlightenment, later claimed that “[...] all knowledge of the world can only be obtained from sight, and thus a blind man could learn ‘nothing that is worthy in this world’” (Johnson 2011: 62).⁴⁹

Evidently, the status of vision as “[...] the arbiter of understanding, objectivity and truth [...]” (Coleman 2007: 6) is far more complicated than at first meets the eye. Perhaps it is precisely the ambiguous status of vision – as at once noble and unreliable – both in ancient Greek philosophy and successive epistemological positions on the reliability of sense perception that provided the foundation for the subsequent assumption that Western culture is predominantly ocularcentric. For, whether the essence of vision is considered to be seated in the speculating ‘eye of the mind’ or the observing two eyes of the body, for Jay (1993: 29) and others,⁵⁰ vision has nevertheless been the sense privileged above the other corporeal senses in modern Western societies.

Aiming his critique specifically at the critical theory emerging in visual culture studies, Mark Poster (2002: 1) has noted that many commentators on visual culture incorrectly assume the “autonomy of the visual” in modern cultures. Poster, therefore, rejects Mirzoeff's (1999: 4) well-known contention that “[...] human experience is now more visual and visualised than ever before” on the grounds that it is more the case that, due to advances in visual technologies, “[...] we are only in different visual regimes” and not necessarily *more* reliant on

⁴⁹ Cf. Mosche Barasch's *Blindness: the history of a mental image in Western thought* (2001) in which the author documents changing interpretations and attitudes toward blindness and blind people.

⁵⁰ For example, Levin (1993: 2) concurs with Jay that “[f]or those of us who can see, vision is, of all the modes of perception, the one which is primary and predominant, at least in the conduct of our daily lives”. At the same time, however, Levin also questions the ocularcentrism of Western society by refusing to unproblematically accept that since the time of the ancient Greeks Western culture “[...] has been dominated by an ocularcentric paradigm, a vision-generated, vision-centered interpretation of knowledge, truth and reality” (Levin 1993: 2).

vision than people living in previous periods (Poster 2002: 2). Interestingly, Mirzoeff has removed this statement from both his second and third editions of *An introduction to visual culture* (2009 & 2013), choosing instead to focus his introductory argument around the case for the multimodality of visual media as *mixed media*. In similar vein, Mitchell (2003: 241) argues that “[...] the supposed hegemony of the visible in our time [...] is a chimera that has outlived its usefulness”.

Despite vision's alleged importance in Western societies, Geraldine Johnson (2011: 62) points out that in ancient, medieval and early modern thought, the valorisation of sight was also not always absolute or uncontested. For example, visual anxiety is a dominant theme that runs through the mythical narratives of Narcissus, Orpheus and the Medusa in classical mythology. In the myths of Pygmalion and Prometheus, in contrast to vision's supposed nobility, touch is portrayed as “[...] a positive, life-giving force [...]” (Johnson 2011: 62).⁵¹ Furthermore, Johnson (2011: 63-84) demonstrates that touch was acknowledged as an important sense in people's interaction with images and objects created in early modern Italy. For example, wooden sculptures of Christ were taken down from crucifixes in Holy Week so that worshippers could touch them. The purpose of pilgrimages was not only to see but, more importantly, to touch reliquary caskets and the tombs of saints (Johnson 2011: 64). Another common practice at that time, particularly amongst nuns, was to handle life-size sculptures of the Christ Child in wood or terracotta. The physical handling and adoration of these objects as part of devotional practice was, of course, later viewed with scepticism by church reformers (Johnson 2011: 64).⁵²

⁵¹ Jay (1993: 28) also notes that, apart from philosophical discourse that warned against the illusive power of sight, in the cultural lifeworld of the ancient Greeks their myths provide even more evidence of their awareness of “vision's malevolent power”. Apart from the myths of Narcissus, Orpheus and Medusa, the all-seeing Argus (Panoptes) is lulled to sleep by the enchanting music of Pan in the mythical narrative. Similarly, the existence of apotropaic amulets that could ward off the power of the evil eye reveals, once again, the ancient Greek's suspicion of sight.

⁵² In addition, hearing was the privileged sense in human consciousness before the turn toward a written culture, argues Walter Ong (1991). Ong (1991: 117) maintains that “[...] the shift from oral to written speech was essentially a shift from sound to visual space”. The dominance of sight in cultural thought and expression had “[...] its beginning in writing” (Ong 1991: 121) with the resulting shift from an oral to a written culture giving rise to “[...] situational thinking [being]

In everyday lived experience, too, it seems that sight has not always enjoyed the same prominence that it has been accorded in some intellectual circles. Lucien Febvre (qtd Jay 1993: 34) points out that “[...] the sixteenth century did not see first: it heard and smelled, it sniffed the air and caught sounds”. It was only later that it seriously and actively became engaged in geometry, focussing attention on the world of forms with Johannes Kepler (1571-1630) and Desargues of Lyon (1593-1662). It was then that vision was unleashed in the world of science where it quickly proved helpful in scientific investigations and observations later assisting in attaining “[...] the rational vision of the Enlightenment” (Levin 1993: 3).

Whether the hegemony of vision in the modern era is taken as an unproblematic cliché or “[...] a chimera that has outlived its usefulness” (Mitchell 2003: 241), it is difficult to deny the priority given sight not only in the realms of art, art history, philosophy and science but also in everyday social practice. For instance, as Levin (1993: 2,3) rightly suggests “[f]or those of us who can see, vision is, of all the modes of perception, the one which is primary and predominant, at least in the conduct of our daily lives”. But, in Levin’s opinion, there is a more pressing issue that should be investigated than whether or not modern people are more reliant on vision than in previous periods. Instead, he suggests that attention be paid to a host of more complex issues resulting from the various forms and modes of vision operating in modernity and how these forms of vision are understood. In the following section I consider an interpretation of a scopic regime of modernity termed ‘Cartesian perspectivalism’ by Jay (1988a).

replaced by abstract thinking” (Pallasmaa 2005: 25). For Ong (1991: 12) this change in mode of thinking is irreversible as the writing down of oral speech “[...] tyrannically locks them into a visual field forever [...]” from which the literate person, in Ong’s view, apparently “[...] cannot fully recover”.

2.6 ‘Cartesian perspectivalism’

As a result of sight’s alleged epistemological importance, it has been argued that the hegemonic visual model of the modern era has been produced via two significant systems of thought. On the one hand, modern visuality has allegedly been produced by rationalist philosophical thought which underpinned much, but not all, Enlightenment philosophy.⁵³ According to the rationalist position, the disembodied mind ought to free itself from the limitations of the sensual body. On the other hand, the widespread use of linear perspective in art produced since the fifteenth century in the West has been regarded as foundational to the scopic regime of modernity.

Jay (1988a: 4) has coined the term ‘Cartesian perspectivalism’ to denote the combination of “[...] Cartesian ideas of subjective rationality in philosophy [...]” derived from Descartes, and the “[...] Renaissance notion of [linear] perspective in the visual arts”. Indeed, Van de Vall (2005: 43) has pointed out that Descartes’ conception of space was inspired by linear perspective. For, Descartes understood space in Euclidean terms (in other words, space is understood as extension by means of points, lines, angles, distances), as quantitative and not qualitatively experienced. Linear perspective, developed before Descartes, had thus already rationalised or geometricised space. According to the paradigm of ‘Cartesian perspectivalism’ the observer is constructed as a rational, stable subject who is able to know and fully understand an unambiguous world. In the following section I investigate how subjectivity may have been produced in this way by more closely examining the discourse of the scopic regime of ‘Cartesian perspectivalism’.

⁵³ Western Rationalism was mainly characterised by two opposing traditions. One is often indicated as rationalist for its emphasis on the innate or *a priori* existence of mental concepts and ideas (hence the metaphorical links between mental and visual clarity are recognised). The other tradition within Western Rationalism is empiricism which denies any innate knowledge. The mind is regarded as a *tabula rasa* and the senses, in particular sight, seen as the only source of knowledge, with all concepts considered to have a sensory origin.

In this investigation, however, I tread with caution. For, the assumption that ‘Cartesianism’ or ‘Cartesian perspectivalism’ represents a dominant model of vision and subjectivity in the modern era is a contentious point. Many commentators have critiqued the suggested cultural primacy of ‘Cartesian perspectivalism’ as the reigning model of modern vision offered by Jay. Even Jay (1988a: 4) admits that the scopic regime of modernity is complex and contested with several ocular fields competing in the modern era.⁵⁴ Equally, Bal (1993: 379) argues that there is not only one mode or kind of vision and that to subscribe to such a point of view would be entirely reductive. Even so, owing to the importance of Descartes’ dualist position on the relationship between mind and body and the discursive currency of linear perspective in understanding the relationship between perception, sensation and the subject in this period, I nevertheless embark on this investigation as a necessary component of the groundwork for the development of my later arguments. Furthermore, although I understand vision to have a history, this investigation does not attempt to write a history of vision, but only to focus on a particular construction of that history by focussing, following Jay, on two very specific frames of reference: ‘Cartesianism’ and linear perspective.

2.6.1 Mind over matter

Although Descartes’ mind/body dualism has been discredited by postmodern discourses, it has nevertheless been considered the prevailing paradigm influencing scientific and technological pursuits in the modern West in general. A recent example of this position is evident in Amanda du Preez’s (2009: xiv) contention that, despite the many counter-discourses that have unmasked this obviously problematic dualism “[...] most of [Descartes’] postulations have miraculously survived and cleverly morphed into recent cyber-projects that

⁵⁴ The two fields he mentions other than ‘Cartesian perspectivalism’, are the ‘art of describing’ (following Svetlana Alpers’ account of seventeenth-century Dutch visual culture) and the Baroque ‘madness of vision’ (following Christine Buci-Glucksmann). But he also admits that even within these broad categories there are different visual subcultures at work.

express aversion toward the body".⁵⁵ Equally, Maxine Sheets-Johnstone (2009: 2) describes 'Cartesianism' as a "350-year-old wound" that has still not healed. This is because, according to Sheets-Johnstone (2009: 2), since Descartes' formulation of a mind/body split, the body has been misrepresented as "[...] mere material handmaiden of an all-powerful mind, a necessary but ultimately discountable aspect of cognition, intelligence, and even affectivity". For Sheets-Johnstone (2009: 2), the turn toward "embodiment" in recent critical thinking merely represents a "lexical band-aid" that does not heal but instead covers up the body's wound which is its 'Cartesian' legacy. Evidently then, owing to its 'Cartesian' heritage, the misrepresentation or misunderstanding of the body as a mere tool or instrument in the mind's production of knowledge about the world is still a necessary avenue to explore.⁵⁶

Despite Descartes' ambivalent position on vision, as I pointed out earlier, his theory of vision has been regarded as the visual dimension of what has become known as the 'Cartesian' self (Mirzoeff 1998: 111).⁵⁷ His "spectatorial epistemology" (Jay 1993: 297; Wylie 2007: 145) designates sight as an objective and mechanical process that can be explained and rationalised through science/geometry. Furthermore, for Descartes, sight (controlled by the mind's conceptual *clarté*) can render the visible world unambiguous.⁵⁸

Seeking out knowledge in all fields of human inquiry through a reliable mathematical method, Descartes (1968: 32) rejected philosophy, theology,

⁵⁵ In Chapter 5 I examine Merleau-Ponty's critique of Descartes' notion of disembodied perception in greater detail.

⁵⁶ Maria Coleman (2007: 1) locates the earliest forms of the disavowal of the body in the Judeo-Christian story of Adam and Eve's expulsion from the Garden of Eden. After the fruits of knowledge had brought the realisation that the body was shameful, it had to be "[...] civilised, covered, dominated and controlled by the intellect". Furthermore, according to Coleman (2007: 2), following Christian dogma, the body and all its desires must be conquered and controlled and ultimately set the soul, which is trapped within it, free.

⁵⁷ Although within the long tradition of Western philosophy the relationship between mind, body and world has been studied and critiqued over and again, Descartes is chiefly associated with the "dominant model of subjective transparency" (Jacobs 2011: 2) especially evident in his "obsess[ion] with clarity and light" (Levin 1993: 9).

⁵⁸ Descartes is noted for his re-conception of vision in mechanical terms, rather than as divine revelation, based on his observation of the physiological process of sight. In this way, he also challenged the classical idea that "little copies of objects [...] travelled into the eye" (Mirzoeff 2013: 330).

poetry and the “false sciences”, as in his opinion, they were built on “shifting foundations”. Instead, he endeavoured to travel, “[...] seeing different courts and armies [...]”, to “[...] gather[...] a varied experience [...]”, “witness[ing]” and “reflecting” on what he *saw* “[...] in order to see *clearly* into [his] own actions” (Descartes 1968: 32, 33 [my italics, JL]). The ‘Cartesian’ self, therefore, is an autonomous person whose mind, operating separately from the body (and even from the corporeal eye) interprets and judges sense impressions received from that body.⁵⁹ Based in his philosophy of methodical doubt, for Descartes, thought, *precedes* all perception obtained through the senses.

The main purpose of Descartes’ *Optics* is to explain vision in objective and scientific terms in order to eliminate “confusion and illusion” about sight and also to reconstruct the visible world in such a way as to render it unambiguous (Van de Vall 2005: 40). As Dalia Judovitz (1993: 63) points out, when read in conjunction with Descartes’ earlier writings, this text is a “systematic [...] undermining [...] [of] the role of vision and its perceptual domain”, handing these over to the domain of the mental. In *Optics* Descartes describes sight as a process whereby rays of light – *lumen* – strike the eyes, or more precisely, the back of the retina.⁶⁰ But he wondered if the essence of vision lay in the way in which the light that fell on the eye stimulated the retinal nerves or if it lay in the way in which the mind was able to comprehend or deal with the raw material of sensations that came to it.⁶¹

Although impressed by technologies, such as the telescope, that improved the human capacity to see, Descartes eventually concluded that “[...] it is the mind (or soul) that sees, and not the eye” (Ingold 2008: 379). People are able to

⁵⁹ Descartes’ observational approach to science, based on the sceptical observation of repeated experimentation, was in contrast to the then-prevailing Scholastic tradition “[...] in which evidence was judged in the light of existing texts, such as the philosophy of Aristotle” (Mirzoeff 2013: 229).

⁶⁰ Ingold (2008: 379) explains the implications of Descartes’ account of the relationship between sight and light: “Sight and light, confounded in ancient optics, came to be separated on either side of a boundary between mind and world”. Ingold argues that in this way sight was understood as occurring ‘inside’ while light occurs ‘outside’, with the boundary being the eye.

⁶¹ In Chapter 3, section 3.4 I elaborate further on Descartes’ understanding of the relationship between sight and touch as set out in *Optics*.

recognise what they see because in our minds we assign meaning to forms in the same way that “[...] we assign meaning to words” (Van de Vall 2005: 40). In other words, according to Descartes, the intellect inspects entities that are modelled on the images on the retina, with the corporeal eye being merely a passive lens. Following this view, since representations are in the mind, the philosopher studies his/her ideas by means of a type of mental gaze.

In this way, Descartes gave the role of ‘seeing’ over to the mind, which itself is made up of representations (Casey 1997: 203).⁶² For example, in Descartes’ estimation, we know that the oval in a two-dimensional image is a circle, and that the rhombus is a square because the mind – more specifically, the surface of the pineal gland – judges it to be so, because these geometric forms are innate to the soul; the soul does not derive them from sensory information (Figure 8). The diagram from Descartes’ *Treatise on man* (1664) not only shows the position of the pineal gland at point H, but also the way in which he understood inverted retinal images to be formed in the eyes, and to be transmitted via the nerves to form a singular re-inverted image (idea) on the surface of the pineal gland. Vision understood in this way – as a purely cognitive phenomenon – occurs only by means of thought.⁶³

⁶² Descartes’ modern epistemology is based on the model which Richard Rorty (1979: 45) refers to as the ‘mirror of nature’ by means of which “the intellect inspects entities modelled on retinal images”.

⁶³ For Descartes, the visual experience of sight by the two eyes is transformed into the coherent sight of the eye of the mind or soul, the source of rational intellection (Jay 1993: 226). As discussed in Chapter 5, Merleau-Ponty (1993 [1945]: 64) critiqued Descartes’ rationalist approach to visual experience. In ‘Cezanne’s doubt’, for instance, Merleau-Ponty (1993 [1945]: 64) maintains that, “To say that a circle seen obliquely is seen as an ellipse is to substitute for our actual perception what we would see if we were cameras: in reality we see a form which oscillates around the ellipse without being an ellipse”.

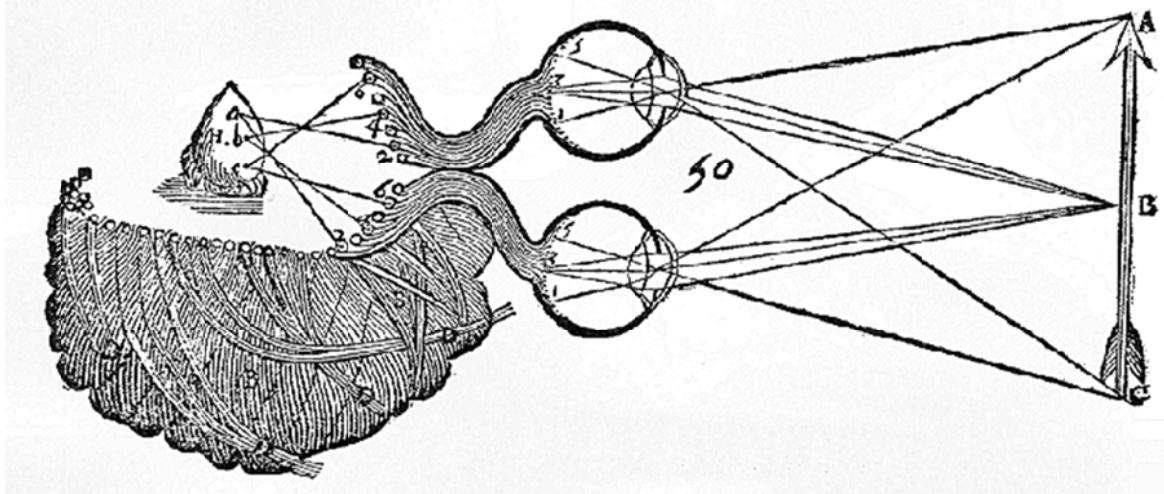


Figure 8: Illustration from Descartes' *Treatise on man* (1664)

While Descartes was sure that he could not doubt the existence of his mind – expressing this in his famous dictum *cogito ergo sum* – he did think that it was possible to doubt the existence of his body. Descartes (1901: 225) asked: “[a]m I so dependent on the body and the senses that without these I cannot exist?” Although thoroughly discredited by postmodern criticism, ‘Cartesianism’, according to some theorists at least, became the reigning model of modernity.

At the risk of repeating what has already been stated previously, it is necessary to say a little more about the Enlightenment in order to clarify some pertinent points. For, ‘Cartesianism’ may have become the scopic regime of modernity precisely because it best suited the scientific worldview of the Enlightenment project, which, although moving away from the scientalist phase of Western Rationalism (dominated by Galileo Galilei, Isaac Newton and Descartes), was nevertheless strongly influence by the “rationalist system of philosophy” (Bristow 2011: [s.p.]). Science and experimental methods, with practical reason being fundamental to such endeavours, were the cornerstones of Enlightenment thought. Moreover, according to the rationalist strain of the Enlightenment, which understood space in Euclidean terms, vision was considered to be a one-way street, with the objects located in spaces being nothing more than the passive recipients of the gaze.

Judovitz (1993: 63) notes that although Descartes' was deeply committed to undermining the nobility of vision, it is ironic that he transferred “[...] the properties of the visible [...] to the mental domain”. In other words, according to this interpretation of the ‘Cartesian’ *cogito*, although Descartes attempted to separate reason from perception, he nevertheless regarded vision as a means by which clear and distinct ideas could be reached (Levin 1993: 10).⁶⁴

John Wiley (2007: 146-147) concurs with this view by suggesting that, in his philosophical method and language, Descartes “[...] clearly identifies vision with [the] *cogito*” and in this way deeply cements “[...] associations between *seeing* and *thinking*, and visual perception and certainty”. Moreover, according to his view, it is precisely because vision possesses the ability or potentiality to remove itself from the external world “[...] to an idealised, uncontaminated vantage point” that vision is the only sense in the sensual body that can “[...] testify to the geometrical certainties of the material world” (Wiley 2007: 146). In this way, argues Wiley (2007: 147), a gazing subject is “[...] carr[ied] from the world to a position of detached epistemological authority [...]” from which distanced position s/he can presumably “[...] contemplate the world along an avenue of inspection and observation”.

In distinguishing between material substance extended in space (*res extensa*) and purely mental substance (*res cogitans*), Descartes defined the rational observer as a stable subject who is able to know and fully understand and control the world by denying the bodily senses, with the mind presiding over matter. Or put another way, the essence of the *res extensa* is revealed by the essence of the *res cogitans*. According to this paradigm, the body (the senses) is therefore subdued by reason (the mind), with the mind being superior to

⁶⁴ This conception of what is implied in Descartes' *cogito* appears to also follow Heidegger's reading thereof, which regards representation (*Vorstellung*) to be the fundamental ground of thought. According to this view, all thinking is visual. Thought is “[...] the bringing-before-itself and what-is-brought-before-itself [...] made ‘visible’ in the widest sense” (Heidegger 1982: 105). This interpretation of Descartes' *cogito* is but one among others. Elkins (1994: 30), for example, points out that Heidegger's model of thought has been contested by Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen (1991: 50) who understands thinking to be non-visual. Similarly, Ricoeur (1977: 281) argues against the notion that thought is fundamentally visual.

matter. Sensation – occurring in the body – was thus considered to be organised and clarified by perception – thought, which occurs in the mind. As Jay (1988a: 9) puts is:

Cartesian perspectivalism was [...] in league with a scientific world view that no longer hermeneutically read the world as a divine text, but rather saw it situated in a mathematically regular spatio-temporal order filled with natural objects that could only be observed from without by the dispassionate eye of the neutral researcher.

It is necessary to return for a moment to the main theme of this chapter: ‘showing seeing’. More specifically, I propose that in ‘showing seeing’ Sperber’s installation is a critique of Descartes’ notion of the disembodied mind. Following the logic of ‘Cartesianism’, the optical device that corrects the muddle of coloured cotton reels in *After the last supper* can be likened to the eye of the mind which gives clarity to the information received by the senses by organising and ordering what we see. Paradoxically, however, by means of the huge scale of the installation which renders the abstract ‘image’ blurry, combined with the nature of the medium used – cotton reels, commonly used in the production of (tactile) fabrics – *After the last supper*, as I have already pointed out, appeals to our sense of touch. In other words, this piece, while dealing with the operation of perception – by ‘showing seeing’ – emphasises the viewer’s sensuous interaction with what is encountered, appealing to our bodies which are utterly connected, rather than separated from our minds. In this way, the piece critiques the model of vision as a machine and the dualistic relationship of mind over body is complicated – possibly overturned – through a participant’s somatic relationship to the work.

2.6.1.2 The *camera obscura*

Jay (1993: 69) suggests that Descartes “[...] tacitly adopted the position of a perspectivalist painter using a camera obscura to reproduce the observed world”. Taking this analogy further, it is helpful to examine the *camera obscura* as discursive object more closely. Crary (1988: 25-66) finds the technical properties of the *camera obscura* and its related use by artists only of marginal significance. He argues that “[t]he camera obscura [...] cannot be reduced either to a technological or a discursive object: it was a complex social amalgam in which its existence as a textual figure was never separate from its machinic uses” (Crary 1988: 31).⁶⁵

As a “socially constructed artifact” (Crary 1988: 30) and therefore also as a discursive object, the *camera obscura* can be seen to define both what an observer was understood to be and how vision was understood. As a metaphor for human vision, it provides a model of subjectivity according to which the human observer, standing inside a dark room, withdrawn from the world outside and looking at her/his projected image, is understood to be completely separated from what s/he sees.⁶⁶

From the 1500s, argues Crary (1998: 38), the *camera obscura* functions discursively to delimit the boundary between viewer and world – sight and site. In this way, this technical object simultaneously “[...] performs an operation of

⁶⁵ The workings of the *camera obscura* had already been fully understood since antiquity. Kittler (2010: 51) explains that Aristotle used the principle underlying the *camera obscura* to watch a solar eclipse without the risk of blindness. He instructed viewers to look at the back wall of a room whose opposite (front) wall has a small hole through which sunlight enters. The solar eclipse could be observed on this wall.

⁶⁶ Crary (1990: 43-46) shows that Johannes Vermeer's two paintings produced circa 1668, *The Geographer* and *The Astronomer* (Figure 39) represent this account of vision by Descartes. Both astronomer and geographer are located in rooms which have only one visible source of natural light. Both men, without looking at the world outside, are engrossed in maps; one representing the stars and the other a nautical map. Although both scholars are isolated from the exterior world which they seek to understand “[...] this is not in the least an obstacle to apprehending the world outside, for the division between interiorized subject and exterior world is a pre-given condition of knowledge about the latter” (Crary 1990: 46). In this way, concludes Crary (1990: 46), the interior of the *camera obscura* represents an “interface” between the subject and the world, or, more precisely between Descartes' *res cogitans* and *res extensa*.

individuation [...]” as the isolated observer is cut off from the outside world. In the same instance, the *camera obscura* also “decorporealize[s] vision” in that an observer’s sensory and physical experience of the world is mediated through the mechanical object (Crary 1998: 39). Therefore, argues Crary (1998: 39), the *camera obscura* must be recognised as “[...] inseparable from a certain metaphysics of interiority: it is a figure for both the observer who is nominally a free sovereign individual and a privatised subject confined in a quasi-domestic space, cut off from a public exterior world”.

A further important feature of the view on vision and the mind that developed half a century later and in particular in the writings of John Locke (1632-1704) – who might be described as a rationalistic Empiricist – was that the observer within the *camera obscura* was given the role of the judge of their observations.⁶⁷ Locke (1690: II, iii, 1) likened the dark chamber of the *camera obscura* to the space of the mind, in whose “presence room” an inner eye (the observer in the *camera obscura*) orders and compares the information entering it. Although empiricism is a philosophy that sees sensory perception as the only source of knowledge (in other words, empiricism is much more sympathetic to the senses than Rationalism), in Locke’s view, sensations that enter the mind from the outside world, are “[...] objects of quasi-observation [...]” (Rorty 1979: 50) which nevertheless require discipline and categorisation.

In this way, Rorty finds a link between Locke and Descartes, in their account of an observer that is fundamentally different from the way in which the observer was previously understood. For Descartes (1984: 43), the world cannot be known through eyesight alone but rather through “[...] perception of the mind”. Furthermore, a precondition for such understanding is a subject securely located “[...] within an empty interior space” (Crary 1988: 43). In this space in the mind, and metaphorically inside the *camera obscura*, Descartes (1984: 24) would no doubt “[...] shut [his] eyes, [...] stop [...] [his] ears, [and] [...] disregard [his] senses”. And, in an extension of the analogy of the *camera obscura*, the

⁶⁷ Cf. Locke (1690: II, xi, 17).

light that enters the dark chamber, or the mind, is not the light of the sun, but the light of reason instead.

2.6.2 Linear perspective

The *camera obscura*, as will become clearer, was not only foundational to ‘Cartesian’ accounts of subjectivity, but also to the graphic technique of linear perspective widely used in two-dimensional works of art created in the West from the early fifteenth century. Whereas, on the one hand, in Jay’s (1988: 4) estimation, the Enlightenment demand for ‘Cartesian’ rationality supported and maintained ‘Cartesian perspectivalism’ as the dominant visual regime of the modern era, on the other, linear perspective may have laid the groundwork for this model two centuries earlier. During the Renaissance period in Europe, the artistic desire to conquer and ‘master’ reality was no doubt one of the impetuses (although most likely not the only one) behind Filippo Brunelleschi’s (1377-1446) ‘invention’ of linear perspective in 1413.⁶⁸ In Western art, perspective – literally meaning “seeing through” (Holly 1996: 15) – is a well-known system of rules which enables a painter or draughtsperson to create illusionistic space on a two-dimensional wall, canvas or other surface.⁶⁹ In *On painting* (1435) Alberti wrote that a canvas should offer the spectator a view onto the world through a window, arguably one of the “fundamental myths of mimesis” (Holly 1996: 15).

According to Friedrich Kittler (2010: 52), it was, in fact, research that attempted to ‘show seeing’ (by constructing a model of vision) that gave rise to the revolutionary concept of creating perspectival depth in two-dimensional

⁶⁸ According to Elkins (1994: 7), our ‘modern’ understanding of perspective is mostly constructed from three events in the early years in the development of this system in Renaissance painting: Brunelleschi’s experiments around 1413; the painting of Tommaso Masaccio’s *Trinity* (1427-1428), which is the oldest surviving painting based on linear perspective; and Alberti’s book on painting, *De Pictura*, in 1435.

⁶⁹ Cf. Elkins’ (1994) challenge to the assumption that there was one unified geometric logic at the basis of Renaissance perspective. Elkins (1994) maintains that it is far too reductive to assume that in the Renaissance pictorial tradition (or even in one picture) only one perspective, or point of view, existed. In other words, contrary to the modern understanding of perspective based on correct mathematical standards, Elkins finds that in several Renaissance paintings, more than one perspective co-exists.

paintings. In constructing the first working model of the *camera obscura*, the Arab scholar, Abu ‘Ali al-Hasan ibu al-Haytham (965-1041) (known as Alhazen by his Western friends), also created the first model of seeing (Kittler 2010: 51). Writing in Alexandria, and drawing from his experiments with a *camera obscura*, Alhazen deduced not only that vision is caused by light entering the eye, but also that the image that enters the eye is refracted and inverted (Mirzoeff 2009: 23) as also demonstrated in Sperber’s installation. Furthermore, as Belting (2011b) argues, the visual theory that developed in the Arab world at that time profoundly influenced Western art and in particular the use of perspective in the Renaissance. In other words, Alhazen’s mathematical theory, laid down in *Perspectiva* (widely known by its Latin translation), which dealt with visual rays and refraction, was the basis of perspective used in Western art (Belting 2011b).

Prior to vision being understood in this way, the classical Greeks had already “[...] founded a science of optics” (Kittler 2010: 50), the first recorded writings of which, for example those of Euclid (c. 325-265 B.C.), reveal their understanding of the law of refraction (Kittler 2010: 50). It was, however, widely accepted (except by the materialistic school of philosophy), that visual rays – *lux* – emanated not from the light source which then travelled to the eye, but from the eye which lead to the light source (Kittler 2010: 50). In Ivan Illich’s (2000: 9) words, in the classical regime it was thought that “[...] the gaze radiates from the pupil to embrace an object, to fuse with it, so that the eye is dyed the object’s colors”.⁷⁰ According to this understanding, vision is an ‘outgoing activity’ also termed *extromission*. Owing to classical philosophers’ anthropocentric belief that people are the centre of the finite cosmos (Kittler 2010: 50), it was thought that light radiates from the eye towards the object in the shape of a cone (Mirzoeff 2009: 22). In this way, it was believed (in particular by the Sophists,

⁷⁰ Illich (2000) distinguishes between four main scopic regimes in the Western world, beginning with the classical regime. This regime ended around 1000 A.D. The second is the scholastic regime which coincided with the Gothic period. The third regime begins with the early Renaissance at which point the eye is increasingly thought of as a camera whose abilities can be enhanced by technical devices. Regarded by Illich (2000: 9) as ‘the age of show’, the fourth regime begins around 1800 and continues into the present.

such as Protagoras), that rays of light shine out from a person's eyes toward the world – which was conceived as “a well-ordered sphere” (Kittler 2010: 50) – thereby illuminating it.

But this was not the only way in which the ancient Greeks understood perception. The originator of empiricism, Aristotle, for example, and later Epicurus (341-270 B.C.), postulated that the process of sight occurred through *intromission*, whereby what we see is actually “[...] a visible image of the object [...]” that has travelled to the eye (Mirzoeff 2009: 22). Aristotle proved the main force behind optics (perception understood as a passive sense with the eyes receiving light from the outside and with the impressions thus made becoming the only source of knowledge).⁷¹ Plato, on the other hand, claimed that we are able to see as a result of a combination of a ray that is sent out from the eye and light that is emitted from an object.⁷² Ultimately, although conflicting understandings of the operation of vision existed in the ancient world it was overall accepted that light was the foundation of vision.⁷³

It was not until the eleventh century that such notions of vision were critiqued and amended by Alhazen. And in doing so, Alhazen and the *camera obscura* (used as an optical apparatus) assisted Renaissance artists in achieving the spatial illusionism they desired in their illusionistic paintings. Why is the use of linear perspective in the fifteenth century interesting in a discussion of ‘showing seeing’? What does this turn in artistic approach from the flattened compositions of medieval art to the creation of illusionistic depth in Renaissance two-dimensional art reveal about the intentions of its users, and what they may have intended to show about seeing? In other words, can Renaissance perspective be considered as more than merely a graphic technique? Moreover,

⁷¹ Aristotle’s writings only reached the West in Arabic and Hebrew translation in the latter part of the Middle Ages, leading to the rise of empiricism as a tradition in Western Rationalism, particularly in Britain.

⁷² Illich (2000: 11) explains that for Plato the gaze could never reach reality but instead “[...] fuses with the colour from the thing somewhere halfway [...].” Mirzoeff (2009: 21) describes Plato’s notion of sight as occurring at the ‘interface’ between the seer and what is seen.

⁷³ With increasing investigations in modern physics, *lux* was replaced by *lumen*, and in vision light was separated from the eye. Light as *lumen* was thereafter regarded as “[...] an impulse that owes nothing to the human presence or to the workings of the eye” (Ingold 2008: 379).

what, if anything, is the link between the invention of perspective and the way in which subjectivity was understood?

To ask these kinds of questions is to consider perspective, not only (or merely) as a pictorial device, but also as a metaphor for something else – a particular paradigm or world view (*Weltanschaung*).⁷⁴ As far as Ernst H. Gombrich (1909-2001) (1967: 80) was concerned, linear perspective is not symbolic of some new *Weltanschaung*, arguing that “[...] perspective is precisely what it claims to be, a method of representing a building or any scene as it would be seen from a particular vantage point”.⁷⁵ Gombrich’s position on the implications of perspective are in contrast to Erwin Panofsky’s (1892-1968) earlier argument in *Die Perspektive als Symbolische Form* (1991 [1924]) in which the art historian regarded perspective as essentially expressive of the cultures that invented them. Panofsky thus linked the use of perspective in Renaissance paintings, in which objects were unified and ordered pictorially into wholes, with a world view that demanded such a notion of spatial unity (Elkins 1994: 13).⁷⁶

Drawing to a large extent on Panofsky’s relativist reading of perspective in relation to prevailing cultural attitudes and values, James Elkins (1994: xi), examines the implications of perspective beyond the notion that it was merely a practical means by which to render objects spatially feasible by means of geometry. Rather, Elkins (1994: xi) is of the opinion that perspective is a metaphor for vision. In this sense, it is “[...] a powerful concept for ordering our

⁷⁴ Much has already been written on the significance and metaphorical meaning (if any) of Renaissance perspective. Cf. Hubert Damisch *The origin of perspective* (1994 [1989]) and Martin Kemp *The science of art: optical themes in Western art from Brunelleschi to Seurat* (1990). Their differing positions on the manner in which to approach and understand perspective is usefully explained by Elkins (1994: 32-33). Elkins’ (1994: 30) own approach to the matter is summed up in the following statement: “As a corrective to accounts that focus attention on philosophy and metaphysics, I would urge that, in the end, perspective is neither ‘larger’ nor more fundamental than the geometric issues I also consider here”.

⁷⁵ According to Gombrich (1982: 21), the development of this system was presupposed by a shift in the expectations and demands of the public who insisted on the representation of a sacred event set on an imaginary stage as if through the eyes of an eyewitness. By concentrating on the rules and procedures for achieving perspective, the Renaissance artist was able to explore and reproduce space as a picture. In this way, the representation of space became more important than the subjects or objects in it, at least according to Gombrich, that is.

⁷⁶ Iversen & Melville (2010: 109) note that it was Panofsky’s research that sparked interest in perspective, particularly in Europe.

perception and accounting for our subjectivity" (Elkins 1994: xi). As Jay (1988: 5) has noted, linear perspective "[...] expressed the 'natural' experience of sight valorised by the scientific world view". In other words, as a "strategy for making pictures" (Elkins 1994: 17), perspective is understood as being well suited to the view of the world as a mathematically structured spatio-temporal order within which objects were considered to be situated allowing their examination from 'outside' by the neutral and "dispassionate eye" (Jay 1988a: 9) of the gazing (and presumably not glancing) researcher.

The notion of the alleged 'dispassionate eye' of the observer constructed by the perspectival paradigm has further implications for conceptions of subjectivity itself. Pallasmaa (2005: 16), for instance, reflects such a view on the implication of perspective when he states that the perspectival visual representation of three-dimensional "rationalised space" placed the eye not only in the centre of the visual world, but also at the centre of "[...] the concept of self". This means that perspective can be regarded not only as describing three-dimensional space but also as having the power to *condition* perception. In other words, linear perspective can be described not only as a model for vision (Kittler 2010: 51), "[...] but for subjectivity itself" (Johnson 2011: 62). For, the conscious modern subject discovers her/himself when standing in the required position before a perspective painting (Belting 2011: 2). In this system, the vanishing point in the picture represents the ideal position of the gazing spectator in relation to the represented space. The observing subject thus experiences her/himself "[...] precisely in the place where he is not present [...]" which has been left open for her/him – the space of the vanishing point (Belting 2011: 10).⁷⁷

The concept of a gazing viewer played no role in Alhazen's earlier visual theory which Belting (2011: 3) describes as a non-pictorial theory. It was only later and

⁷⁷ Iversen & Melville (2010: 109) draw attention to fact that in the twentieth century, photography, film and other "[...] technologies of representation with their fixed monocular view [...]" have been associated with the way in which perspective channels vision. All of these technologies mistakenly represent the idea a unified and transcendent subject.

in the West that this theory was transformed into a pictorial theory where, by means of the invention of the vanishing point, it also introduced into a picture a theory not only of the gaze but also of a gazing subject (Belting 2011: 4).⁷⁸ As has often been noted, it was at this moment that the human gaze became “[...] the pivotal point of all perception [...]” (Belting 2011: 4). In this way, and as pointed out by Iversen & Melville (2010: 109), perspective has come to be regarded, in some intellectual quarters, as a method by which to “[...] consolidate a gaze that secures the position of the viewer and stabilizes existing power relations”. This position cuts the viewer off from a tactile relationship with the world and “[...] presents vision as disembodied, monocular [and] distanced [...]” (Iversen & Melville 2010: 109).

The rationalisation of sight and the visual mastery mistakenly assumed to be produced via the application of perspective is perhaps best exemplified by the print by Albrecht Dürer showing an artist drawing a nude reclining woman (Figure 9). In this image, the artist, by employing Alberti's *velo* (veil) – a transparent cloth attached to a frame and onto which a grid has been outlined – represents the “[...] unified, centred and transcendent subject” (Iversen & Melville 2010: 109) while the woman represents the object of his supposed powerful perspectival gaze. In the same way that the viewer must stand at a particular fixed point in front of Sperber's viewing sphere if s/he wishes to see the muddle of chaotic shapes clearly and coherently, Dürer's draughtsman must awkwardly fix and line up his gaze with the point of a small obelisk in order to render the woman accurately in space on his paper.

⁷⁸ The concept of a vanishing point was unnecessary in Arab art since it “[...] makes sense only in a kind of picture that did not occur in Arab art” (Belting 2011: 10). The vanishing point does not exist in the world of objects but only in pictures whose relation to a gazing subject is required and whose intention is to make it seem as if a viewer were looking through the picture into the world it depicts. Belting (2011: 11) explains that Alhazen's visual theory did not include the Western concept of a screen – or picture plane – bisecting the imaginary cone of visual rays emanating from the centre of the eye and projecting to the visual field.

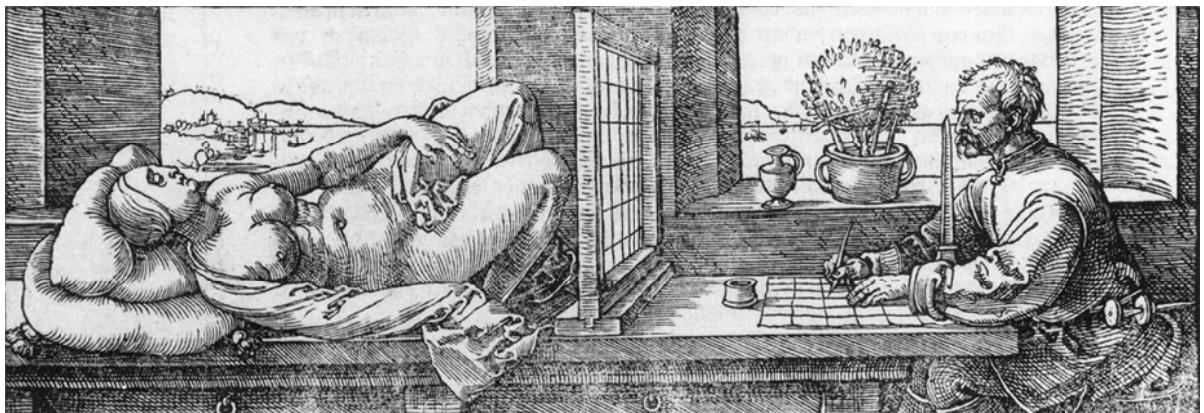


Figure 9: Albrecht Dürer, *Draughtsman drawing a recumbent woman* (1525)

Illich (2000: 18) maintains that the Florentine painters, in their use of perspectival geometry, marked a turning point in conceptions of vision, since from that time onward “[...] the image was transformed from an object into a geometrical construct”. In art created in the West the framed rectangle on the wall metaphorically represents the commanding attitude, whereby space and the objects in it are subjected to the gaze of the observer (Illich 2000: 18). Even further than this, Illich (2000: 7) argues that from the sixteenth century onward “[...] the gaze seems incapable of neglecting the image”. While Stafford (1991: 48) suggests that the image could not escape the gaze of the viewer, Illich (2000: 7) maintains that since the invention of perspective, the image became a ‘trap’ for the gaze, which, mesmerised by the image, was unable to resist it. Whether the sighted spectator is regarded as seeking out images or images as seducing the gaze, evidently the invention of linear perspective further complicated the relationship between sight and site and, most importantly, the way in which the observer – or subject – was understood.

When Da Vinci painted his *Last supper*, on the north wall in the refectory of Santa Maria delle Grazie, Milan, he employed the perspectival construction of the room with the orthogonals that meet at Christ’s forehead, with the result that the viewer may be drawn into, or ‘trapped’ perhaps, in Illich’s (2000: 7) terms, into an imaginary space. As Leo Steinberg (2001) points out, however, this painting, while greatly theorised, resists easy reading. According to Steinberg (2001: 13), in the “common view” the painting reflects the fifteenth century

desire for works of art that secularise religious subject matter in clear and unambiguous ways. In other words, such interpretations, like that of Gombrich for instance, are based in the idea that meaning is more clearly conveyed by means of naturalistic portrayals of human subjects in illusionistic pictorial space, with linear perspective a crucial technical invention to assist in this endeavour.

There are too many interpretations – and misinterpretations in Steinberg's (2001) opinion – of the painting to explore fully here. For this reason, this brief discussion of the painting is restricted to Da Vinci's use of linear perspective for representing the chamber in which Christ and the Apostles are shown. Steinberg (2001: 119) is particularly interested in the relationship between the depicted room on the wall of the refectory and the actual space of the dining room. Contrary to Steinberg's (2001: 119) findings, many "less scrupulous" interpretations conclude that the depicted room is an extension of the real room made possible by means of linear perspective. Indeed, it has frequently been argued, and as I have pointed out above, that owing to its ability to give spectators the sense that they are looking into an extended space behind the wall they are looking at, the importance of the invention of perspective in the history of vision owes much to the fact that it allowed its users to draw their audiences into the Biblical stories they represented. More importantly, however, the use of perspective by Renaissance artists also reflects the assumption that what was visible in the perceptual field was a homogenous, regularly ordered space, a rational visual order, awaiting duplication by the coherent, unified self – the subject who gazes (Mirzoeff 2009: 29).⁷⁹

Michael Kubovy (1986: 159) concurs that it is a misconception that perspective was mainly developed to represent reality accurately. He argues that

⁷⁹ Cf. Berleant (1991: 55-57) who argues that linear perspective reflects a Euclidean understanding of space. According to this view, space is regarded as finite, absolute and homogenous with the perceiver taking a distanced view of the objects in space. Thus, linear perspective, argues Berleant (1991: 57), "[...] signified a [specifically] visual approach to space". Moreover, it "[...] solidified in graphic form the primacy of vision as the pre-eminent sensory modality, a status that reflected its history of superiority and the long-standing metaphorical identification of sight with the cognitive process" (Berleant 1991: 57). For Berleant, the cognitive process has traditionally been recognised as facilitated by a distant, contemplative and objective observer of the visual field.

perspective was developed “[...] to produce space for contemplation, meditation and fantasy” (Kubovy 1986: 159). Coleman (2007: 5) explains that Da Vinci’s *Last supper* is an example of how some Renaissance artists (particularly Da Vinci and Andrea Mantegna) play ‘mind games’ with the viewer, who must be some distance (4.5 meters or 15 feet, in the case of Da Vinci’s *Last supper*) above the floor in order to be in line with the vanishing point in the picture. At this point, the orthogonals of the tapestries in the painting line up perfectly with the murals painted on the walls of the refectory (Steinberg 2001: 121). Kubovy (1986: 159) explains that “[...] these effects achieve the goal of divorcing the viewer’s felt point of view in relation to the scene represented in the painting, from the viewer’s felt position in relation to the room in which he or she is standing”. In this way, the viewer develops a virtual eye – “[...] a potent cocktail of visual understanding and cognitive flight of fancy [...]” – that can leave the physical body on the “magical wings” of the imagination to view the physically unattainable point of entry (Coleman 2007: 5). Following Kubovy, Coleman (2007: 5) suggests that, in this way, it was thought that the mind’s eye, which includes both understanding and imagination, could be separated from the bodily eye, giving rise to the idea that we can be set free from the limitations of our bodies. When regarded in this way, it could be suggested that, on the one hand, perspective set the foundation for rationalist ideas regarding the ordering and control of *res extensa*. On the other, linear perspective may have enabled the production of the notion of a contemplative viewer whose disembodied mind can – and must – rise above the sensuous body.

In the model of linear perspective, the eye of the beholder is evidently singular, monocular, and motionless, and therefore, quite different to the “saccadic, embodied, binocular, temporal experience of seeing with our own two eyes” (Gere 2010: 152). In other words, linear perspective presents an abstracted and disembodied model of vision. *After the last supper* glaringly exposes the limitations of linear perspective as a model of vision, as the viewer must close one eye, and stand motionless (if that is possible) in order to see the image through the optical device.

The limitations of perspective as a means by which to represent reality were, however, already evident to scholars and artists in the fifteenth century. Even Da Vinci rejected this system altogether in his later works (Mirzoeff 2009: 28). Martin Kemp (1990: 51) explains that according to Da Vinci, “[...] every part of the pupil possesses the visual power and [...] this power is not reduced to a point as the perspectivists’ wish”. It would be more precise to say then that perspective does not accurately imitate vision, but rather polices it. Its metaphorical importance lies in its ability on the one hand to direct vision and on the other, to provide the illusion that we can “[...] order and control what we see” (Mirzoeff 2009: 29). In short, linear perspective can be described as a regulative model for thought and perception.

2.7 Conclusion

In this chapter, although I have scarcely scratched the surface of vision’s apparent hegemony in the sciences and philosophy from the point of view of visual culture studies, this superficial contextualisation was nevertheless necessary. By focussing in particular on the early modern period beginning with the Renaissance up to the late eighteenth century, I have attempted to explore some of the ways in which the relationship between the sensing body and the rational mind have been understood historically. Particular attention has been paid to linear perspective and Descartes’ understanding of the relationship between the sensing body and the rational mind in order to understand the implication of these notions for the ways in which subjectivity has been understood in the particular scopic regime Jay has termed ‘Cartesian perspectivalism’. In other words, for the purpose of my subsequent arguments, it was necessary to unpack some of the ways in which, in the early modern period, the observer was constructed as a rational, stable subject able to know and fully understand an apparently unambiguous world by means of her/his mind, which evidently was assumed to rely quite heavily on vision.

In the next chapter, I explore the classical division of the senses, the hierarchisation of those senses and accounts of the relation between perception and sensation in order to further make evident some of the arguments already alluded to in this chapter. In particular, I show that the historical categorisation and hierarchical division of the senses reveals that vision has not always enjoyed a position of privilege in conceptions of the human sensorium as the notion of the ocularcentrism of modern Western culture presumes. Ultimately, my contention is that, in medical science as well as in the everyday viewing of images (three-dimensional, aesthetic or otherwise), the person who gazes does not do so, and never has done so, in isolation from the rest of her/his embodied self which is at the same time entangled with the world. And, further than this, I investigate the implications of such a revised understanding of subjectivity for investigations of a person's encounter with art.

CHAPTER 3

DIVIDING THE SENSORIUM

Seeing, after all, is a soundless activity. It isn't talking, or listening, or smelling, or touching. It happens best in solitude, when there is nothing in the world but you and the object of your attention.¹

In Chapter 2 I contextualised the autonomy allegedly given the visual understanding of the world in modern Western societies by broadly examining the ways in which sight appears to have been the privileged sense mainly from the fifteenth century in the field of science which was geared towards gaining accurate knowledge of the world. Thus, I showed that the increasing technological development of optical instrumentation to enhance visual ability played a significant role in the equation of scientific observation and knowledge (Coleman 2007, Howes 2005, Jay 1993, Jencks 1995, Johnson 2011, Kromm 2010, Levin 1993).

In addition, the combination of a 'Cartesian' (rationalist) understanding of the relationship between the subject and the world, and the implication of the invention and use of linear perspective in painting and drawing in the fifteenth century, was investigated in order to shed light on the way in which a subject was understood in relation to the world according to a particular understanding of that relationship referred to as 'Cartesian perspectivalism' (Jay 1988a). In other words, the previous chapter investigated the discursive construction of the 'subject' in relation to the world that was produced between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries in light of the claim made by many analysts of visual culture studies, that vision is integral to this construction (cf. Foster 1988, Jencks 1995, Levin 1993, Mirzoeff 2009, Mitchell 2003, Jay 1988a).

Chapter 3 continues the investigation of the privilege given to sight by focussing particularly on a brief historical account of the Western philosophical and

¹ Elkins (2000: xiii).

anthropological division and hierarchy of the senses. Thereafter, I investigate a new understanding of perception and a new account of subjectivity that emerged in the early nineteenth century as a result of an explosion of physiological research which mapped and measured the human body. This chapter shows that this new knowledge of the workings of the human perceptual system gave rise to an understanding of perception and subjectivity that replaced earlier versions defined in terms of the *camera obscura* and ‘Cartesian perspectivalist’ models as they have been discussed in Chapter 2. Following the theme of ‘showing seeing’ which guided my argument in Chapter 2, Chapter 3 also unpacks recent evidence from the neurosciences that shows that vision operates in a complex relationship not only to the other senses but also in an inseparable relationship to the entire body. I examine the extent to which such scientific information is able to adequately account for vision as also influenced by a whole person’s personal beliefs and attitudes grounded in cultural and social formations as well as the intellect and the imagination. According to such an understanding of vision, since vision does not operate independently from the body, it does not appear viable for a discipline – visual culture studies or art history – to focus attention only on the visual domain of visual culture. Thus, the main aim of Chapter 3 is to investigate some of the ways in which the relationship between the senses has been understood.

My starting point is a brief exploration of the division and hierarchisation of the senses in ancient Greek philosophy. The forebears of the Western philosophical tradition are discussed in order to show how sight came to be equated, in some Enlightenment quarters, with rational and objective understanding. This equation relied on the premise that sight is a so-called ‘distance-sense’ whilst taste, touch and smell are ‘proximal’ senses. Furthermore, the late seventeenth century concern with the so-called Molyneux problem is investigated. Essentially this problem, or question, led various philosophers associated with the Enlightenment to ask whether space and depth are perceived differently via the senses of sight and touch. It is important to investigate the problem briefly here as it shows an early interest in the ways in which the senses might work

together in perception. The early nineteenth century measuring and mapping of the human eye is then investigated in order to show how the discoveries that resulted from such physiological investigations led to a new understanding of vision as an autonomous and subjective activity. By the 1840s it became increasingly clear that the body is an active participant in the production of optical experience.

Thereafter, I investigate the recent stitching together of the human sensorium that has taken place in both neuroscience and neuroarthistory which have endeavoured to show the intersensoriality – to the extent of a kind of synaesthesia – of perceptual experience. I investigate the usefulness of the neural mapping projects undertaken in the neurosciences that seek to understand human consciousness in terms of experiential encounters between people and what they see. By visualising the inner workings of the human brain, does neuroscience merely provide a reductive view of the human body and embodied existence? Surely the body is more than only a physical, material or sensory entity and the sensorium but one of the ways in which human beings operate? An attempt is made here to show that, despite views to the contrary, neuroscientific research into the ways in which the senses operate at a neurological level, assists in making the case that thought – including ideas, attitudes, beliefs and the imagination – is shaped and constantly reshaped by the interaction between a physical/biological body and culture.

I return to the intersensoriality of perception later in this chapter, but begin by discussing the genealogy of the Western division of the senses. In order to organise and deal with the arguments as set out above, I examine an installation produced by Scottish artist, Annie Cattrell who, working in close collaboration with scientists, Drs Steve Smith, Morten Kringelback and Mark Lythgoe, has created sculptures that are meant to illustrate the activity patterns of a human brain as it responds to sensory stimuli.

3.1 Thought in a vat

In works such as *Seeing* (2001) (Figure 10) and *Hearing* (2001), Cattrell gathered digital data from fMRI scans and transformed this information into computerised virtual models. Using rapid-prototyping processes,² the digital information obtained from a succession of scans – 128 slices to be precise – was then converted into three-dimensional structures using wax, resin, and nylon. The stimulus – which is visual in the case of *Seeing* – had to be repeated dozens of times in order to stimulate the occipital lobe, or more precisely, the visual cortex, which is the particular part of the brain in which visual processing apparently occurs, or at least according to neuroscientific research. The three-dimensional amber-coloured localities of neural activity in the brain were then set in solid cubes of transparent hot-cure resin, or “brain box[es]” (Ede 2011: ix), in which they appear to float like specimens in an *in vitro* experiment.



Figure 10: Annie Cattrell, *Seeing* (2001)

² Rapid prototyping is a laser technology that can recreate brain tumours in three-dimensions and is often used before surgery (Gere 2004: 418).

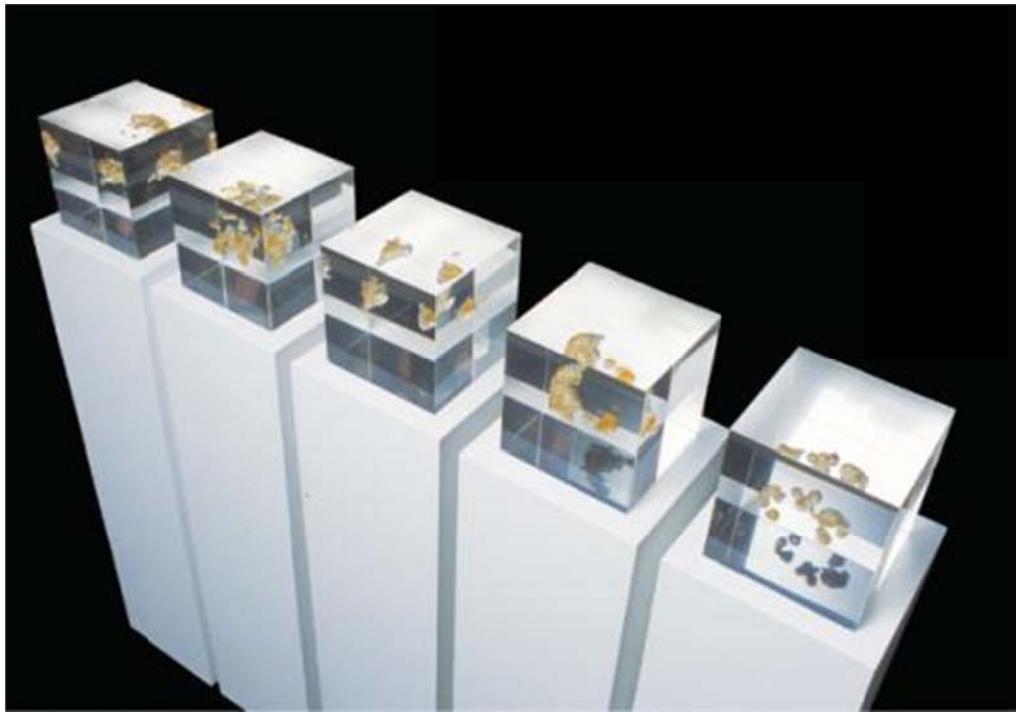


Figure 11: Annie Cattrell, *Sense* (2003)

Seeing is only one component of the entire installation entitled *Sense* which also incorporates the senses of hearing, touch, smell and taste (Figure 11). Conceptually, each sculpture represents not only the idea that different regions in the brain fulfil different functions, but also that it is possible to accurately model such localised brain activity. In other words, each of the five sculptures presumably displays an isolated activity occurring in a particular part of the brain. Each floating amber form suspended in a vitrine is supposed to represent a mental activity or the “anatomy of a thought” as the artist puts it (cited in Gere 2004: 416).

It has also been suggested that by visualising the physical leftovers or residues of a neural activity (presumed by the artist to be a thought) that has already taken place, the amber forms represent the invisible, or supposedly the “impenetrable made visible and tactile” (Ede 2011: ix).³ In displaying each part

³ This confusion of physical traces of neural activity with thought is similar to the mistaken *engram* or memory trace concept Aby Warburg adopted from Richard Semon.

of the brain in its own ‘vat’, Cattrell seems to ask us to consider what connects the inner world of the brain to the exterior world. In other words, the artwork deals with notions regarding the relationship between the mind, body and world, a discussion already touched on in Chapter 2, where I showed that according to the rationalist paradigm the body came off second best. Does this installation represent a continuing notion of the dualistic relationship between mind and body, and mind and world, or is it a critique of such an understanding of human sensation, perception and cognition? For, is this limited understanding of human actions (such as desiring, knowing, feeling, imagining, communicating, trusting, believing and so forth) supposedly functioning exclusively in either one of these general categories (mind/body) not utterly restrictive and unhelpful?

In effect, the concept presented to us in this installation is embedded in a larger scientific endeavour in the neurosciences to map the brain in order to show that brain activity is localised. The separation of brain activity (related to stimulation of the separate senses) into distinctive sections in the brain is an assumption foundational to “the neural mapping project” (Gere 2004: 419) in its endeavour to localise brain functions. Cathy Gere (2004: 415) maintains that “[...] the brain in a vat problem in philosophy is an outcome of the same neural ‘mapping’ project as made Cattrell’s ‘thought in a vat’ possible”. In other words, the notion of an ‘envatted’ brain, as it is shown here, can be regarded as a modern version of an earlier thought experiment posed by analytical philosophy. This experiment asked whether or not it would be possible to be “[...] floating in a tank while super-psychologists stimulate your brain electrochemically, to produce exactly the same experiences you are now having [...]” (Nozick 1981: 167).

Fundamental to the possibility of a brain functioning in a vat independently of the body is the assumption that brain activity is localised. According to this view on neural activity, different cerebral hemispheres are found to be actively involved in different sensory experiences and bodily functions. Gere (2004: 419) notes that in the two works, *Seeing* and *Hearing*, the idea that brain activity is

localised is apparent in the placement of the forms in the transparent cubes. In *Hearing* there are two separate forms, one on either side of the cube, illustrating that the auditory sections of the brain are located close to the ears. In *Seeing*, the amber form is positioned toward the back of the cube, approximately where the visual cortex, which is primarily responsible for seeing, is located in the occipital lobe.

In depicting five senses Cattrell's installation appears to follow the ancient Greek division of the senses. This means that the installation does not visualise the so-called 'sixth sense' which was officially named as the muscle sense – or *kinaesthesia* – in the early nineteenth century.⁴ In separating the five senses in this way, the installation evidently does not describe the ways in which the senses operate in an interrelated manner to the extent that it is impossible to isolate the different parts of the brain as they are in this piece.

On the other hand, based on the visual effect of the floating forms suspended in transparent glass which produces the impression of fleeting movement as the viewer moves around them, as well as Cattrell's own comments on these and her other works dealing with the notion of 'a brain in a vat', the installations can be employed to critique the very idea they visualise: the possibility of a disembodied brain. In other words, although Cattrell displays minimalise sensory experience, I would argue that the muscle sense, *kinaesthesia*, is implicit to the way in which the work is experienced. For, the continuous shifting of the forms in the brain boxes as the viewer moves around them represents the shifting and dynamic workings of an observer's own brain. Thus, a viewer's mobile interaction with the sculptures produces a shifting 'picture' of a brain, or a picture of a brain in motion.

⁴ The notion of a sixth sense, argues Nicholas Wade (2011: 20), emerged in the early nineteenth century after evidence of a muscle sense, separate from touch, was provided by empirical research in the late eighteenth century. In one of his early works entitled *Prolegomina zu einer Psychologie der Architektur* (1886), the formalist scholar, Heinrich Wölfflin (1864-1945) described the kinaesthetic encounter between bodies and architectural forms. In this text, Wölfflin explored the different ways in which people breathe in different spaces. Zeynep Çelik (2006: 159) explains that for Wölfflin "[...] aesthetic experience was not simply a matter of enjoying forms from a distant fixed point; the body that entered architecture's field of influence was shaken to its bones and stimulated throughout its muscles".

Moreover, the problem represented in the work – the distinct separation of sensory activity into localised areas in the brain – can be taken even further in order to explore recent approaches to investigations of experience as synaesthetic and multisensorial. In other words, Elkins (2000: xiii) contention (referred to at the opening of this chapter) that “[s]eeing, after all, is a soundless activity. It isn’t talking, or listening, or smelling, or touching. It happens best in solitude, when there is nothing in the world but you and the object of your attention” does not hold water when considered more closely. In the next section I investigate the foundation for the Western division of the human sensorium as set out in Cattrell’s installation, *Sense*.

3.2 The senses divided

The division of sensory awareness into five distinct modes is often regarded as a Western invention (Jay 2011: 310, Stewart 2005: 61). However, their hierarchisation and the values and meanings ascribed to each sensory faculty have been found to be culturally specific and inflected by prevailing orders of sensory value. In other words, there are many different perspectives on the nature of sensory awareness and its importance in various social practices and cultural life. For instance, Classen (2005) shows the immense sensory diversity of cultural life by examining three particular non-literate cultures. She demonstrates that in their respective cosmologies the Tzotzil of Mexico give heat primacy, the Ongee of Little Andaman Island, odour, and the Desana of Colombia, colour.⁵

In this investigation, however, I briefly explore the Western philosophical and intellectual construction of the five-sense sensorium and its hierarchisation in order to more specifically situate the prominent position accorded sight above

⁵ Whilst Marshall McLuhan (1961) has argued that non-literate societies predominantly make sense of the world through sound, Classen (2005) has pointed out that such a view is essentialist and reductive casting *all* non-literate cultures as aural/oral without considering the particular sensory paradigms that exist in specific cultures.

the other senses which was the main topic under investigation in Chapter 2. The division of the sensorium and its hierarchisation are thus the foci of this section (3.2) and the one thereafter (3.3).⁶

Although it is widely assumed that Aristotle coined the notion of the ‘five senses’ (Stewart 2005: 61) it should be noted that the Greek scholar, Democritus, founder of the materialist school of Greek thought, was indeed the first to name them.⁷ These early Western scholars based their classification of the senses on anatomical and perceptual evidence gathered from their direct observation and experience of the effects of sensory stimuli on the body (Wade 2011: 26).

For ancient Greek scholars, the prominent location of eyes, ears, nose and mouth on the face served to fix the four senses – sight, hearing, smell and taste – in concrete and specific instruments or sensory organs (Wade 2011: 20). Touch, on the other hand, posed a more complex problem since its perception is not localised to only one organ, but is perceived both through the whole skin and also in varying intensities on different parts of the body.⁸ Nevertheless, touch was regarded as a single sense and was therefore counted among the five senses. In fact, touch, which requires direct contact between a sensing subject (a body) and sensible objects, has even occasionally been regarded as

⁶ Whilst the discussions in these sections are necessarily brief, cf. Jütte *A history of the senses* (2005) for a comprehensive account of various attitudes toward the senses in Western thought systems.

⁷ Even before these Greek scholars had classified the senses, however, ancient Indian medicine had already divided the sensory system into five parts. Although no collective name for the senses was given at that stage, Jütte (2005: 20) shows that the division of the sensorium into five senses was already established in the *Vedas*, ancient Indian religious texts dating from around 1000 BC. In these texts, the senses are simply mentioned separately. In addition to the five senses, however, a sixth sense, *ati-in-driya* (super-sense) was also identified. This sixth sense was referred to as the highest sense which activated the other senses.

⁸ In the seventeenth century, Galileo (qtd Wade 2011: 22-23) was of the opinion that the sensation of touch resides “[...] principally in the palms of the hand and in the fingertips, by whose means we sense the most minute differences of texture that are not easily distinguished by other parts of our bodies [...].” The upper surface of the tongue, according to Galileo, is even more sensitive than the skin (Wade 2011: 23). Galileo went on to associate the four senses of touch, taste, smell and hearing with the elements of earth, water, fire and air respectively. However, vision, he declared, being too enigmatic to comment on, should rather be “[...] pass[ed] [...] over in silence” (Wade 2011: 24). Galileo’s silence on vision most likely has much to do with his ability to examine the responses of the other senses to mechanical stimulation while, in the seventeenth century, little was known about the actual process of vision (Wade 2011: 24).

the most important sense, to which all others could be related (Ross 1931: 413b).

Despite the ancient scholars' fascination with the sense of touch, overall it has been suggested “[...] that classical Greece privileged sight over the other senses” (Jay 1993: 22).⁹ Evidence of the higher status given to sight by the Greeks is often drawn from two notable cultural characteristics, namely the Greek's visualisation of their gods in human form and the increasing idealisation and perfection of the human body – in particular the male nude – in art of the classical period.¹⁰

Perhaps it is more significant, however, to consider some ancient Greek philosophers' attitudes toward sight. *Theoria*, from which the word 'theory' is derived, means “to behold”, or “to look at attentively” (Jay 1993: 23), or to bear witness in Gadamer's terms (Scheibler 2000: vii).¹¹ Jonas (1954) explores the valorisation of sight in Greek philosophy and the implications of the status and significance accorded vision in providing the means for contemplation of an infinite object. Jonas (1954: 507) shows that ancient Greek philosophers mainly used visual metaphors to describe *theoria* which was considered to be “the noblest activity of the mind”. For example, Plato not only spoke about “the eye of the soul” and of the ‘light of reason’ (Jonas 1954: 507), but he also “[...] regarded vision as humanity's greatest gift” (Pallasmaa 2005: 15). Furthermore, Plato described the sense of sight as 'divine' (Jütte 2005: 34). Therefore, according to Jütte (2005: 36), “Plato's theory of sense perception must be considered in the context of the central concept of his philosophy, namely the 'idea' (*eidos*), which derives from the Greek word for 'to see'”.

⁹ William Ives, who argued that the Greeks were more tactile than visual, would be an example of a dissenting view on the matter (Jay 1993: 22).

¹⁰ Cf. Larissa Bonfante's (1989) investigation of the meanings attributed to nudity in ancient Greek custom and in particular the significance of the nude male statues that appeared in art from the seventh century B.C. onward.

¹¹ According to Gadamer, the ancient Greek meaning of *theoria* had to do with “[...] participation in the delegation sent to a festival for the sake of honouring the gods” (Scheibler 2000: vii).

Similarly, Aristotle begins the *Metaphysics* by linking “[...] the desire for knowledge inherent in the nature of men to the common delight in perception, most of all in vision” (Jonas 1954: 507). This leads Jonas (1954: 507) to conclude that sight was treated by the ancient Greek philosophers, or Aristotle at least, as “[...] the sense yielding the most knowledge and excelling in differentiation”. Among the conclusions drawn by Jonas (1954: 507-514) after close investigation of the reasons sight was regarded by ancient Greek philosophers as ‘noble’, has to do with its apparent unique ability to perceive simultaneity at a great speed. While hearing and touch are temporal and do not continue beyond the “event of sense-affection” (Jonas 1954: 598), and, in fact, require time for the experience of sensations to unfold, only sight is able to take in the co-existence of a present visual field which “may be at rest” (Jonas 1954: 507). Thus, Jonas (1954: 513) concludes that only sight “[...] provides the sensual basis on which the mind may conceive the idea of the eternal, that which never changes and is always present”. In other words, according to Jonas, there seems to have been a direct link between the physical eye and the mind even in ancient times. As Pallasmaa (2005: 15) notes, however, even in ancient Greek thought it was always the ‘mind’s eye’ that was considered able to access ethical universals.

In *Theaetetus*, Plato established a clear distinction between sense perception and the act of thinking by laying down the foundation of the concept of the senses as the organs of the soul. In this way, Plato separated “the physical capacity to perceive” from the “physiological-biological sense organ” (Jütte 2005: 33), thereby separating perception from sensation. Plato thus attributed “[...] the capacity to process diverse sense impressions”, or synthesis, to human reason or the soul, while Aristotle attributed this capacity to a higher sense (*sensus communis*) (Jütte 2005: 34).¹²

¹² Democritus had earlier made an important distinction between “[...] sense perception and another, superior form of knowledge” (Jütte 2005: 33) for he regarded the senses as deceitful and the source of an obscure form of knowledge in contrast to genuine knowledge. Democritus insisted that “[...] the soul or reason (*nous*) has to clarify and, if necessary, correct impressions conveyed by the senses, in order to gain knowledge of the finer or atomic structure of the external world” (Jütte 2005: 34). For Aristotle *koiné aesthésis* (common sense) operates

Fundamental to the Greek understanding of sensory perception is the contrast between the Platonic distrust and suspicion of the senses as the source of illusion and bondage and Aristotelian empiricism's great expectations regarding the senses as the only (and trustworthy) source of knowledge. The legacy of these two contrasting positions is still alive today and has coloured Western thought and practice. For Aristotle, what is perceived (*aistheton*) provides individual sensory material for the *nous* which, by a process of generalisation, generates universal concepts from this material. Within each sense organ (*aistheteria*) is located the ability to perceive (*aesthesia*). Jütte (2005: 38) maintains that Aristotle's concept of the operation of the senses fundamentally influenced Greek natural philosophy by enabling sensory knowledge to be understood as separate from other activities occurring in the soul. This is achieved through Aristotle's notion that perception is not derived from "[...] any direct contact between an object and a sense organ", but is rather accessed by means of "[...] the presence of a 'medium' as mediator" (Jütte 2005: 38) such as light in the case of sight. In *De Anima (On the soul)*, an important work dealing with the physiology of the senses, Aristotle argues that "[i]n each case the sense-organ is capable of receiving the sense object without its matter. That is why even when the sensible objects are gone the senses and imaginings continue to exist in the sense organs" (qtd Jütte 2005: 38).¹³

Thus far I have briefly sketched the ancient Greek division of the sensorium into five faculties. However, this five-part division is not the only way in which the human sensorium has been understood. Zeynep Çelik (2006: 159) points out that a sixth sense, which has to do with bodily movement, was generally studied and referred to as the "inner sense" and 'organic or visceral sensibility" even before it was formally named in the nineteenth century. It was only after two

between basic sensory perception and rational human thinking (*nous*); its function being to enable the different individual or separate senses to collectively perceive characteristics such as movement and size. However, in Aristotle's estimation, it is still separate from the individual or personal *nous* (with its conceptual generalising or classificatory universalising capacity) as well as the suprapersonal *nous* (with its activating impetus which drives human thinking and acting).

¹³ Aristotle's conceptual framework of form and matter – *hylomorphism* – is important here. For Aristotle, substance is made up of matter (which is individual) and form (which is universal), the latter giving rise to general concepts.

physiologists, Charles Bell (1774-1842) and François Magendie (1783-1855), working in England and France respectively, made an important discovery that “[...] those unclassifiable sensations that could not be traced accurately to one of the five known sense organs, but seemed to originate from the undifferentiated mass of the viscera” (Çelik 2006: 159) were named as *kinaesthesia*.

Working independently from each other, Bell and Magendie determined that the nerves which carry sensory impulses and those which carry motor impulses are attached to the spinal cord in two different places. This meant that “[...] if muscles were capable of receiving sensations as well as carrying out movements, they might have a sentience comparable to that of the eye or the ear” (Çelik 2006: 159). In other words, it became possible to consider that the ‘muscle sense’ has the capacity to perceive or feel things in the same way that the other five senses do.

3.3 The senses hierarchised

While the senses were thus constructed in Western culture as being overseen by human reason – *nous* for Democritus, the soul for Plato and *sensus communis* for Aristotle – they were, at the same time, hierarchised, with sight and hearing privileged while smell, taste and touch – often referred to as the ‘proximal’ (Diaconu 2006: 2, Jay 2011: 310, Marks 2011: 239) senses – were subordinated to these two apparently more important sensory faculties.¹⁴ Susan Stewart (2005: 61) maintains that Aristotle regarded seeing and hearing as the

¹⁴ Marks (2011: 240) and Jonathan Rée (2000: 57) note that Aristotle included smell amongst the so-called ‘noble’ senses. The others were, of course, sight and hearing. Mădălina Diaconu (2006: 1) notes that “[i]t has often been argued that touch, smell and taste cannot produce art because they deal with ephemeral stimuli and consume their objects”. She argues that such ideas are based on the assumed status of these senses as “secondary” or “lower” requiring “physical contact and emotional intimacy” with the things that stimulate them (Diaconu 2006: 1). Furthermore, Diaconu (2006: 2) maintains that the assumption that these senses cannot produce aesthetic experience rests on the notion that we are not able to “[...] adopt a critical and reflective attitude [...]” owing to the fact that “[...] we are not able to keep a distance from the subjective character of the experience”.

“higher philosophical senses” which give access to ‘sensibility’.¹⁵ Aristotle’s hierarchy positioned the senses in the following order from most to least important: vision – hearing – smell – taste – touch (Stewart 2005: 61).¹⁶ Since Aristotle’s fundamental formulation of the hierarchical division of the sensorium, vision and hearing, which do not require actual contact with the material world as do taste, touch and smell, have been linked to philosophical contemplation and abstraction thereby being accorded “supreme philosophical honours” (Jonas 1954: 507).

3.3.1 Sight: the ‘ideal’ distance sense

Jonas (1954: 517) explains why such ‘noble’ honours may have been bestowed upon sight by discussing the ways in which this sense came to be regarded as “[...] the ideal distance-sense”. In Jonas’ (1954: 518) somewhat reductive view, it is precisely because sight is not a proximal sense that it has been considered to have an advantage above the other senses and has thus been regarded as ideally positioned to provide a means – or one of the means, at least – by which to access theoretical knowledge. This may have much to do with his assumption that sight is the only sense for which distance is an advantage and not a disadvantage.¹⁷ Jonas (1954: 518) gives clarity to this assumption by maintaining that “[...] the best view is by no means the

¹⁵ Aristotle followed Plato in denigrating touch and taste. Réé (2000: 57) explains that for Aristotle, these senses “[...] beckon [...] us towards debauchery, drunkenness, gluttony and lechery”.

¹⁶ Presumably, Aristotle’s hierarchy of the senses has much to do with his notion that vision offers more universal form while touch, individual matter. This attitude toward the senses is encapsulated in his notion of *hylomorphism*.

¹⁷ Although scientists would no doubt point out the shortcomings of Jonas’ assumption, he maintains that, unlike sound and smell which become distorted as they travel over any distance, light travels further and does not distort in the same way. In other words, although distance is necessary for clarity of vision, Jonas finds this characteristic to work to vision’s advantage. Whilst all the other senses need to overcome distance in order to reach clarity, distance affords sight the opportunity to scan attentively. In Jonas’ (1954: 518) opinion, distance is therefore “[...] always realised as a positive and not a defective feature in the phenomenal presence of the object”.

closest view; to get the proper view we take the proper distance [...].¹⁸ Owing to the fact that the eye scans a scene at a distance, while both directing and moving the gaze (or more precisely, following Edward Casey (2007: xiii), the *glance*) from one object to another, the potentiality of the visual field awaiting the glance gives rise to the idea of infinity.¹⁹ Jonas (1954: 518) argues that “[...] in sight the object *faces me across* the intervening distance” thereby opening up that space for me to explore it. Through vision, the space between me and the object is opened as if “at my disposal”; I am invited to traverse the intervening space which, as Jonas (1954: 518) puts it, is “read[y] [...] to be penetrated”. According to Jonas (1954: 518), although the object of my vision is “the terminal of a dimension leading from me towards it”, it is not an end point as such. For, I always notice at the same time what is beyond it and around it, which Jonas (1954: 518) terms the “and so on”. The “and so on” which exists in the depths and folds of the visual field before me, argues Jonas (1954: 518), “[...] is the birthplace of the idea of *infinite*, to which no other sense could supply the experiential basis”. The space between me and what I see is therefore the perceptual “germ” (Jonas 1954: 519) of the conceptual idea of infinity. Vision, therefore points the mind toward “the enduring present”, the distinction between form and matter and essence and existence, and finally, the infinite, the cornerstone of philosophy (Jonas 1954: 519). Jonas (1954: 519) explains that “[s]ight includes at any given instant an *infinite* manifold at once, and its own qualitative conditions open the way into what lies beyond”. Moreover, he argues that “[k]nowledge at a distance is tantamount to foreknowledge” (Jonas 1954: 519) in that the viewer is able to foresee and prepare for what is ahead.

¹⁸ The usefulness of distance being available for clear vision, thereby giving access not only to clear but also abstract thinking, is also suggested in Sperber's installation as discussed in Chapter 2 in section 2.3. For, the optical device must be placed at an ideally located position, some distance away from the piece for it to render the muddled shapes clear.

¹⁹ This can also be linked geometrically with perspective or the perspectival gaze. Cf. Karsten Harries', *Infinity and perspective* (2001), quite different from Casey's individualising notion of the *glance*.

On the other hand, apparently if we do not allow or desire that which is distant to come nearer, it remains out of our reach and, in so doing, in Jonas' (1954: 519) estimation, "[...] perceptual distance many [*sic*] turn into mental distance, and the phenomenon of disinterested beholding may emerge", which is the "[...] essential ingredient in what we call 'objectivity' [...]"²⁰ Distance allows us to contemplate infinity, thereby enabling, in Jonas' (1954: 519) opinion, "the mind [to go] where vision pointed". In this way, and according to a specific line of thought on the metaphorical meanings accorded sight, vision is understood to have allowed for the production of rational and objective knowledge in the Western hierarchical distribution of the senses (Classen 2005: 70, Howes 2005: 6, Jonas 1954: 519, Joy & Sherry 2003: 261, Stewart 2005: 61).²¹ In this very limited account, I have tried to show some of the ways in which Western intellectual history has privileged the intellect over the senses except in the case of sight which, as Howes (2005: 6) puts it, has been presumed to be "[...] the most 'rational' of the senses" in contrast to the alleged "base" (Jones 2006: 2) senses of smell and taste.

3.3.2 The 'unruly' proximal senses

Classen (2005: 70) has pointed out that, even further than the association of vision with rational understanding, sight and hearing also came to be associated with connotations of order and domination, resulting in their cultural attachment to the realm of the masculine particularly in the fifteenth through seventeenth

²⁰ Cf. Daston & Galison, *Objectivity* (2010).

²¹ Cathryn Vasseleu (1998: 12) sheds further light on the philosophical understanding of the importance of distance as a requirement for clear vision. She explains that in Western philosophy vision has traditionally been regarded as a distancing sense by means of which objective theoretical knowledge may be produced. According to the traditional sensible/intelligible binarism of photology, argues Vasseleu (1998: 12), "[...] vision has the distance required for theoretical knowledge and gives the sense of objective certainty". In this conception, vision, separated from the sensory body, is constructed as producing a more accurate kind of foundation of knowledge than that attained through the sense of touch, which has been thought to be more subjective and therefore less reliable in its close proximity to the object (Vasseleu 1998: 12, Stewart 2005: 61 Diaconu 2006: [s.p.]).

centuries.²² In accordance with the scientific world view that emerged in Enlightenment thought, Classen (2005: 77) quotes the secretary of the Royal Society in England who proclaimed in 1664 that “[...] the old wives’ tales of the past needed to be replaced by [...] accurate observations and experiments [...] of a *masculine* philosophy” [my italics, JL].²³ Touch, taste and smell, on the other hand, were at the same time primarily regarded in European culture as the intimate, corporeal and ‘proximal’ senses, and came to be associated not only with the nurturing and domestic, but also the seductive, the irrational, and the deceptive – in other words, ‘naturally’, women, workers and non-Westerners, as Classen (2005: 71-77) maintains.²⁴ In the case of olfaction for instance, George Orwell (1937: 159) describes conventional nineteenth-century societal attitudes toward smell in the following way: “[t]he real secret of class distinctions in the West [can be summed up in] four frightful words [...]. *The lower classes smell!*”.²⁵

In further elucidating the association of women with the allegedly subordinate (and by extension, dangerous and seductive) senses, Classen (2005: 71) draws on the Biblical example of Samson whose strength vanished after being touched, and thereby contaminated, by the ‘seductive’ and ‘deceitful’ Delilah. In

²² See my earlier discussion (in Chapter 2, in sections 2.3 and 2.4) of the ways in which seeing was equated with ‘knowing’ in the Enlightenment pursuit of knowledge.

²³ One should not forget, however, that such statements are reductive and assume the homogeneity of cultural constructions in particular periods. Counter positions on the association of sight with rationality and masculinity with rationality are also to be found in the literature of this period. For example, in 1600 Lucrezia Marinelli, an Italian Humanist wrote that female sensory traits “[...] are more conducive to rational judgement” and that it is “[...] only when men cool down with age that they become reasonable” (Classen 2005: 79). Not only was the association of sight and rationality with masculinity challenged, but also the masculine domination of the rising field of science. Cf. seventeenth century writer, Margaret Cavendish’s challenge to the prevailing gendering of the sensory order at that time as discussed in Classen (1998).

²⁴ Classen (2005: 71) argues that one of the aims of the witch hunts of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, for instance, was to quell the transgressive power of feminine sensuality, as the feminine sensorium was regarded with suspicion and in need of control. In other words, although the so-called ‘lower’ feminine senses were considered to be inferior to the alleged ‘higher’ masculine senses, they nevertheless were thought to possess powers that “[...] emanated from their presumed primal, irrational nature” (Classen 2005: 71). Furthermore, it was believed that the “[...] rational masculine gaze [...]” could expose and subdue “[...] the dark secrets of feminine nature [...]” (Classen 2005: 77).

²⁵ Cf. Classen et al (eds) *Aroma: the cultural history of smell* (1994) as well as Howes, Synnott & Classen, *Anthropology of odor* (1990-94).

this narrative, maintains Classen (2005: 71), touch was shown to be “[...] the most dangerous of the feminine senses”. Similarly, in the witch hunts carried out in the fifteenth, sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, smell and taste, along with touch, were demonised and considered capable of satanic power (Classen 2005: 71-74).²⁶

Throughout Western history, philosophy, ideology, religion and social practice there is much evidence that the senses of smell, taste and touch (which require immediacy and direct contact with the world) are ranked lower than seeing and hearing (cf. Classen 2005, Coleman 2007, Diaconu 2006, Howes 2005).²⁷ Diaconu (2006: 2) corroborates this distinction between the proximal and distanced senses by arguing that “[b]ecause the secondary senses [taste, touch and smell] are doubly near by the physical contact and emotional intimacy involved, we are not able to keep a distance from the subjective character of the experience, in order to adopt a critical and reflective attitude [...].”

Although not a widespread theme in the Middle Ages the representation of the five senses in Christian art shows not only the visual representation of the hierarchy of the senses but also their social and religious significance as it was understood at that time.

²⁶ Cf. Kramer & Sprenger (1948), Lea (1957) and Maclean (1980) who investigate the construction of ideas surrounding witches and witchcraft in various treatises on witchcraft specifically in terms of the manner in which touch, taste and smell are appropriated for demonic purposes in the period Classen (2005) refers to.

²⁷ In *Civilisation and its discontents* (1961), Sigmund Freud wrote that human civilisation only began when hominids stopped sniffing each other and got up off the ground thereby also raising sight to a superior position (Jay 1993: 222). For Freud, a consequence of the civilisation of humans was that sexual and aggressive drives became repressed giving rise to the “[...] radical separation of ‘higher’ spiritual and mental faculties from the ‘lower’ functions of the body” (Jay 1993: 222 [my italics, JL]).

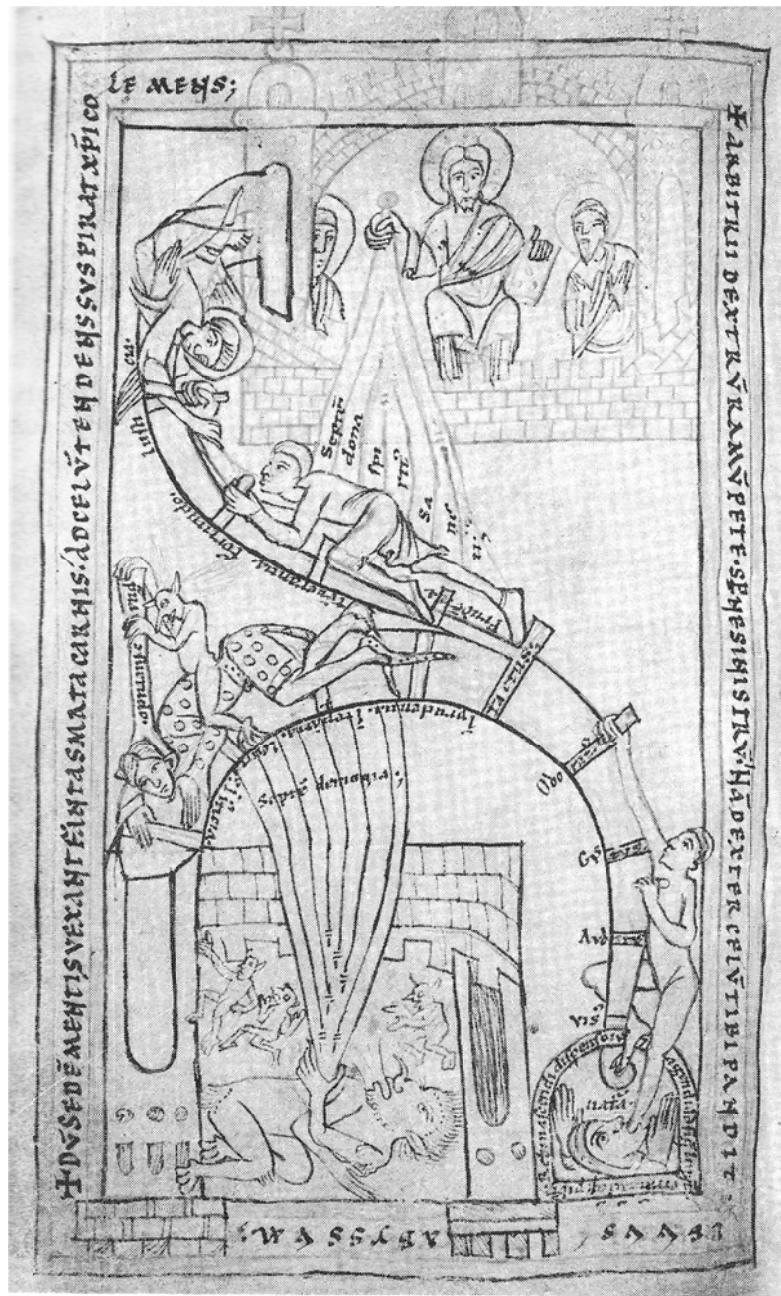


Figure 12: The senses on the way to heaven and hell; medieval manuscript from a monastery in Heilbronn (c. 12th century)

Produced in the second half of the twelfth century, the illustration in an illuminated Erlangen manuscript (Codex 8, fol. 130v) depicting the senses on the way to heaven and hell (Figure 12) shows a ladder that forks midway up the picture plane with the right-hand fork proceeding upward to heaven where Christ and St Peter await, while the left-hand fork curves downward to hell where the Devil and his followers lie in wait. The names of the five senses are

inscribed on the first five rungs of the ladder in the traditional order from lowest to highest: touch, smell, taste, hearing and vision (Jütte 2005: 78). The four virtues: justice, courage, prudence and moderation are inscribed on the rungs leading to heaven while their four corresponding vices pave the way to hell. Many religious allegories of the senses that appeared at that time, in Jütte's (2005: 80) opinion, reflect the Judeo-Christian theological interpretation of the senses as exceedingly treacherous with limited ability to grasp divine truth. Based on interpretations of Biblical passages, these images express "[...] something approaching downright hostility to the senses" (Jütte 2005: 80).²⁸

Furthermore, in the nineteenth century the natural historian Lorenz Oken postulated a racial hierarchy of the senses. According to this immensely reductive hierarchy, African people, for whom tactility has a significant function in social and cultural practice, are ranked in fifth place; in fourth place is the Australian "tongue-man"; third, the Native-American "nose-man"; second, the Asian "ear-man" and (unsurprisingly) in Oken's first place is the European "eye-man" (Howes 2005:9).²⁹

As has already been pointed out in Chapter 2 vision's alleged all-powerful authority was not always unproblematically accepted. It would be more precise to say that, especially in the realm of ancient philosophy and in later scientific experimentation since the seventeenth century, much attention has been given

²⁸ In *A history of the senses: from antiquity to cyberspace* Jütte (2005: 72-78) shows that interpretations of both the Old and the New Testament produced by early Jewish and Christian scholars of the texts, are rich in their condemnation of the senses, their association of the senses with evil and the instruction to keep the senses "[...] under a tight rein". Yet, at the same time, notes Jütte (2005: 80), there is evidence of an ambivalent attitude toward the senses, "[...] for along with the apparently dominant motif of the senses as a moral threat, we are reminded again and again that the sense organs were servants of God's sense of beauty and that, in using them, we are serving a divinely ordained purpose". The ambivalent position on the status of the senses adopted by medieval scholars would reappear again in both Catholicism and Protestantism where, "[...] the sinfulness of the senses [...]" (Jütte 2005: 81) was regularly pointed out. Thus, in various Christian regimes, the proper containment and control of the senses was regarded as "[...] essential to the entire order of state and society" (Jütte 2005: 90).

²⁹ Perhaps the eighteenth to nineteenth-century metaphorical metamorphosis of physiological taste into the cultural and aesthetic 'good taste' or 'tastefulness' also warrants attention. Cf. Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: a social critique of the judgement of taste* (1984). Unfortunately, for reasons of economy, I am not able to pursue this topic here.

to the troublesome relationship between vision and the other senses. In other words, despite the hierarchical organisation of the senses as it was discussed above, notions of the relationship between the senses as well as their assumed hierarchy of importance are, simultaneously, “complex and variable” (Johnson 2011: 62). Thus, in keeping with the main aim of this chapter, which is to analyse the ways in which the relationship between the senses has been understood, it is necessary to examine a seventeenth-century philosophical debate which complicated the distinction and organisation of the senses outlined in the above section.

3.4 Blindsight: Molyneux’s problem

In the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century a philosophical debate known as Molyneux’s question or -problem emerged which attempted to determine the nature of the relationship between touch and sight in the acquisition of empirical knowledge about the world. In a letter sent to Locke in 1688, the Irish philosopher, William Molyneux (1656-1698) wondered whether ideas regarding space and depth produced via the sense of touch are the same as ideas produced via the sense of sight. In other words, the fundamental issue concerned how a hypothetical blind man synthesises the information obtained through the various senses into ideas about the world. Locke (1694: II: ix, 8) formulated the problem in the following way:

Suppose a man born blind, and now adult, and taught by his touch to distinguish between a cube and a sphere of the same metal, and nighly of the same bigness, so as to tell, when he felt one and the other, which is the cube, which the sphere. Suppose then the cube and sphere placed on a table, and the blind man be made to see: *quaere*, whether *by his sight before he touched them*, he could now distinguish and tell which is the globe, which the cube?

The question of whether or not the manner in which space and depth are understood via the sense of touch matched the way it is understood through the sense of sight sparked much debate not only amongst seventeenth-century thinkers but also into the present day in the fields of philosophy, psychology, ophthalmology and neurophysiology (Degenaar & Lokhorst 2011). Initially a thought-experiment, involving a hypothetical blind man, seventeenth-century philosophers could not at the time imagine sight being restored in a person born blind. Not long after, however, in 1728 Molyneux's question became one of scientific experimentation when, according to Degenaar & Lokhorst (2011), William Cheselden published an account of what a congenitally blind boy saw after his cataracts were removed.³⁰ For empiricists such as Locke, George Berkeley (1685-1753) and Etienne Bonat de Condillac (1715-1780), the blind man whose sight was restored would not immediately be able to distinguish between the cube and the sphere. Rationalists who believed in the existence of innate geometrical concepts, on the other hand, argued that the man would be able to distinguish between the two (Degenaar & Lokhorst 2011; Çelik 2006: 160). At the time, therefore, no consensus on the subject could be reached.

Prior to this debate, as Crary (1990: 59) points out, in the early part of the seventeenth century vision had already been compared to the sense of touch, with their relationship often being demonstrated via blindness. One of the most famous of such analogies is found in Descartes' *Optics* (1637) whose central metaphor is, as in the later examples, a hypothetical blind man negotiating his way through space by means of a stick held in each hand (Figure 13).

³⁰ In contrast to Degenaar & Lokhorst, however, Moshe Barash (2001: 150) notes that this hypothetical speculation and theoretical problem only became a scientific one in 1749, in other words two decades later, when the French scientist Reaumur surgically removed cataracts from the eyes of a girl born blind thereby restoring her sight.



Figure 13: René Descartes, Illustration from 1724 edition of *Optics*.

The analogy proved to Descartes that vision is a physiological and mechanical process in the spatial domain of *res extensa*, and also fundamentally tactile. Wade (2011: 25) suggests that Descartes' analogy of the blind man feeling his way in a space demonstrates the philosopher's contention that, not only are all stimuli mechanical, but also that “[...] all perception [can be] traced back to movement” leading him to conclude that “[...] contact and movement [...] are the touchstone of all the senses” (Wade 2011: 25).³¹ This example demonstrates

³¹ Contact and movement are key concepts of the mechanised universe that appeared in the seventeenth century in the work of scientific Rationalists like Galileo, Newton, Descartes and Gottfried Leibniz. Cf. Eduard Dijksterhuis, *The mechanization of the world picture* (1961).

once again that, although Descartes has been described as a “quintessentially visual philosopher” (Jay 1993: 69), like Plato, whose position on sight has also already been discussed, Descartes was indeed sceptical of the ‘nobility’ of vision, asserting that touch is “[...] more certain and less vulnerable to error than vision” (Pallasmaa 2005: 19).³²

3.4.1 Denis Diderot: vision and touch

In the same way, Denis Diderot’s (1713-1784) later account of vision relied on blindness in order to show his deep ambivalence surrounding the nature and status of sight as a reliable producer of accurate knowledge. Instead, Diderot was sceptical of any account of perception that singled out any one of the senses from the others. In his *Lettre sur les aveugles à l’usage de ceux qui voyent*, (*Letter on the blind for the use of those who see*) (1749), his primary example is not a hypothetical blind man but a real blind mathematician, Nicholas Saunderson, whom he uses to put forward his notion of a practicalist tactile geometry.³³

According to Diderot, who adopted the position of the British empiricists, both vision and touch possess the capacity for accessing universally valid ideas or truths (Crary 1990: 59). In the essay, Diderot is concerned to show that the sense of sight does not operate on its own in the acquisition of knowledge. By means of a series of pins placed on grids built into wooden boards, Saunderson was able to perceive several figures and their relation to each other owing to their location on the grid. According to Crary (1990: 60), the anecdote

³² Cf. Georgina Kleege’s (2005) insightful critique of the ways in which the experiences of blind people have fascinated sighted philosophers leading Descartes, amongst others, to compare the mechanics of sight to the cane used by a blind person without any knowledge of how a blind person actually negotiates space, or rather the objects in it, with a stick. See my more detailed reference to this topic in Chapter 7, section 7.7.

³³ The eighteenth-century Enlightenment was a practicalist form of Rationalism, responding to the seventeenth-century scientific Rationalism. It was directed at the practical application and education of abstract scientific concepts, hence the project of the *Encyclopédie* to make this available for everyday life. At this stage, the natural light of reason took the form of experience and practice.

demonstrates Diderot's contention that "[t]he certainty of knowledge did not depend solely on the eye but on a more general relation of a unified human sensorium to a delimited space of order on which positions could be known and compared". Although Diderot understood the senses to be unique and able to provide a person with different kinds of information, through their "reciprocal assistance" (Crary 1990: 60), Diderot also understood that the senses all combine to produce knowledge.

Moshe Barasch (2001: 156) notes that in the context of the empiricist philosophy of the Enlightenment, Diderot's thoughts on the Molyneux problem are undoubtedly complex.³⁴ For, Diderot held that a blind person whose sight was restored through cataract surgery would be able to "[...] immediately recognise the images of a cube and sphere as the objects he formerly knew from tactile experience" (Barasch 2001: 151). According to an empiricist view, which guided Diderot's thinking, "[n]othing is in the mind that was not before in the senses [...]" (Barasch 2001: 151). In other words, thought in the mind originates from sensory experience. The mind therefore only has the evidence to work with that is "conveyed to it by the senses" (Barasch 2001: 151). In this respect then Diderot's findings stand in opposition to empiricist thinking.

Diderot, however, approached the Molyneux problem in a slightly different manner from that applied by other *philosophes* of his time. Whereas some eighteenth-century philosophers wanted to understand what would happen when a blind person could see (specifically in terms of how that person would grasp the now visible world), Diderot wanted to grasp "[...] the world and the experience of the blind as blind" (Barasch 2001: 151). In other words, Diderot asks the following question: "What can the blind, in the state of full blindness, know of the world surrounding them, and how do they acquire this knowledge?" (Barasch 2001: 151). Furthermore, Diderot wanted to understand the philosophical implications of a blind person's particular knowledge of the world.

³⁴ On this matter, cf. Andrew Curran's 'Diderot's revisionism: Enlightenment and blindness in the "Lettres sur les aveugles"' (2000).

Thus, Diderot asked whether or not a blind person can construct in his/her mind not only the objects in the visible world but also the spaces between them, or their interrelations – *rapports*. According to Barasch (2001: 151), this was an important and insightful question, since “[t]he perception of relationships is the foundation of aesthetics”. As the key concept not only in his philosophy but also in his notion of aesthetic experience, according to Diderot, ‘to know’ is to discover and experience *rapport*. Diderot was thus also asking “[...] whether the blind can grasp and judge beauty and particularly symmetry (Barasch 2001: 151). This question extends and complicates the Molyneux problem, owing to the fact that symmetry concerns a relationship between objects and shapes and is not a tangible object itself. This means that symmetry can surely only be grasped by the eye which is able to perceive simultaneously. Therefore, the blind, who cannot perceive objects and shapes simultaneously by means of touch, cannot grasp symmetry.

In the *Lettre*, Diderot (qtd Barasch 2001: 152), however, maintains that “[o]ur blind man judges symmetries quite well”. This ability arises, according to Diderot, via the sense of touch which is “[...] capable of providing the simultaneous experience of different objects, and mainly of different parts of a whole” (Barasch 2001: 152). In particular, the fingertips, which are highly sensitive in a person born blind, compared with that of a sighted person, afford a blind person this ability. Thus, Diderot (qtd Barasch 2001: 152) believes that the man born blind “[...] places his soul in his fingertips”.

One of the main ideas in the *Lettre* is that the sense of touch compensates for the absence of sight in a blind person. Diderot (qtd Barasch 2001: 153) also maintains that his blind subject, when asked if he would like to be able to see, answers that “[w]ere it not for the curiosity that informs me [...] I would nothing like so much as having long arms”. “The value of sight [...]” argues Barasch (2001: 153), “[...] is that you perceive things placed at a distance.” Consequently if a blind person were to “[...] have arms long enough, their extended ability of touching would be an equivalent of sight” (Barasch 2001: 153).

According to Diderot, the highly developed sense of touch in blind people is an advantage and not a limitation in that this sense reveals that which vision cannot such as the texture, firmness, or softness of an object. Their dependence on the sense of touch enriches a blind person's experience rather than limiting it. Furthermore, to return to the Molyneux question, according to Diderot, tactile experience can be simultaneous and continuous in the same way that sight is. Contrary to centuries of belief in the assumption that the sensation of space can only be perceived via visual experience, Diderot claims that “[...] tactile experience can produce the concept of space” (Barasch 2001: 153). This is accomplished via the movement of the blind person's body and hands in different places, which leads to the creation of both an “[...] unbroken sensation of a body, and the ‘sense of direction’” (Barasch 2001: 153). In other words, Diderot comes to the conclusion that a blind person can orientate her/himself in space by means of the sense of touch. Based on these assumptions, Diderot builds a geometry for the blind, in which he deduces that “[...] something that is not a body or an object does have a structure” (Barasch 2001:153). Diderot thus suggests that “[...] the structure of nonmaterial extension [...] can be experienced by means of touch” (Barasch 2001: 153). In other words, Diderot is translating the abstract geometrical concept of space (part of scientific Rationalism's so-called *mathesis universalis* or mathematical order of nature) into a typically practicalist and experiential concept of the Enlightenment.

Diderot's position on sight and blindness can now be compared with Rilke's statement, used at the beginning of Chapter 2. Whereas Rilke considered the loss of sight to deprive a person of any happiness, Diderot does not see blindness as a drawback to gaining knowledge of the world. Overall, Diderot's attitude toward the blind was that they are not at a disadvantage to the sighted at all. What a blind person is not able to perceive via sight (such as colour) is countered, or compensated for, by developing, through autodidactic experience, an extreme sensitivity to texture which a sighted person does not have. Furthermore, according to Diderot, precisely because a blind person also

possesses mental images based on his or her previous experiences the blind person whose sight is restored will be able to connect the sphere and the cube, now experienced visually, with those same objects previously perceived through the fingertips.³⁵

Despite the fact that Diderot acknowledged the integrated nature of sensory perception, like Descartes before him Diderot always regarded the senses to be subordinate to the superior mind. For Diderot, knowledge gained through the senses is always subject to inspection by the rational mind which ultimately “overrid[es] [...] the immediate subjective evidence of the body” (Crary 1990: 60). In other words, even for Diderot, the senses, although now given some recognition, are nonetheless regarded as mere assistants of the mind which supervises perception.

3.5 I see, I see, I see: vision autonomised

Owing to the explosion of physiological research in the nineteenth century, a new understanding of vision and a new account of subjectivity was produced that replaced the model of vision and subjectivity defined in terms of the *camera obscura* model and ‘Cartesian perspectivalism’ as they have been discussed in Chapter 2. It is specifically the 1820s and 1830s, according to Crary (1988: 31), which marked a turning point in “[...] the way in which an observer is described, figured, and posited in science, philosophy, and in the new techniques and practices of vision”. As has already been argued, the *camera obscura* and the ‘Cartesian perspectivalist’ conception of the subject in her/his relation to the world assumed the existence of an autonomous rationalist observer who could access the pre-given objective truth of the world through the mind (Crary 1988: 33). But this conception of the observer was replaced by a radical notion of

³⁵ Referring to Diderot’s findings as “the disenchantment of blindness”, Barasch (2001: 157) maintains that Diderot’s conclusion that the mind of the blind works in the same way as the mind of the sighted was a defining moment in the history of the manner in which blindness had thus far been understood in European culture.

autonomous vision based on empirical evidence of the subjective role of the perceiver in the process of seeing. In short, as vision was more and more closely observed in the early nineteenth century, previous notions of vision and subjectivity were radically reconceptualised.

3.5.1 Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

In his book *Techniques of the observer*, Crary argues that by the 1840s, a new type of observer had been formed. The *camera obscura* paradigm of vision was replaced with “striking [...] suddenness and thoroughness” (Crary 1988: 33) by new discourses and practices of vision when the human body was permitted to enter onto the scene in the early nineteenth century. As a result, various accounts of a subjective observer emerged both in the “aftermath” of Kant’s “subject-centered epistemology”³⁶ (Crary 1990: 70) as well as the publication of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s (1749-1832) *Theory of colours* in 1810. Goethe showed that vision is corporeal, that it takes place in the body of an observer and that the body itself produces optical experience.³⁷ Crary (1990: 69) points out that, owing to Goethe’s experimentations on vision, two models of subjective vision that had previously been irreconcilable could thereafter increasingly be regarded as inseparable: the physiological visual system, on the one hand, and an observer understood to be an “[...] active, autonomous producer of his or her own visual experience” on the other.

Goethe’s research in effect overturned the eighteenth-century conception of the spectator, defined by the operation of the *camera obscura*, as one who is both

³⁶ In *The critique of pure reason* (1952 [1781 or 1787]: 24-25) Kant developed a new conception of the subject arguing that “[...] our representation of things, as they are given, does not conform to these things as they are in themselves, but that these objects as appearances, conform to our mode of representation”. In other words, for Kant, the categories in the theoretical and practical reason as well as judgement power (his three *Critiques*) are universal.

³⁷ Cf. Goethe’s (1970 [1840]) *Theory of colours*, in which he demonstrates the way in which entoptic images are produced on the retina when a person first looks intently at a bright light shining through a round hole (in the *camera obscura*) and then covers that hole and stares at a black wall. The resulting effect of circles of ever-changing colour – since for Goethe colour is the primary object of vision – proves that vision “belongs to the eye” (Goethe 1970 [1840]: 21).

separated from the exterior world and a passive observer. As Crary (1990: 70-71) puts it, for Goethe “[...] vision is always an irreducible complex of elements belonging to the observer’s body and of data from an exterior world”. Furthermore, for Goethe the eye is not a neutral device in the apparatus of vision as Descartes had earlier concluded. Instead, “[...] both the viewer’s sensory organs and their activity now are inextricably mixed with whatever object they behold” (Crary 1990: 72). In this way, the previous construction of vision as giving rise to clear perceptions in the mind is replaced by an account of its multifarious and temporal nature always mediated by the active body of the perceiving subject and not by the mind.³⁸ Following Goethe’s research on entoptic images, the observing subject could no longer be considered the passive receiver of sensations or impressions, as constructed earlier by Locke, but was instead regarded as “both the site and producer of sensations” (Crary 1990: 75).

Crary (1988: 35) points out three important effects of research into the involvement of the subjective body in vision. Firstly, the notion that the body is unreliable and frail was reinterpreted with an emphasis on the positive contribution of a dynamic and active body in vision. Secondly, the fact that the body was increasingly recognised as an active producer of vision “collapse[d]” (Crary 1988: 35) the paradigm of an observer separated from the exterior world which thereby undermined a bipolar relationship between observer and object of vision. Thirdly, notes Crary (1988: 35) “[s]ubjective vision is found to be distinctly temporal, an unfolding of processes within the body, thus undoing notions of a direct correspondence between perception and object”. These new directions in understanding vision effectively produced a model of autonomous vision (Crary 1988: 35).

³⁸ This active body would, throughout the course of the nineteenth century, be increasingly scrutinised, regulated and disciplined through scopic regimes (Crary 1990: 73). Crary maintains that the explosion of physiological research in the nineteenth century which was aimed at mapping, measuring and mastering the body, resulted in the transcendent being mapped onto the empirical. Knowledge about the body, and in particular about the visual system, led to “the discovery that knowledge was conditioned by the physical and anatomical functioning of the body” (Crary 1990: 79).

Throughout Europe in the 1820s and 1830s, physiologists scrutinised the nature of afterimages. For instance, Joseph Plateau calculated the duration of the afterimage, or as it was termed then, the ‘persistence of vision’. The new science of physiology that developed in the nineteenth century strove to uncover precisely how the visual system worked, how long it took before it became tired or irritated, how and why and for what length of time the pupil contracted or dilated. Just as the body was “mapped, explored and mastered” (Crary 1988: 35), so too the eye was measured, surveyed and reduced to statistical data. In addition, the parameters of what was considered to be ‘normal’ as opposed to ‘pathological’ vision were determined.³⁹

3.5.2 Johannes Müller

The quantitative mapping and measurement of the eye in the nineteenth century enabled the production of statistical information about vision. At the same time, the entire human body was progressively divided up and separated according to its specific systems and functions, in similar fashion to that displayed in Cattrell’s abstraction of the functioning of the senses. It was at this time that the brain and nerve functions, for example, were localised and a distinction was made between sensory nerves and motor nerves (Crary 1988: 38). By 1826 this research had determined that there were five distinct nerve types which correspond with the five senses. In particular, research produced by Johannes Müller (1801-1858), a German physiologist, was groundbreaking in shaping a fundamentally different conception of the “classical observer” (Crary 1988: 38).⁴⁰

³⁹ Three prominent researchers of vision at that time went blind or suffered permanent damage to their vision as a result of staring repeatedly and for long periods at the sun. The inventor of the kaleidoscope and stereoscope, David Brewster; one of the founders of modern quantitative psychology, Gustav Fechner; as well as Joseph Plateau, who studied the persistence of vision all went blind for the purposes of science (Crary 1988: 34).

⁴⁰ Especially influential was his major work, *Handbuch der Physiologie des Menschen*, Bd 1 & 2 (1837-1840)

Described by Stanley Finger & Nicholas Wade (2002: 136) as “[...] arguably the most important Western physiologist of the first half of the nineteenth century”, Müller’s importance includes his discovery that the nerves of the five senses were physiologically distinct meaning that when each different nerve is stimulated by the same cause (such as electricity for example) the resulting sensations are different in each case. In other words, if the optic nerve is stimulated by an electrical current, the experience of light is produced, while an electrical current applied to the skin produces the sensation of touch. Conversely, different stimuli applied to the same sensory nerve would produce the same sensation. Müller’s “law of specific nerve energies” (Finger & Wade 2002: 141) showed the arbitrariness of the relationship “between stimulus and sensation” (Crary 1988: 39). Most importantly, argues Crary (1988: 39), this research gave rise to a notion of “[...] a body with innate capacity, one might even say a transcendental faculty, to *misperceive*, of an eye that renders differences equivalent”.

Most of Müller’s research examined the sense of sight; his conclusion being that there is no necessary connection between an observer’s experience of light and actual light. Rather the experience of light can be produced by a number of different causes:

The sensations of light and colour are produced wherever parts of the retina are excited 1) by mechanical influences, such as pressure, a blow or concussion 2) by electricity 3) by chemical agents, such as narcotics, digitalis 4) by the stimulus of the blood in a state of congestion (qtd Crary 1988: 39).

This means that Müller determined that there is no causal link – what Crary (1988: 40) refers to as “referentiality” – between a supposedly real world and sensation. In other words, Müller proved that irrespective of what was used to stimulate the nerve – auditory, optic, or otherwise – a person will only experience sensations specific to the respective nerve (Finger & Wade 2002: 141).

Crary (1988: 40) suggests that this information produced two results. On the one hand, it resulted in a new epistemological scepticism about the reliability of the senses. On the other, it gave rise to a “[...] reorganization of perception and its objects” (Crary 1988: 40). In other words, Müller’s findings eradicated the notion of a stable, unified observer, a distinction between perception and object, and inside and outside which had all been central tenets of ‘Cartesian perspectivalism’ as Jay (1988a) understands it. Instead, in place of the *camera obscura* model of vision and subjectivity, the new understanding of the relation between stimulus and sensation produced a new understanding of the subject. Owing to the radical “reconfiguration of vision”, from the nineteenth century onward, the observer was understood to be “mobile”, “usable” and “productive” (Crary 1988: 42). Furthermore, “[t]he body which had been a neutral or invisible term in vision now was the thickness from which knowledge of vision was derived” (Crary 1988: 43).

3.5.3 Hermann von Helmholtz

A student of Müller, Hermann von Helmholtz (1821-1894) contributed significantly to theories of sensation, perception and the field of optics.⁴¹ In 1851 Helmholtz invented the ophthalmoscope which, not only enabled scientists to examine the inside of the human eye, but also contributed to his own understanding of the physiology of perception and was of interest to artists such as the Impressionists, in particular Auguste Monet and Georges Seurat.⁴² The results of Helmholtz’s investigations culminated in the publication of *Handbuch der physiologischen Optik* (*Handbook of physiological optics*) in 1867.

⁴¹ Three areas in which Helmholtz made significant contributions were vitalism, the nerve cell and the conduction of the nerve impulse (Finger & Wade 2002: 137).

⁴² The Impressionists, as it is well known, pursued a scientific approach in their art attempting to reproduce the experience of light and colour as it is imprinted on the retina. Seemingly unfinished, with patches of paint and sketchy brushstrokes still visible, the viewing public initially rejected their paintings as fragmentary and incomplete. As Gombrich (1982: 27) maintains “[...] the public had to learn to see [...]” Impressionist paintings. In her analysis of Sperber’s cotton-reel installations, Kuschner (2005) likens Sperber’s investigations into vision to the work produced by the Impressionists.

Jessica Riskin (2011: 367) argues that Helmholtz effectively demoted the eye as the superior organ in the body, pointing to its weaknesses and blind spots. For example, he realised that accurate vision is limited to only a very small part of the visual field. In the fovea or pit of the retina, where the cones are tightly packed, “[...] the image we receive by the eye is like a picture, minutely and elaborately finished in the centre, but only roughly sketched in at the borders” (Helmholtz 1995 [1868]: 135). He also discovered that this area of the retina is less sensitive to weak light than other parts, demonstrated by the fact that faint stars can often be detected only if one does not look at them directly. Moreover, Helmholtz found that the astigmatisms of varying degrees are caused by the fact that the cornea is not a perfectly symmetrical curve. Helmholtz (1995 [1868]: 147) concluded that “[n]ow it is not too much to say that if an optician wanted to sell me an instrument which had all these defects, I should think myself quite justified in blaming his carelessness in the strongest terms, and giving him back his instrument”. In short, Helmholtz’s research contributed to the production of new epistemological understandings of the process of vision which firmly cemented its autonomy.⁴³

3.6 The plasticity of perception

With the ancient Greeks and later Descartes having established the concept of sight as ‘the noblest of the senses’ (Van Heuckelom 2010: 57), combined with the invention of linear perspective in painting, the invention of optical devices to enhance visual ability and the dominance of vision in obtaining objective knowledge based on scientific evidence since the seventeenth century, I have thus far tried to show that the assumption that Western societies acquired “[...] a dominantly ocular understanding of the world [...]” (Coleman 2007: 4) is far more complex than meets the eye. Thus, while Coleman (2007: 6) maintains

⁴³ For Helmholtz, argues Riskin (2011: 368), “we see by thinking”. It is because the mind is able to “[...] overcome every impediment – an inverted retinal image, aberrations, blind spots, entoptic objects, poor peripheral vision [...]” that we are able to “[...] form a smooth picture of the world [...]” (Riskin 2011: 368).

that “[...] sight has been raised to a dominant cultural position as mediator of psychological experience” it is, rather, the mind that has been raised to this position. And, in contemplating the world, this supposedly objective gazing subject (whose mind reigns supreme) was regarded as ideally outside and detached from what it sees. This ‘Cartesian’ subject, who is presumed to be able to “leave the physical body” (Coleman 2007: 5) behind, is putatively able to rationally, logically and objectively inspect and observe the world from an “uncontaminated” viewpoint, as conceptually alluded to in Sperber’s cotton reel installations analysed in Chapter 2.

What was not acknowledged in this earlier system is the embodiment of the subject – the corporeality of the one who gazes – as was recognised by the physiologists conducting research in the early nineteenth century. Far from being able to transcend the physical body, a spectator’s perception of the world was demonstrated to be both from inside the body and inside the world rendering objectivity (understood as a separate mind transforming and organising the supposedly irrational and chaotic experiences of the sensing body into rational thought) a redundant premise. In the following sections I discuss the so-called ‘modernity thesis’ as well as evidence gained from the neurosciences in order to uncover the ways in which the notion of subjective vision that was reached in the medical sciences has manifested in and intersected with theoretical work in visual culture studies.

3.6.1 The modernity thesis

From the perspective of cultural relativism, the role of experience (that is, both social and cultural experience) in shaping how we see and understand what we see is not new to art history. In 1972, the art historian Michael Baxandall – referring to a ‘period eye’ specific to fifteenth century Renaissance Italy – had already pointed out that context and cultural experience shape the reception

and interpretation of art.⁴⁴ The extent to which such ‘shaping’ takes place at a physiological level, however, has been a topic of much debate amongst art historians, film scholars and aestheticians in recent years. I am referring in particular to a debate in *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* (2001) between Danto, Carroll, Davis and others, surrounding the question of the im/penetrability or in/flexibility of perception.

The so-called ‘modernity theorists’ are perhaps best exemplified by Marx Wartofsky (1984: 865) who contends that “[...] human vision itself [is] a cultural artifact shaped by our own historical change in practices (in this case of pictorial representation)”. “Modes of our visual cognition [...]” writes Wartofsky (1984: 864) “[...] change with changes in the modes of our pictorial representation”. Human vision “[...] has a history which goes beyond the biological evolution of the hominid visual system and is part of that activity of self-creation and self-transformation which we call cultural evolution” (Wartofsky 1984: 865). In other words, according to Wartofsky, and others, human vision is both transforming and transformable, and not only in the slow evolutionary sense.

One could quite easily regard many theorists of visual culture, for whom visuality is culturally specific, as modernity theorists. For example, as was pointed out in Chapter 2, according to numerous scholars of visual culture, visuality refers to the complex interaction between sighted individuals and what they see. Foster’s (1988: ix) definition of visuality is notable in this respect, arguing that visuality includes the social and historical aspect of vision as well as the physical body and the psyche. In other words, Foster appears, in my view at least, to support the idea that vision itself has a history. But what seems to be of relevance here are the various ways in which, and the varying degrees to which, the plasticity of perception based on social and historical factors is understood. I attempt to shed some light on these various perceptions below.

⁴⁴ Cf. Baxandall’s *Painting and experience in fifteenth century Italy: a primer in the social history of pictorial style*, in which he argues that vision is socially constructed within a particular period and place.

Against Wartofsky and the modernity theorists, Danto (2001: 9) concludes that “[t]he eye is not historical [...] but we are” using the way in which people are able to recognise real objects in the world when they are represented in pictures to demonstrate what he means. According to Danto, perception is a matter of hard-wiring, which means that the biological or structural process of seeing is universal to all human beings irrespective of their cultural context. Thus, for Danto (2001: 1):

[t]he thesis that the eye itself is as historical as human knowledge itself – that there are changes in visual perception indexed to and possibly reflective of historical changes, and that there is a history of seeing entirely analogous to changes in artistic production – attributes, in my view, a far greater plasticity to our optical system than the facts of perception seem to me to allow.

Dividing the penetrability (or plasticity or flexibility) of perception thesis – also referred to as the ‘modernity thesis’ – across two poles, Danto (2001) argues that the question could be understood in both a ‘weak’ and a ‘hard’ sense. In its weak sense the assumption that perception can change is easily acceptable. An example of changes to the ways in which people see would be that a painting might cause one to notice the world differently. To illustrate the weak sense of perceptual malleability, Danto refers to the case of Swann, in Proust’s novel, *Swann’s way* (1913), who falls in love with Odette de Crecy only after realising that she resembles a figure in one of Botticelli’s paintings.

In its stronger sense, according to Danto (2001: 1), the modernity thesis claims that perception changes at the level of ophthalmology, or physiology, so that a person sees the world differently, “[...] or even, in the strongest version of the thesis, see[s] different worlds”. This is different to understanding the specific symbolic meanings that may be attached to different pictures which, Danto argues, although they undeniably have a historical and contextual dimension, does not amount to anything historically interesting regarding visual perception. Learning the meanings of particular images in specific contexts “[...]" has

[no]thing to do with the way the eye works, nor does it entail that the eye is in any sense historical" (Danto 2001: 3). Thus, in Danto's view, regardless of the representational traditions of a group, or a culture, and whether or not such representations are figurative, realistic, symbolic or otherwise, at a bioperceptual level, there can be no fundamental change to the human visual system.

In Carroll's (2001: 12) view, the modernity thesis is an attempt to distinguish modernity as a specific epoch marked by a new kind of perceptual ability or "bioperceptual processes" (Davis 2001: 30) with Walter Benjamin's classic essay *The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction* (1935) cited as "the touchstone" for this position. In that essay Benjamin (1970 [1935]: 224) claimed that:

During long periods of history, the mode of human sense perception changes with humanity's entire existence. The manner in which human sense perception is organized, the medium in which it is accomplished, is determined not only by nature but by historical circumstances as well. The fifth century, with its great shifts of population, saw the birth of the late Roman art industry and the Vienna Genesis, and there developed not only an art different from antiquity but also a *new type of perception* [my italics, JL].

Benjamin (1970 [1935]: 224) concluded that paragraph by suggesting that the decay of the aura in modernity is evidence of changes in "[...] the medium of contemporary perception [...]" and that there were specific and identifiable social causes for this change. The social causes of such change, in Benjamin's (1970 [1935]: 224) view, included a new urge for closeness to images as opposed to the 'aesthetic distance' – not to be misunderstood as a literal distance – which was part of viewing traditional ("authentic") art. "Every day [...]" argued Benjamin (1970 [1935]: 225), "[...] the urge grows stronger to get hold of an object at very close range by way of its likeness, its reproduction". This point is exemplified not only by the desire to reproduce and thereby "overcom[e] the uniqueness of

everyday reality" (Benjamin 1970 [1935]: 225) but also by the emergence of photographs and filmic close-ups of small gestures, which penetrate deeply into reality, thereby showing/exposing and rendering small nuances in everyday life noticeable.

Based on Benjamin's writings, Crary (1990: 19, 20) – a supporter of the modernity thesis – has described the "heterogeneous texture" of the social and cultural context within which the modern observer was constructed.⁴⁵ Benjamin's "ambulatory observer", argues Crary (1990: 19, 20), was produced by:

a convergence of new urban spaces, technologies, and new economic and symbolic functions of images and products – forms of artificial lighting, new use of mirrors, glass and steel architecture, railroads, museums, gardens, photography, fashion, crowds. Perception for Benjamin was acutely temporal and kinetic; he makes clear how modernity subverts even the possibility of a contemplative beholder. There is never a pure access to a single object; vision is always multiple, adjacent to and overlapping with other objects, desires, and vectors.

In other words, according to this view, modern observers' perceptual experience in the new world of shifting sights and spectacles – specifically in the rapidly expanding cities of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries – breaks with the experience of perceivers in previous epochs. The new type of attention required of modern ambulatory observers is presupposed to be of the kind that can cope with the constantly mobile and fast-paced world surrounding them.

It is apparent that at the heart of the matter on the variability or invariability of perceptual experience is a deep indecision as to what 'perception' actually refers to. For Danto there appears to be a 'weak' and a 'strong' version of the matter, as described above, a version with which Carroll (2001: 13) appears to

⁴⁵ Cf. Crary's *Suspensions of perception: attention, spectacle, and modern culture* (1999).

concur when he distinguishes between *perceptions* and the *faculty of perception*. While both theorists find the variability of the former “not a very interesting claim” (Carroll 2001: 13) they are both sceptical of the possibility of the variability of the latter, although Carroll points out that at the level of evolution a change in perceptual ability is not entirely “inadmissible” (Carroll 2001: 13).⁴⁶

For Crary, however, there seems to be no need for such distinctions. According to Crary (1996: 262), the import of the modernity thesis is that it contradicts:

[...] a persistent, and most often unexamined, Kantian prejudice that perceptual and cognitive capacities are ahistorical; that is, they are unchanging and permanent, and most significantly independent of an external social/technological milieu that is in constant flux.

In other words, Crary believes that perceptual change is possible at some deep structural level – at the level of the programming of the hardwiring – as opposed to the level of how people feel or think about or understand what they saw. This means that to some extent the notion of a disembodied mind that already possesses the innate potential to perceive and think is undermined by the modernity thesis. In these terms, vision is most certainly historical and therefore needs to be examined historically.

For the modernity theorists, one of the ways in which a modern person’s faculty of perception is believed to have changed is at the level of attention (Benjamin 1970 [1935], Crary 1990 & 1999). For the city dweller would have to be able to shift attention quickly owing to the fast-paced and stimulating nature of city-life – bustling crowds, fast-moving cars, buses and trains, shop windows, billboards and so forth. Carroll (2001: 14), however, points out that this is hardly a reliable assumption, since people have always had to possess such a capacity. For

⁴⁶ The modernity thesis is not formulated on evolutionary grounds, however, but on the theory that a specific economic, social and cultural world fundamentally changed and changes how people see.

example, he notes that prehistoric people would have had a similar ability in order to quickly scan an area and always be on the alert for predators or prey. Instead, Carroll suggests that it is a matter of people ‘noticing’ things differently, – in the sense of awareness, alertness and application – rather than actually seeing differently. In opposition to the modernity thesis, Carroll (2001: 16) wants to know why “[...] art historians and film historians as well as others in the humanities, feel so compelled to speak as though perception were utterly plastic?” For Carroll, this thesis would require scientific proof in order to move beyond the plane of mere speculation. Put differently, what are the implications of the plasticity of perception for the way in which the observer of art or images in general is understood?

In my view, Danto’s (2001: 9) contention that “[t]he eye is not historical [...] but we are” is highly problematic.⁴⁷ For, if one were to agree with Danto that we are historical, then surely, one would have to acknowledge that his claim that ‘the eye’ – which he seems to suggest can somehow be abstracted from the rest of the human being – can at the same time not be historical, is incongruous with the notion of vision’s embodiment. In other words, if we are embodied beings, whose perceptual-cognition systems and processing are entangled with and not separate from our physiological, social and psychological bodies, how can our vision not be historical? It is at this level that the modernity thesis becomes interesting. For, neural mapping, as it was discussed above and depicted in Cattrell’s sculptures, has provided empirical evidence for the fact that the modernity thesis may warrant closer attention. If perceptual processing can change (not in the long evolutionary sense, but in terms of what people see on a daily basis) and vision is considered to be historical, just as much as it is social, cultural and psychological, then surely its neural specificity should be able to assist art historians in understanding how people see art? To some extent at least neuroscience may be providing some answers to their questions.

⁴⁷ In *After the end of art: contemporary art and the pale of history* Danto (1997: 49) writes that “[...] perception itself undergoes relatively little change over the period in question – let’s say from about 1300 to 1900” [my italics, JL]. In other words, Danto admits that there is *some* change, however slight, in perception, which he later completely denies in *Seeing and showing* (2001).

3.6.2 Neural mapping

Following on the theme of ‘showing seeing’, which guided my argument in Chapter 2, in this section I examine recent evidence obtained through neuroscience which has provided empirical evidence of an integrated sensory system.⁴⁸ Whilst research in the medical sciences and research in the humanities and social sciences may seem strange bedfellows, recent inquiries into the connection between neural activity and vision have proven valuable to some art historians.⁴⁹ For, neuroscience is *showing seeing* to be very much connected with the entire sensorimotor experiences of the viewer.

By means of imaging technologies such as Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI), neuroscientists began visualising and mapping the brain in the 1970s and 1980s so that by the 1990s neural activity was being monitored in real time (Onians 2007: 3). Neuroarthistorian, John Onians (2007: 3) explains that what this research revealed was that the human brain consists of billions of neurons that continuously develop new connections, not only because of their natural functioning but also owing to each changing experience. In an interview with Eric Fernie [s.a.], Onians contends that if a person looks with attention at a particular object, the visual networks involved will be strengthened, thereby developing in that person a preference for looking at objects that share the same properties. This means that as research uncovers what people (or artists) have been looking at, whether it is a man-made object or a natural object, the

⁴⁸ Some modernist philosophers, including Merleau-Ponty and John Dewey (1859-1952), have challenged the notion of an objective and rational mind overseeing human experience emphasising instead the mutuality of the seeing and the seen. In this sense, Dewey’s basic conception regarding biological interaction between organisms and environment would be amenable to neuroscientific elaboration. Furthermore, even if it may be a somewhat uneasy proposition, in ‘Merleau-Ponty and neuroaesthetics: two approaches to performance and technology’, as the title suggests, Sue Broadhurst (2012) investigates the links between the latest research in neural activity and Merleau-Ponty’s own theories regarding sensory perception.

⁴⁹ As I will demonstrate in the following chapters, neuroscientific findings into the workings of the brain, particularly regarding the operation of the human sensory system, have shaped art historical research into the ways in which the senses function in aesthetic experience. This is glaringly evident in Bacci & Melcher’s (2011) edited text *Art and the senses*, in which the arguments presented in a large proportion of the chapters are based on neuroscientific research in cognitive psychological.

more is known about the unconscious preferences that may have influenced any art-related activity in which those people may have been involved. According to Onians, this kind of information is useful because it allows for the reconstruction of aspects of the minds of makers, patrons and viewers of which we were previously ignorant.

As neurologist Oliver Sacks (2005: 25) explains, in the nineteenth century when phrenology was at its height the brain was believed to have been “programmed from birth”, effectively allowing individuals little chance of adaptation. This was based on the belief that different mental faculties or operations are processed in different modules or locations in the brain, a notion clearly under investigation in Cattrell’s installation. Owing to the idea that the functioning of the brain is separate from the living body, Lakoff & Johnson (1999) describe these first generation investigations into cognitive psychology as based in a paradigm of the disembodied mind, or the mind in a vat, as it was discussed earlier.

Contrary to these earlier understandings of the workings of the brain, recent research in neuroscience has revealed that the brain’s functioning is not only shaped by human bodily experience – movement, touching, smell, hearing, etc – but it also shapes experience at the same time. This is because the brain has been shown to be “[...] in a state of constant transformation” (Onians 2007: 4). Termed ‘neural plasticity’, this means that, as we are all different individuals whose minds – and senses – are embodied, our neural networks are unique and ever-changing.

3.6.2.1 Neurovisuality

This finding has been fundamental to what Davis (2011: 3) terms “neurovisuality” the hypothesis being that “[...] there might be a neural correlate or even causation to the visual succession of visuality”. In other words, in its investigation of the neural manifestation of a specific visuality neuroscience, or

more specifically, neuropsychology could be of help to art history in understanding how people in specific cultures, or visualities, see art or the images they produce and/or are exposed to. This is because, according to neurovisuality, and closely resembling Wartofsky's (1980 & 1984) view, exposure to pictures habituates vision.

Though unpopular among art historians, Davis (2011: 22) is of the opinion that experimental neuropsychology and art history ought to "join forces".⁵⁰ Davis (2011:3) finds that art historians who approach their objects specifically from the perspective of formalism and historicism – "[...] from Wölfflin (and before) to Baxandall (and beyond) [...]" – have rejected scientific experiments on how humans experience art, even as they "[...] address human beings in visuality [...]" . This means that, according to Davis (2011: 4), art historians have overall tended to "[...] overlook neural causalities that might operate *outside* visuality [...]" and which might provide answers to the question of why some works of art or other images have retained their "[...] visual 'power' or 'agency' (aesthetic or otherwise) far beyond their original contexts of making in a particular historical visuality [...]" . Neuropsychology might also enrich art historical notions of *Sehformen* – understood by Wölfflin to refer to "culture styles particular to a time and place" (Davis 2011: 1) – as well as Baxandall's similar notion of a "period eye".

3.6.2.2 Neuroaesthetics

While for neurovisuality vision is not only culturally specific but also neurally transformative, for neuroaesthetics aesthetic experience is an *invariable* process localised in the brain by means of which visual images are generated "[...] according to its own rules and programs" (Zeki 1999: 68).⁵¹ In this sense,

⁵⁰ This topic is also the main theoretical thrust of Davis' book *A general theory of visual culture* 2011, which, interestingly, is dedicated to Richard Wollheim.

⁵¹ The notion of the human brain organising information presented to it by physical reality by means of "its own rules and programs" (Zeki 1999: 68) has its genealogy in Kant's notion of the

neuroaesthetics would seem to contradict neurovisuality. As a sub-discipline of neurology, neuroaesthetics, according to Semir Zeki (1999: 2), aims to provide “[...] an understanding of the biological basis of aesthetic experience”. In other words, as if to offer scientific proof for what was already apparent to Kant, Zeki supposes that human beings already have a notion of what it means to have an aesthetic experience. Reducing aesthetic experience to neuroelectrical activity, this means that from the perspective of neuroaesthetics, a particular painting will always lead to the firing of particular cells in the human brain, even if this ‘firing’ is not limited to only one particular part of the brain. In Davis’ (2011: 6) rather alarming estimation, a neuroaesthetic analysis of an artwork would be a “[...] read-out of the neuroelectrical activity specifically correlate with the perception of the painting as an artwork” without considering a discursive analysis thereof. His contention that “[...] the neuroaesthetic read-out and the extended discursive description can be fully translated into one another” (Davis 2011: 6) is an even more disquieting thought.

It is claimed, however, that a narrow understanding of neuroaesthetics would regard its claims as a universalist account of a putative panhuman visual aesthetics. Davis (2011: 8) advises, however, that to be fair, some of the claims made in neuroaesthetics are tolerant of the assumption that historical and visual cultural context shape neural processing. This means that there may be closer ties then between neuroaesthetics and neurovisuality than is initially apparent. Davis (2011: 6) suggests that a read-out from neuroaesthetics – of course, already a visualisation and thereby adding one more to the endless list of images involved in historical identification – might be useful to art history in that it may “[...] identify patterns of similarity and difference in vast series of artefacts, pictures, or artworks – patterns of similarity and difference founded in their functions and meanings – that are invisible to the naked eyes, or to *our* naked eyes”.

transcendental imagination, Ernst Cassirer’s notion of the phenomenology of knowledge and Nelson Goodman’s constructivist psychology.

For instance, Marshall Segall (1976: 107) has identified cross-cultural differences in visual perception; a fact he ascribes to the influence of the visual environments within which humans live and are engaged.

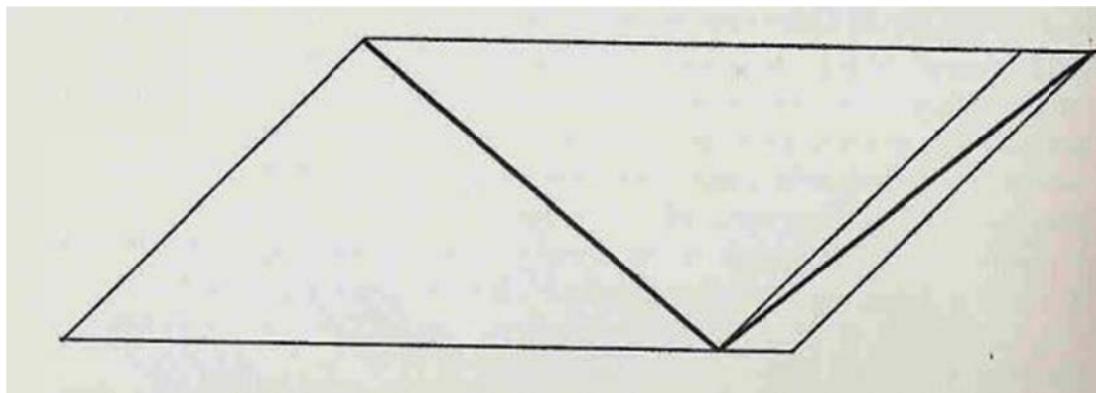


Figure 14: Friedrich Sander, *The Sander Parallelogram* (1926)

This means that in Western societies, which may be described as highly ‘carpentered’ environments (in other words, consisting of many buildings and rectangular objects), perception of the Sander Parallelogram⁵² (Figure 14) will occur according to the rules of linear perspective. Consequently, the left bold diagonal line appears longer than the right since it is perceived as if receding into pictorial space. However, according to Segall’s (1976:110) research, the “inference habit”, whereby acute and obtuse angles are interpreted as right angles extended in space, will not be visually learned by cultural groups living in environments where man-made structures are limited – otherwise referred to as ‘uncarpentered’ environments. The implication of this research for understanding the conditioning of visuality is that, if perception is shown to be influenced by “inference habits” (Segall 1976:110), and different cultures are exposed to different visual environments and visual experiences, then,

⁵² Gestalt psychology studies the appearances of visual patterns and configurations. Segall (1976: 108) explains that the Gestalt psychological explanation of the Sander Parallelogram is that all viewers will *inevitably* read the left heavy diagonal as longer than the right, although they are equal, due to the way in which the human nervous system is structured. According to this theory, the illusion “[...] is a product of certain hypothetical neural forces” (Segall 1976: 108).

perception (or ‘seeing’ in Mitchell’s terms) has already been shown to be flexible with neural reintegration being strongly supported by empirical evidence.

But can an artefact, an image or an artwork cause the brain to change its structure and functioning, which is the hypothesis of the modernity thesis discussed earlier? In other words, can the ways in which people see change based on the environment in which they live? And what are the implications of these changes for the way in which visual culture is analysed? In short, as Davis (2011: 14) succinctly puts it, can and/or should “[...] a general theory of visual culture [...] logically be accommodated to a general science of vision?”

Sue Broadhurst (2012: 233) finds that discoveries made in neuroaesthetic research may very well be the “[...] scientific echo of Merleau-Ponty’s rejection of the concept of an interior subject inhabiting a sensing object”. This is because, on her reading of Zeki’s (1999) research, Broadhurst (2012: 233) finds no evidence that could support a notion of “[...] a ‘master area’ of the brain understanding all perceptions”. As if the question of the im/penetrability of perception were not complex enough, another finding from neuroscience has complicated our knowledge of the visual processing system, that is, its relation to the other senses.

3.6.2.3 Cross-modal plasticity

Whilst the separation of the five senses was useful to ancient Greek scholars and later physiologists, such as Müller and Helmholtz, found it helpful to consider human perception in terms of the independent operation of each sense organ, it is more accurate to think about the human sensorium as an inter-related system. This is because, as Charles Spence (2011: 85) explains, “[...] our senses receive correlated information about the same external objects and events”. What is more, argues Spence (2011: 85) information received from individual senses is “[...] combined to yield the multisensorially determined

sensations that fill our daily lives [...]” rendering that which “we feel through the skin” influenced by that which we see, hear and smell. Similarly, it would be accurate to say then that what we see with our eyes is influenced by that which we feel through the skin, and what we hear and smell and that vision is not an autonomous function at all.

Hence, Spence (2011: 85-106) argues, by means of empirical studies conducted in cognitive neuroscience, that the sense of touch for example is a multisensory experience informed by other sensory registers. An earlier investigation into the relationship between touch and vision from a psychological perspective came to the conclusion that visual perception dominates over tactile/haptic perception. This was demonstrated in the twentieth century through experiments using conflicting sensory stimuli (Spence 2011: 86-90). For example, Gibson (1933) showed that when people run their fingers up and down a straight stick, while at the same time looking at that stick through lenses that make it appear curved, they perceive the stick as curved.⁵³ Similarly, Irvin Rock & J. Victor (1964) and Rock & Charles Harris (1967: 96), after gathering data from experiments in which people could see or feel, or both see and feel an object and then rate their impression of its size and shape, concluded that “[...] vision completely dominates touch and even shapes it”.⁵⁴

But their results do not show the entire picture. The effect of visual input on the experience of pain by amputees with phantom limbs has been documented by Vilayanur Ramachandran and Diane Rogers-Ramachandran (1996) who conclude that the workings of the sensorium is a far more complicated matter than Rock *et al* (1964) and Rock *et al's* (1967) evidence shows. These more recent neuroscientists make use of what they term a ‘virtual reality box’ into which a mirror is placed on one side, reflecting the healthy hand, so that the

⁵³ In his classic work, *The perception of the visual world* (1950) Gibson set down his notion of optical flow and perception as environmental systems, which he later developed into his theory of ‘affordances’.

⁵⁴ Cf. Spence (2011: 87) for an interesting diagrammatic explanation of this phenomenon. Spence (2011: 88) points out, however, that several studies also show that vision *does not* always dominate over touch.

person sees their amputated hand as if it were intact. When the normal hand is moved, the person, seeing their virtual hand also moving, experiences kinaesthetic sensations in the phantom hand. In the same way, the sensation of touch is experienced in the phantom hand when it is ‘seen’ touched by another hand, in the reflection of the normal hand being touched. Describing the reactions of their research subjects as “[...] curious form[s] of synesthesia [...]” the scientists conclude that “[...] there must be a great deal of back and forth interaction between vision and touch [...]” (Ramachandran & Rogers-Ramachandran 1996: 377). It can also be suggested that, based on the above experiments, empirical evidence cannot account for precisely how the sensory /perceptual/cognitive system operates universally for all people but only that this process is unique to individuals and highly variable.⁵⁵

To illustrate the integrated nature of the human sensorium a growing body of evidence suggests that seeing does not operate in isolation from the rest of the body, and that visual processing (or even hearing, touch and so on) is not confined to one part of the brain as Cattrell’s installation apparently assumes. For example, Michel Chion (1994: 137) writes that “[...] the eye carries information and sensation only some of which can be considered specifically and irreducibly visual (e.g. colour); most others are transsensory [...] [and] there is no sensory given that is demarcated and isolated from the outset”.

⁵⁵ What we see can have a profound effect on the body. The uncanny effect of an optical illusion was made emphatically clear to me on a visit to the Maropeng Visitor’s Centre in Johannesburg, South Africa, in 2013. Among the interactive displays integrated into the exhibition was a short tunnel through which one could walk. A digital display of dots spun above and around me as if I were walking through the inner drum of a huge spinning washing machine. The overwhelming sense of unease and instability made me feel as if I were about to fall over and I had to clutch the railing in order to keep my balance. If I closed my eyes, I could walk upright and normally. When opening them, however, I immediately felt as if I were going to fall over. But, I also noticed that the degree to which people were affected by this optical illusion was highly variable. Some people were able to walk through the tunnel relatively easily while others could hardly step forward without holding tightly onto the railing. This anecdotal ‘evidence’ suggests, to me at least, that human beings are far too complex and variable to be measured and mapped in the ways scientists are attempting to do.

Research into “cross-modal plasticity” or adaptive processing gives further support to the contention that we do not see with our eyes only (Howes 2011: 164). Mriganka Sur (2004: 690) explains that research has identified activated visual cortex in congenitally blind individuals when specific auditory tasks are undertaken and auditory cortex activation in deaf individuals when certain visual tasks are performed. In other words, despite the fact that a person may be blind (or deaf) the visual (or auditory) cortex still functions, just not in the way one would expect. What is more, “[...] visual inputs are perceived as visual even when auditory cortex is activated” (Sur 2004: 690). The reverse has been noted in blind individuals. Ultimately, this research may confirm the plasticity of perception, which once again confirms that it is all but impossible to fully comprehend and map the human sensory/perceptual system in the way depicted in Cattrell’s *Sense*.

In other words, some scientists have now shown that, contrary to the division of the senses established in ancient times, the eye operates in conjunction with the entire body which experiences itself and the world simultaneously through all of its sense organs: the skin, nostrils, ears, tongue and the eyes. This means that seeing is not a ‘monosensory’ possibility, but is rather an intersensorial activity informed and shaped by the other sensory channels. Simon Shaw-Miller (2010: xv) argues that, instead of thinking of the senses as individual faculties – as in the faculties of a university which are grounded in the notion of separate and distinct disciplines – we should rather think of the senses as channels and acknowledge the “intersensory” – or interdisciplinary – nature of the human sensorium.

3.7 Synaesthesia

In recent years, much attention has been given to multisensory and synaesthetic experience not only in the fields of cognitive psychology and neuroscience but also in contemporary art and in some theoretical work being

undertaken in the humanities (cf. Berman 1999, Böhme 2013, Bredella 2013, Hahn 2013, Krois 2011, Shaw-Miller 2010).⁵⁶ In the last decade or so cognitive psychology and the neurosciences have increasingly attempted to understand the neural basis of synaesthesia (Howes 2011: 165). If all the senses operate in conjunction in perceptual experience, could it be suggested that all people experience the world synaesthetically? And, if so, what are the implications of such an understanding of the embodiment of perception for the way in which embodied engagement with art is understood?

The term *synaesthesia*, derived from the Greek *aesthesia* (meaning ‘sensation’ or ‘sensory impression’) and *syn* (meaning ‘together’) refers to the experience of two or more sensory impressions at the same time. Synaesthesia occurs, or is diagnosed, when a feature is experienced by a sense which is not actually stimulated by that feature. For example, a colour is tasted, or a shape is heard (Bacci & Melcher 2011: 6). The most commonly documented form of sensory muddling is termed colour-grapheme synaesthesia “[...] in which written words or letters are perceived as having particular colours” (Howes 2011: 164).⁵⁷

Synaesthesia is apparently no longer only understood as a congenital condition. For example, most people experience odour-taste synaesthesia owing to a unitary percept having been produced through previous experiences of eating, drinking and smelling. In other words, there is far more to the common association of a smell, such as vanilla with sweetness, than can be relegated to metaphorical association only. It would appear that the Aristotelian hierarchy of the five senses is no longer viable if all experience is considered, to a greater or lesser extent, synaesthetic (Ede 2011: xvi). For, information obtained from various sensory stimuli blurs into our singular, but multi-layered experience.

⁵⁶ In addition, cf. many of the contributors to Bacci & Melcher’s *Art and the senses* (2011) (some of whom are referred to in this section) who consider aesthetic experience as cross-modal or synaesthetic.

⁵⁷ In his ethnographic research, Howes (2011: 166) has found a high incidence of audioolfactory synaesthesia. In several Melanesian and African languages, for example, it is common to speak of hearing a smell.

Further empirical evidence to support the notion of an integrated sensorium is provided in the field of cuisine, where Heston Blumenthal has gathered data on the multisensory nature of people's perceptions of food and drink. This chef and owner of *The Fat Duck* restaurant in Bray, England, aims to enhance diners' enjoyment of the food he serves by modulating their sensory experience of it. Taking a scientific approach to cooking, Blumenthal is interested in how the workings of the brain influence how people appreciate food and drink. This means that he tries to stimulate all the senses in novel ways by using sound, smell and visual cues. In the late 1990s he had already realised that diners tasted crab differently depending on what it was called.

In order to show the effect of sound on our everyday eating and drinking experiences, Spence, Shankar & Blumenthal (2011: 207-237) report on an experiment conducted by Spence and Blumenthal on the audience at the *Art and the Senses* conference held in Oxford in 2006. The experiment, which involved the audience having to comment on the flavour of 'bacon and egg' ice-cream, showed that the extent to which the ice-cream tasted like egg or like bacon, was influenced by a soundtrack played in the background.⁵⁸ In other words, a complex synthesis between all the senses takes place in the body.⁵⁹

It is clear that, whilst poststructuralist approaches to understanding social life gained increasing status in the humanities in the 1990s, effectively denying the validity of 'nature' – in other words, feeling, intuition, and so on – in human experience and understanding, neuroscientific investigations of the brain were at the same time revealing that the brain is a dynamic, flexible and vital organ and component of the multisensorial body and, more importantly, is influenced by it. According to Onians (2007: 2), investigations into "cerebral and visceral experiences" in the formation of subjectivity are particularly revealing. Not completely denying, but certainly less interested in the ideological construction

⁵⁸ Cf. Spence, Shankar & Blumenthal (2011: 222-228) for a detailed explanation of the results.

⁵⁹ Cf. Spence (2011: 92) for a discussion of the influence of sound not only on the perceived roughness of a surface but also on people's perception of the "[...] pleasantness, powerfulness, and forcefulness of many different products [...]".

of identity, Onians explores those aspects of human nature previously marginalised in poststructuralist thought: feeling, emotion, intuition and sensation all of which are evidently given a certain validity by means of neuroscientific evidence.

However, not all theorists interested in the role of feeling, emotion, intuition and sensation in theorising experience are convinced that neuroscience has much to offer such arguments. One of the criticisms lodged against neuroscientific research into the operation of sense perception is that this research confines sensory processing to the brain. For example, Howes (2011: 166) criticises Calvert *et al's* *The handbook of multisensory processes* (2004), to date the most authoritative text in the psychology of perception, for its focus on the psychological and physiological organisation of sensory processes in the brain to the near complete exclusion of cross-cultural factors in shaping those processes.⁶⁰ From the point of view of a cultural anthropologist, Howes (2011: 165-166) finds that the research focus in the cognitive sciences overlooks the cultural organisation of the senses and the cultural variability of the perceptual process.

The influence of the culturally constructed social world and environment has, for the most part, remained outside the field of interest of neuroscientific research. Instead of the narrow focus of the neurological sciences, Howes (2011: 166) suggests an approach that “[...] would start with the investigation of the culturally patterned ‘loops’ through the environment”. In other words, his approach would (hopefully) investigate the relationship between the world and, not only the body/brain, but also the human being as a multifaceted and complex living being. This approach would extend the notion that ways of seeing are culturally produced to include an investigation into the cultural production of ways of smelling, tasting, touching and hearing as well as their

⁶⁰ Howes (2011: 166) points out that the only reference “to cross-cultural variation in the modulation of perception” appears in Bernstein *et al's* (2004: 207) contention that the McGurk effect is “significantly weaker in Japanese than in American perceivers”. Cf. Howes (2011: 163) for an explanation of the McGurk experiment.

complex interaction with each other in experience. In short, Howes (2005: 5) pleads with researchers of a cultural studies of the senses to be “[...] cautious in their use of scientific data”.

There seems to me, however, to be an important insight from neuroscience that supports and enriches rather than contests Howes' position on the operation of the senses in human experience. Neuroscience shows that the (visual) cortex is plastic (that is, flexible and malleable) and therefore that it is constantly being transformed. If neural plasticity confirms the educability of the senses then that education must be acknowledged to take place in and through specific cultures and societies. New neural pathways are, therefore, continually under construction precisely because they are transformed both by a person's participation in, and internalisation of the various cultural domains (such as domestication, habitus, language, play and so forth) and individual physiology. Thought – including, ideas, attitudes, beliefs and the imagination – are, therefore, constantly shaped and reshaped through the body living in a specific culture. In other words, the way in which we see depends on our having a (unique) body – we cannot see without it.

Questioning the extent to which sensory experience is culturally coded (the emphasis from anthropology), on the one hand, or wholly physiologically determined (the emphasis from neuroscience), on the other, is less helpful than a position that acknowledges that both are part of human experience. Even so, the view that human experience is physiological, cultural and always malleable may still offer a far too reductive account of the ways in which humans operate.

For example, the effect of Cattrell's highly reflective and transparent surfaces on the observer is remarkable as the images continually change shape and position as we move around the sculptures. In other words, these works, which deal with the operation of the senses, not only produce a visual and tactile representation of the hidden/invisible workings of the brain, but also evoke and stimulate a sensual response to an intellectual concept. What the installations

are not able to show, however, is the operation of the imagination in human experience. For, the imagination refuses to be mapped, much less visualised, which may very well be the fantasy of the neural mapping enterprise, whose misguided aim is evidently to render the thinking subject transparent just as Cattrell's glass vitrines mistakenly do.

It is useful to return to both Sperber and Cattrell's installations at the close of this chapter to point out that, further than making visible merely the process whereby the brain and 'the eye' apparently work together to produce coherent images of the world, the installations both – perhaps partly unintentionally – point to the necessity of a unique and individual spectator to actualise this process. In the case of Cattrell's brain scans, the artist insists that the shapes produced through sensory stimulation "are not templates" (qtd Gere 2004: 418). Rather, Cattrell explains that the shapes "[...]" reveal the uniqueness of the person (like a fingerprint) [...]" (qtd Gere 2004: 418). Both pieces demonstrate that the ways in which the world is understood is not a given, but rather individually experienced by a particular sentient body. For, every viewer makes sense of the blurry image in Sperber's installation in her/his own way. In other words, even though every viewer's multisensorial experience is culturally constructed a unique biological, physiological, chemical being makes sense of that experience.

Despite having argued that neuroscience assists in reaching the conclusion that experience is malleable and constantly changing, and brings us closer to an understanding of subjectivity as complex and multidimensional, its limitations should not be overlooked. Most importantly, scientific mappings of the brain in order to show the interrelated sensorium cannot satisfactorily account for the multitude of ways in which people experience and respond to art. For, surely the science of vision – in its attempt to shed light on the dark recesses of the working of the mind in its analysis of physical processes – is deeply rooted in a paradigm of scientific ordering and control and ought to be approached with caution. In other words, the neuroscientific mapping of the brain may be yet

another instance of the submission of the body to scientific ordering and domination.

3.8 Conclusion

In this and the preceding chapter I have attempted to show that, when ‘shown’ on its own – that is, to the exclusion of the other sensorial registers of the body – a focus only on vision does not allow for an adequate understanding of how meanings are produced when subjects engage with visual culture. For, vision is but one sense among others in the multisensorial body, which exists in a complex relation to what is seen and also what is known. Not only do the senses co-operate in perceptual processing towards integral awareness during eventful embodied experiences, but the process of perception is culturally informed by normative assumptions regarding race, class, gender, ethnicity, and so forth, which influence our personal beliefs and attitudes. In other words, ‘showing seeing’, a task which Mitchell challenges researchers of visual culture to take up and which I have undertaken to do in Chapters 2 and 3 has brought to light the fact that vision is a founding basis as well as constantly transforming process through which our physical/chemical/biological/physiological anatomies as well as our embodied social/political/cultural attitudes and beliefs influence the ways in which we see and make sense of and interact with the world.

And yet, there is still more to the matter of human experience than is adequately shown by either neuroscience or cultural anthropology. From their differing paradigmatic positions, visual culture studies, anthropology and neuroscience attempt to analyse the relationship between perception, sensation and subjectivity. As has been shown in this chapter, instead of gaining hard evidence to the answer to that question, all that can be concluded is that the various positions on the matter reveal that “[s]ense experience operates at a membrane somewhere between the sensible and the thinkable” as Marks (2011: 239) suggests.

In Marks' estimation, sensation (in other words, the input we receive from physical stimuli that we respond to via taste, touch, smell, sight and hearing) occurs between the body and thought, which, as I see it, once again reinstates a dualistic body and mind relationship. I would suggest that it is more productive to think in terms of *full bodied human experience* operating, not at a membrane – which, while being a connective tissue is also something that separates – but by means of a fluidity of bodily/mental modes of perception. These modes, I suggest, include not only the intellect, beliefs, attitudes and preconceptions based on our personal history and sensory experience in a specific culture, but also memories, emotions, feelings and the imagination all as embodied phenomena. In other words, embodiment refers to the human person as a unified body/mind entity whose various modes of being cannot be localised.

The dynamics of contemporary spectatorship are certainly not straightforward. It may only be feasible to conclude that thinking about spectatorship as embodied practice (affected by our corporeality as evidenced by our changing neural functioning, our cultural context and our imagination), allows for a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between a senser/perceiver and what is sensed/perceived. As will be shown in the next chapter, much art produced in the twentieth century is not compatible with a methodology that hinges only on the ways in which spectators apprehend art through the sense of sight. This leads to the investigation in Chapter 4 of the implication of the notion that all experience is not only multisensorial and culturally constructed but also unique to a person whose imagination (both personal and intersubjective) is fundamental to experience.

CHAPTER 4

WELCOME TO THE REVOLUTION: THE SENSORY TURN AND ART HISTORY

Fine artists and those given to enjoyment and criticism of visual arts [...] are seen as exponents of the trained eye. They [...] pretend to know how to look, and how to draw the highest semiological and visual satisfaction from that looking. Their total dependency on sight has almost entirely negated the senses of touch, hearing, taste and smell in an artwork.¹

In the preceding chapters the ambiguous privilege given to the sense of sight was examined mainly from the perspective of visual culture studies. In Chapter 2 philosophical scepticism regarding the ability of human vision to access reliable knowledge and understanding of the world was explored in contrast to the value given this sense in the realms of science and technology as well as in people's everyday interactions with the world. For these reasons, from the perspective of visual culture studies, sight has evidently been regarded as *the* sense that requires critical investigation. In Chapter 3, the privileged status given to human vision was shown to be embedded in the ancient Greek philosophical division and hierarchisation of the senses combined with the association of sight, a so-called 'distance-sense', with rational and objective knowledge. Taste, touch and smell, were shown to be considered the 'proximal' senses.

The aim of Chapter 4 is to explore and contextualise the emergence of the 'turn toward the senses' in the humanities and social sciences. In other words, I investigate the social, cultural and intellectual conditions that have given rise to this turn. In order to contextualise the so-called 'sensory turn' in this way, in this chapter I explore earlier philosophical and theoretical positions from which the emerging literature in this direction both turns away and *returns*. I point out that sensory scholarship is not that new at all, but rather returns to an earlier tradition in art historiography evidently still alive, or at least resurfacing, today. I

¹ Willem Boshoff (1997: 36).

closely examine the theoretical assumptions and philosophical positions that have thus far emerged in the scholarly production of academics working under the banner of the sensory turn. I therefore attempt to make meaningful connections between selections of the literature already produced under the rubric of sensory scholarship.²

My intention in this chapter is to bring the conversation regarding people's multisensorial and embodied engagements in culture, already alluded to in the previous chapters, closer to art historiography by investigating the implications of the sensory turn for this field.³ The investigation turns particularly toward accusations of art history's alleged unnecessary privileging of the visual from the perspective of sensory scholarship. In other words, the body of criticism targeted at art historiography's alleged ocularcentrism, the implication of which is apparently a problematical construction of a critical and reflective viewer, is probed. Has art historiography been 'guilty', in Howes' terms, of privileging the visual in its analyses of art at the expense of the other senses? And, if so, what are the implications of the apparently problematic dominance of the visual in research on art? What methodological alternatives are suggested in the literature?

4.1 The sensory turn defined

Whilst research concerned with the senses has, until recently, predominantly been located in the fields of psychology and neurobiology (Howes 2006: 113), over the last two decades investigations into the sensorial dimension of human

² I have focussed particularly on the following texts: Bacci & Melcher's edited compilation *Art and the senses* (2011), Di Bello & Koureas' edited text *Art, history and the senses* (2010), Halsall's article 'One sense is never enough' (2004), Jones' *Sensorium* (2006) as well as various relevant texts by Howes (2005 & 2006).

³ That the discipline of art history has of course always been adapting owing to, amongst others, ever changing and contesting philosophical and ideological outlooks regarding its methods and practices, is well recorded and I shall not repeat them here. Suffice it to say that, since its emergence as an academic discipline, art history has always received some degree of "friendly fire" (Dikovitskaya 2011: 2) as both art and cultural historians, philosophers and artists in the nineteenth, twentieth and twenty-first centuries negotiated its aims, protocols and disciplinary borders

experience have emerged in various academic disciplines in the humanities and social sciences. When the senses are investigated from the perspective of the medical sciences, emphasis is predominantly placed on the “[...] cognitive or neurological dimensions of sense perception [...]” (Howes 2006: 113), while the cultural construction and operation of the senses is, for the most part, overlooked. Where sensory scholarship has emerged in the humanities and social sciences, the emphasis has evidently shifted toward investigations into the cultural embeddedness of sensory experience. From this perspective, as Howes (2005: ix) puts it, “[...] the multiple ways in which culture mediates sensation (and sensation mediates culture) [...]” is investigated.

The rise of conferences and journals dedicated to such investigations attests to the fact that sensory studies is already an important field of academic inquiry. In the edited volume *Empire of the senses: the sensual culture reader*, Howes (2005: ix) states that the combined efforts of the contributors to this volume as well as his fellow editors in the *Sensory formations* series, of which this publication is part, have brought about “the sensuous revolution in scholarship”. He specifically cites the role of fellow researcher, Classen as well as the Concordia Sensoria Research Team (CONCERT) as pivotal in giving shape and direction to how he “think[s] about and through the senses” (Howes 2005: ix). In other words, working predominantly in the field of anthropology and sociology, it would seem that, for Howes, the great strides that have been made in sensory scholarship until now owe much to anthropological work in this field.

Although the emerging discourse in sensory studies takes on different, and often, divergent forms, according to Howes (2006: 114), in general this type of research “[...] emphasize[s] the dynamic, relational (intersensory- or multimodal, multimedia) and often conflicted nature of our everyday engagement with the sensuous world”. At the very least, the premise upon which much contemporary sociological and anthropological work is based appears to be 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).

Whereas Howes' research on the senses is in the fields of sociology and anthropology, in this chapter I explore the rise of sensory scholarship in art history in particular in order to investigate the implications of these kinds of theoretical endeavours for art historiography. For this purpose, two texts linking art historiography and sensory scholarship are particularly useful. Di Bello & Koureas' edited volume *Art, history and the senses: 1830 to the present* (2010) and Bacci & Melcher's edited volume *Art and the senses* (2011) are referred to extensively in the following discussion. I return to these texts later, but for the moment it is necessary to contextualise the sensory turn more clearly.

A helpful way in which to contextualise the recent turn toward sensory scholarship is to ask under what social and cultural conditions the sensory revolution has been made possible? For the anthropologist, Ashley Montagu (1986: xiii), contemporary technologised societies are apparently deprived of sensory experience, arguing that:

[w]e in the Western world are beginning to discover our neglected senses. This growing awareness represents something of an overdue insurgency against the painful deprivation of sensory experience we have suffered in our technologised world.

Presumably, Montagu is referring to the modernist channelling of the senses into safe and hygienic havens and the subjection of the body according to various regimes of discipline and control.⁴ But such sensory channelling has not resulted in the senses being left alone. For, it would probably be more accurate to suggest that people living in the second decade of the twenty-first century are

⁴ For example, the denigration of smell is given alarming clarity in Patrick Süskind's novel, *Perfume: the story of a murderer* (1985) whose demonic main character must kill and die because of his pathologically acute sense of smell. Cf. Jones' (2006) discussion of this novel and the ways in which smell was stigmatised in modernism. Commodities produced in the twentieth century to deal with 'unwelcome' odours provide more evidence of such sensory control.

bombarded with experiences that appeal not only to their sense of sight but also to their senses of sound, smell, taste and touch. Not only in product advertising, but also in ‘hands-on’ or sensory exhibitions in museums appealing to the senses is now very much “in fashion”, to quote Jütte (2005: 1). Similarly, Duncum (2005: 9) argues that in contemporary consumer culture societies, many advertisements appeal to the “precognitive” visceral body, “resist[ing] rational analysis” by “appeal[ing] straight to the central nervous system”, in other words, apparently to “the guts, not the mind”.

Whether or not contemporary life is characterised by sensorial deprivation or over-stimulation, Howes (2006: 1) finds the “sensorial poverty” of theories which deal with images to be highly problematic. The alleged sensorial poverty of theoretical analyses of art can perhaps be entertained if one were to consider only some critical approaches. For multisensorial experience has not always been disdained in the theorisation of art as will be shown below.

4.2 Sharp turns ahead

The recent ‘turns’ that have transpired in the humanities and social sciences, have evidently come about as a result of theorists battling to agree on the appropriate ways in which to deal with human cultural and visual cultural expressions.⁵ The sensory turn, which has also been referred to as the “sensory revolution” (Di Bello & Koureas 2010: 1) is evidently among the latest (and presumably not the last) in this line of paradigm shifts. As its nomenclature suggests, this revolution is presumably set to overturn approaches taken in art historiography thus far.

⁵ See the forum on ‘turns’ in *American Historical Review*, June, (2012). This series of articles provides a retrospective and critical, even sceptical, examination and interrogation of the linguistic and cultural turns in order to contextualise and historicise the circumstances generating each.

Following on from Richard Rorty's notion of a linguistic turn of the 1960s,⁶ and a cultural turn of the 1970s,⁷ the 1990s produced the pictorial turn (as formulated by Mitchell)⁸ or the *ikonische Wendung* (formulated by Gottfried Boehm)⁹ each providing a different understanding of the relationship between humans, their cultural and visual expressions, and their world. The following brief discussion of these turns attempts to contextualise sensory scholarship within this broader theoretical horizon.

4.2.1 The linguistic and cultural turns

According to Howes (2005: 2), sensory scholarship rejects the logocentrism of the linguistic turn which approaches human artistic and cultural expression from the standpoint that “[...] all human thought and endeavour can be understood as structured by, and analogous to, language, so one may best look to linguistics for models of philosophical and social interpretation”. Influenced by the idea that all experience is mediated by language, and also developing on the early writings of Roland Barthes, since the mid-twentieth century, semiology was considered by those working in the humanities and social sciences, and in particular art history, to provide a useful model for interpreting cultural forms and practices, societal formations and human experience which were, in turn,

⁶ Cf. Rorty's *The linguistic turn: recent essays in philosophical method* (1967).

⁷ For an overview of the historical trajectory of the cultural turn see James Cook's 'The kids are all right: on the "turning" of cultural history' (2012).

⁸ Cf. Mitchell's (1994: 11-12) *Picture theory* in which he suggests that variations on a pictorial turn could already be seen in the writing of Anglo-American theorists such as Charles Pierce's semiotics and Nelson Goodman's “languages of art”, both of which do not assume that “language is paradigmatic for meaning”. In addition, in European philosophy he sees traces of such a turn in phenomenology's interest in “imagination and visual experience”; Derrida's emphasis on the “visible, material traces of writing”; and Foucault's attention to the “rift between the discursive and the ‘visible’”, amongst others (Mitchell 1994: 11-12). For Mitchell (1994: 13), these various manifestations of “anxiet[y] about ‘the visual’” provide evidence for his contention that pictures “[...] form a point of peculiar friction and discomfort across a broad range of intellectual inquiry”.

⁹ Cf. Boehm's 'Die Wiederkehr der Bilder' in the volume he edited, *Was ist ein Bild?* (1994).

read as texts in an attempt to uncover their meaning/s.¹⁰ In this way, it has been argued that the visual became increasingly narrativised (Vaughan 2010: xx).¹¹

In the wake of both the linguistic and cultural turns, in the 1980s art history turned its attention to the social history of art examining its modes of production and circulation within political and cultural realms (Moxey 1994).¹² Many art historians began to interpret works of art on the basis of their ideological functions, which, it was thought, could most promisingly be uncovered through the mode of semiotic analysis (Crowther 2002: 478). One of the important aims of the so-called ‘new art history’ that has been developing since that time has therefore been to reveal the “ideological agenda[s]” (Moxey 2008: 132) at work in art. Accordingly, art historians set about to expose racist, sexist and classist ways of seeing that are constructed in images and also engendered by them. Works of art, both past and present, and in the widest sense (that is, including not only visual art, but also literature, theatre, music, film, media, and so forth) are now widely regarded as both producing and articulating hierarchical ways of literally and conceptually ‘seeing’ others. Consequently, the interpretative methodologies of not only semiotics but also feminism, Marxism, postcolonialism, psychoanalysis and hermeneutics, based on the constructivist assumption that the human body, person and societal formations are entirely fashioned, have served the new art history well in exposing the ways in which both objects and their viewers are culturally produced.

¹⁰ Cf. Bal & Bryson (1991) who support a ‘semiotic turn’ in art history. Although they complicate and challenge key categories of the semiotic approach, in the structuralist sense of the term, Bal and Bryson nevertheless contend that a semiotic perspective, which reads every detail of a work of art as a sign to be interpreted, provides a useful approach in the analysis of works of art. Cf. Manghani’s (2003) critique of a purely semiotic ‘reading’ of art which merely succeeds in narrating and translating the textures, marks, ink spots, and so forth into their possible, if dynamic, meanings. From the perspective of sensory scholarship, the semiotic approach privileges the textual and theoretical, being overall unconcerned with the embodied and/or experiential.

¹¹ Cf. Elkins *On pictures and the words that fail them* (1998).

¹² Cf. Berger’s influential 1970s BBC series published as *Ways of seeing* (1982), Baxandall’s *Painting and experience in fifteenth century Italy: a primer in the social history of pictorial style* (1972) and Rees & Borzello’s *The new art history* (1986) to name only a few examples.

4.2.2 The pictorial and iconic turns

The pictorial turn, first referred to by Mitchell in the 1990s,¹³ was later described by him simply as “[a] critique of the image” (Mitchell 2005a: 77). In this sense, the pictorial turn would include all the theoretical critiques of images and the questions that have emerged regarding their problematic nature and status. In other words, the pictorial turn is to some extent a turn toward the image resulting from an “anxiet[y] about ‘the visual’” (Mitchell 1994: 13). Evidence of such anxiety can be found in the anti-visual or anti-ocular rhetoric that emerged in theoretical and philosophical circles in the twentieth-century (Jay 1993).¹⁴

Quite unaware at the time of each other’s theories, as Mitchell was coining the ‘pictorial turn’ Gottfried Boehm (1994) coined the ‘*ikonische wendung*’ or ‘iconic turn’.¹⁵ Boehm (2010: 10) formulates the iconic turn as a consequence of the linguistic turn in the sense that he understands the image as equal to ‘logos’, and therefore itself as generative of knowledge. In this sense, the image is regarded as a way of speaking and thinking, not in words, but in images. Boehm’s interest in an iconology of the image is, therefore, not to be confused with Panofsky’s interest in what images represent. Rather, Boehm’s (2010: 12) approach is a criticism of the image, leading him to ask “what and when is an image?”¹⁶

¹³ In *Picture theory* Mitchell (1994: 38) investigates the ways in which pictures reflect on themselves. He makes it very clear, however, that words are necessary to such an investigation and therefore relies on ekphrasis to do so. In his essay dealing with ‘Metapictures’, Mitchell clearly states that the argument is therefore “*about* pictures about pictures; it is not an essay *in* pictures, but *in words*” (Mitchell 1994: 38). In other words, Mitchell does not turn away from words, but instead acknowledges their necessity.

¹⁴ The anti-visual rhetoric and well-rehearsed critique of the hegemony of vision is excellently analysed by Jay in *Downcast eyes: the denigration of vision in twentieth-century French thought* (1993).

¹⁵ In the two letters exchanged between Mitchell and Boehm and published in Curtis’ *The pictorial turn* (2010) it is clear that the idea of an iconic turn, although only published in 1994, had been germinating in Boehm’s thoughts for some time since the 1980s.

¹⁶ Moxey (2008: 132) situates the pictorial and iconic turns under the same umbrella by stating that both approaches acknowledge the “ontological demands” of visual artefacts. In Moxey’s estimation the conceptual tools of the pictorial and iconic turns contrast with those employed in social history which has been the focus of art history, cultural studies and identity politics as well as the broad focus of visual culture studies. It is along these lines that Moxey finds differences in the Anglo-American and German approaches to visual culture studies. According to Moxey (2008: 132), “[v]isual studies in the UK and the US has tended to be dominated by an

The pictorial/iconic turn can, therefore, also be understood somewhat differently to what is proposed by Mitchell's recognition of the anxiety over the image. Hans-Ulrich Gumbrecht (2004: xv), for instance, describes the theoretical endeavours of the pictorial turn as an attempt to study images with regard to their "presence effects" and not only to their "meaning effects". Driven by interest in the materiality of images and objects, recent research on art is increasingly giving attention to the so-called "presence" of images, or what Keith Moxey (2008: 132) suggests is their "existential status as images", focusing on their inherent "nature and structure".¹⁷

In other words, the pictorial/iconic turn has produced research into aspects of artworks that "[...] exceed the possibilities of a semiotic interpretation" (Moxey 2008: 132), an ingredient it no doubt shares with the sensory approach, as it has been defined in the literature thus far (Bacci & Melcher 2011, Di Bello & Koureas 2010, Howes 2005). According to Moxey's (2008: 132) ideas about the future prospects of art history, from the standpoint of the pictorial/iconic turn at least, there is a sense that the "[...] physical properties of images are [now] as important as their social function".¹⁸ This kind of research is therefore interested in "[...] the other side of experience, what comes to meet us rather than what we bring to the encounter [...]" (Moxey 2008: 133). When Di Bello & Koureas (2010: 1) indicate their support of art historical methodologies "[...] that can account for [...] the materiality of works of art" it is difficult to deny the strong conceptual affinities between the pictorial/iconic turn and the sensory turn.

interpretive paradigm according to which the image is more often than not conceived of as a *representation*, a visual construct that betrays the ideological agenda of its makers [...]. In contrast, amongst German scholars of visual culture (and Mitchell in the US) there is an interest in the ways in which images affect us, "[...] in a manner that sign systems fail to regulate [...]" (Moxey 2008: 133). In other words, the different approaches taken to images in these two schools of thought hinge on their status as *representations* on the one hand and *presentations* on the other.

¹⁷ Mitchell's (2005a) intriguing question: "what do pictures want?" no doubt stems from this interest in the power and agency of images.

¹⁸ The approach taken by anthropologists such as Alfred Gell also resonates with research into the presence effects of images and artefacts. Cf. Gell's (1998) *Art and agency: an anthropological theory*.

Apparently the sensory turn has emerged alongside the pictorial and iconic turns, which challenge logocentric interpretations of works of visual art. Howes (2005: 2), however, suggests that it is not only the logocentrism – or, as he puts it, “verbocentrism” – of the academic enterprise (within which the linguistic and cultural turns are seated) that is disdained by sensory academics, but also the overemphasis on vision (at the expense of the rest of the corporeal sensorium) in the interpretation of such visual texts, as historians ‘look’ for clues to interpret meaning.¹⁹

The pictorial turn may even have given rise to, or at least strongly influenced, the sensory turn. For, surely the body of the viewer is implicated in interpretations of the “presence effects” (Gumbrecht 2004: xv) of visual artefacts? In this respect, Belting’s research (which is associated with the pictorial or iconic turn) emphasises a spectator’s full-bodied response to images. In his article ‘Image, medium, body: a new approach to iconology’, Belting (2005) argues that, despite its “[...] marginalization, so much à la mode”, a turn toward the body (of the perceiver or performer of images) is “[...] indispensable for any iconology”. He ends the article by stating that “[t]oday, it is the task of a new iconology to [...] reintroduce the body which has either been marginalized by our fascination with media or defamiliarized as a stranger in our world”. “The present consumption of images [...]” he argues, “[...] needs our critical response, which in turn needs our insights on how images work on us” (Belting 2005: 319). Perhaps it would not be too ambitious to suggest that recent academic work in sensory scholarship is contributing to laying a foundation for such an iconology. For, Di Bello & Koureas (2010: 1) have argued that sensory scholars are not only interested in the materiality of art, but also in exploring methodologies “[...] that can account for bodily experiences” with art.

¹⁹ In the same way, Stafford (1997: 5), has argued that the Saussurean ‘linguistic turn’ has “[...] emptied the mind of its body, obliterating the interdependence of physiological functions and thinking”.

4.2.3 Turn back!

If the sensory turn is considered not only in terms of the preceding intellectual positions from which this paradigm turns away, but also in terms of the philosophical and epistemological traditions to which it returns, then a more nuanced understanding of the rise of this position and its conceptual affinities with other theoretical positions comes to light. For, the present interest in the sensory has much older historical roots in past traditions evidently still alive, or presently being ‘reborn’ as I showed in Chapters 2 & 3.²⁰

In some of the intellectual work currently emerging within the sensory turn there appears to be a specific return to the notion of *Einfühlung* (meaning ‘in-feeling’ or ‘feeling-into’),²¹ a term coined in 1873 by art psychologist, Robert Vischer (1847-1933) to describe the ways in which spectators respond to art and architecture through their bodies (Esrock 2010: 218).²² Vischer developed a schema which accounted for the ways in which “[...] spectators project their bodily forms, their emotions, their selves, and their souls into objects they perceive” (Esrock 2010: 218). He argued that “[...] the visual stimulus is experienced not so much with our eyes as with a different sense in another part of our body” (qtd Esrock 2010: 218). In the late nineteenth century, Theodore Lipps (1851-1914) developed Vischer’s notion of *Einfühlung*, to include not only how people understand inanimate objects but also how they understand mental states in other people. For Lipps, who introduced the first scientific theory of empathy, “[...] empathy is the fact that the antithesis between myself and the

²⁰ The sensory turn stems from the empiricist tradition in philosophy and epistemology which held that mental functions like conceptualising, analysis, judgement, memory and imagination all proceed from sensory processes. In other words, in some instances, the empiricist tradition narrowed and reduced the nature of experience to “pure, isolated elements of sensation” (Berleant 1991: 191). This tradition goes back to Aristotelian philosophy in ancient Greece and nominalist thinking at the end of the Middle Ages. Its strongest twentieth century representative would be pragmatism, in particular Richard Shusterman’s (1999) variety of somaesthetics. Distinct from this line would be the so-called rationalist or idealist tradition going back to Platonism (among others) and *a priorism* discussed in the previous chapters.

²¹ Cf. the brief summary of the history of the concept by David Depew (2005).

²² Cf. Vittoria Gallese ‘Mirror neurons and art’ (2011), David Freedberg & Gallese ‘Motion, emotion and empathy in aesthetic experience’ (2007) as well as various texts by Ellen Esrock (1994, 2001 & 2010).

object disappears, or rather does not yet exist" (qtd Berleant 1991: 16). From the perspective of empathy theory what is in the world and my experience of it are drawn together. According to Ellen Esrock (2010: 219) empathy theory quickly came to be regarded as too sensationalist or 'theatrical' and the opposite of serious intellectual or visual abstraction with the result that Vischer's notion of empathy became virtually completely rejected by the mid-twentieth century owing to its "transcendental, Romantic orientation".

Such an attitude towards art was also strongly in opposition to Panofsky's pursuit of a rigorous method by which to explain and interpret images. As Didi-Huberman (2005: xxiii) argues, Panofsky wanted to "exorcise" from images any uncertainty an art historian might have about them. In other words, Panofsky "[...] wanted to reconstruct his *Kunstgeschichte* as a *history of exorcisms*, of safety measures and reasonable distancing" (Didi-Huberman 2005: xxiii). In Didi-Huberman's (2005: xxiii) estimation, Panofsky was wary of "[...] the aesthetic vagueness of nonhistoricised approaches to art [...]" . The development of his iconological method was thus a means by which to render art history objective and scientific and to quell the 'power' of images on its viewers. Iconology was, in Didi-Huberman's (2005: xvi) opinion, developed as a "[...] veritable buffer zone meant to protect the discipline against all imprudence and all impudence: in other words, from all hubris, from all immoderation in the exercise of reason".²³ It is precisely from such a scientific approach to explaining images that sensory scholarship, it would appear, turns away thereby returning to approaches more interested in people's bodily or embodied and imaginative encounters and engagements with art.

²³ Didi-Huberman contrasts Panofsky's method with the approach taken by Warburg, who was interested in the symptomatic value of images. Whereas Panofsky endeavoured to *explain* images, by identifying their signifying values, Warburg aimed to *understand* images, and in the process "[...] liberat[e] an 'expressive value' [that] transcend[s], in anthropological terms, all signification" (Didi-Huberman 2005: xxiv).

4.3 The turn of the body

Having now established the particular approaches to understanding art from which the sensory turn retreats as well as those to which it returns, its relation to other recent paradigm shifts has become apparent. More precisely, the sensory turn can be located within a broad theoretical paradigm in which the body has in various ways taken centre stage since the late twentieth century. Robert Cooter (2010: 395) regards the turn toward the body in academic discourse – or “the turn of the body” as he puts it – to have emerged largely with Foucault’s (1970) notion of the historicised body as opposed to an essentialised, purely biological body. The ‘somatic turn’ or ‘somatic moment’, argues Cooter (2010: 395), accelerated after Foucault’s notion of ‘biopower’ (1977b, 1981 & 2003) drew attention to the relationship between power and the human body by emphasising the historical, political and ideological construction of the normative or normatised subject.

In the wake of Foucault’s analyses of the discursive construction of the body, a new wave of cultural enquiry began probing the limitations of thinking of the body only in linguistic/representational terms. Since the 1990s cultural historians began to investigate what was considered to be the body’s neglected corporeal experience; in other words, the pre-cultural body was emphasised in an attempt to recover the “real” body (Cooter 2010: 398). According to this kind of writing about the body, recovering and acknowledging experience does not have to entail a return to biological essentialism. Discourse was therefore not entirely rejected; discourse and experience were thus not regarded as mutually exclusive theoretical or epistemological domains.

In the early twenty-first century, however, Cooter notes various directions taken in research on the body and its relation to history. On the one hand, he sees a return to biological essentialism which he relates directly to developments in the neurosciences. Stafford’s recent openness to the potential of science to offer insights useful to cultural historians is but one example of intellectual shifts in

this direction. In *Echo object* she announces that “[t]hose of us in the humanities and social sciences [...]” have acquired “[...] wonderful new intellectual tools to re-imagine everything from autopoiesis to mental imagery” (Stafford 2007: 1).

Current debates on the body in history, argues Cooter (2010: 399), revolve around the question of representation versus presentation. In other words, the main streams of thought vying for attention involve the opposition between the disembodied nature of research invested in the discursive construction of the body on the one hand, and the essentialising notion, at least in Cooter’s (2010: 400) opinion, of the ontological corporeal experience of the body on the other, of which Stafford’s conversion is an example.²⁴ In this sense, the argument regarding images as either representations or presentations has now extended to conceptions of the nature and status of the body. Whilst post-structuralist approaches to understanding social and cultural life gained increasing status in the humanities (including art history and visual culture studies) in the 1990s, denying the validity of feeling, emotion, intuition and sensation in human experience, evidently other scholars have been concerned with non-representational – or presentational – aspects of experience.

These two poles are also evident in the literature associated with the sensory turn. For instance, as pointed out in the previous chapter, Howes (2005: 5) warns sensory studies to exercise caution in their use of scientific data. For, “[j]ust as scientists usually fail to consider cultural factors in their study of perception, they usually fail to recognize that science itself is a product of culture”. In Howes’ (2005: 4) opinion, it is precisely because perceptual paradigms substantially influence scientific paradigms that the sciences should be treated cautiously. Instead, Howes’ (2006: 114) approach to the senses is to proceed from the position that “[...] the sensorium is a social construction [...]” and the senses are “[...] lived and understood differently in different cultures and historical periods”. His understanding is that the sensory models constructed at

²⁴ Stafford (2007: 1) admits to having “[...] to rethink the major themes of [her] life’s work” such as her earlier research dealing with the political, ideological and historical construction of the body.

various times and in different places “[...] are not purely cognitive or limited to individual experiences”, but are rather “communal perceptual orientation[s]” that are, at the same time, always “subject to contestation” (Howes 2006: 114).

On the other hand, many of the contributors to Bacci & Melcher’s *Art and the senses* (2011) embrace the potential of the cognitive- and neurosciences to provide evidence for the operation of people’s senses as they respond to what they see, smell, hear and so forth. The essay by Spence, Shankar & Blumenthal entitled “Sound bites’: auditory contributions to the perception and consumption of food and drink” (2011) is a noteworthy example of sensory scholarship in this direction. In their research into the influence of sound on people’s sense of taste they draw on empirical evidence sourced from a wide net of scientific fields including “[...] cognitive and environmental psychology, food science, neuroimaging, marketing and psychophysics [...]” (Spence *et al* 2011: 210). Poststructuralist approaches and discursive analyses which aim to uncover the ideological agendas at work in art and in visual culture are evidently unhelpful to this strand of sensory scholarship. In other words, the main thrust of these opposing positions seems to be their conception of the body in either historical or ahistorical terms.

The varied turn(s) toward the lived, experiencing body has taken diverse forms, some of which have gained their own linguistic status. In other words, within the ‘somatic’ turn, besides the sensory turn there appear to lurk at least two other turns, namely, the ‘affective’ and ‘corporeal’ turns which, at least in some ways, appear to share similar conceptual approaches to the sensory turn. The theoretical aims and trajectories of these turns are discussed and critiqued in more detail and linked with the so-called ‘phenomenological’ turn in the next chapter. In the following two sections I merely sketch a very brief outline of their intellectual premises in order to show their close affinity to the sensory turn.

4.3.1 The corporeal turn

Sheets-Johnstone's book *The corporeal turn: an interdisciplinary reader* (1996) is a collection of essays written over a span of twenty-six years, the first of which was published in 1979. In her introduction to the book, therefore, Sheets-Johnstone points out that there is nothing revolutionary or new about the corporeal turn at all. Having coined the term 'corporeal turn' in *The roots of thinking* (1990), the author describes the collection of essays as, in various ways, documenting "[...] a diversity of perspectives on the body" (Sheets-Johnstone 1996: 2). The starting point of all the essays is "[...] a belief in experience as the grounding source of knowledge and a dedicated examination of experience as the testing ground of one's knowledge" (Sheets-Johnstone 1996: 2).

For Sheets-Johnstone (1996: 2) the corporeal turn in the humanities and social sciences represents as fundamental a shift in theorising the human as the earlier linguistic turn had accomplished. But whereas the linguistic turn drew attention to "[...] something long taken for granted [...] [or] heretofore simply assumed [...]", with the corporeal turn it is a matter of "[...] correcting something misrepresented for centuries". As has already been pointed out in Chapter 2,²⁵ Sheets-Johnstone (1996) finds that, despite the theorisation of 'embodiment' in the twentieth century, for the most part, the "wound" produced by the 'Cartesian' classification of the body as "mere material handmaiden" to the superior mind,²⁶ remains palpable. In particular, Sheets-Johnstone (1996:2) notes that "[...] reductionist thinking that collapses body into brain – *the brain* – thereby bypassing its living reality" is especially guilty of bandaging but not healing that wound. It is evidently the challenge of the corporeal turn to bring such misrepresentations to light. The reductive thinking about embodied

²⁵ Cf. section 2.6 specifically.

²⁶ Jones (2006: 5) makes a similar statement, by referring to the ways in which the body has been treated as a "humble servant" to the transcendent mind.

perception produced by neuroscience (as discussed in Chapter 3),²⁷ may well be an example of such misrepresentations.

4.3.2 The affective turn

Emphasising people's unique, embodied experiences in the social world, the so-called 'affective turn' generally shares the dissatisfaction with poststructuralist and determinist approaches to cultural analysis taken up by proponents of the sensory and corporeal turns (Hemmings 2005: 549). Whereas the theoretical approaches of social art history – feminism, Marxism, postcolonialism and semiotics – have tended, for the most part, to read artworks as texts, Marie-Luise Angerer (2011: 219) argues that recent "[...] theoretical approaches in art and media studies underpin a development that distances itself from critiques of representation and orients itself toward an affective reading or interpretation of affects and emotions in reception". She sees this "rejection of critiques of representation" not as "a passing fashion" but as a symptom of a more "fundamental shift in modes of 'theorising the human'" (Angerer 2011: 219).

For Susan Best (2011: 1) this shift addresses the "theoretical blindspot in art history" which she believes to be the discipline's blindness regarding "the interpretation of art's affective dimension".²⁸ Although I do return to affect in Chapter 5 it is appropriate at this point to very briefly flesh out some of the ways in which the complex nature of people's affective – or bodily – responses to works of art has been theorised. Theorists of affect, such as Gilles Deleuze (1997), Brian Massumi (1996 & 2002), Simon O'Sullivan (2001) and Eve Sedgwick (2003), to name only a few, have produced different ways of defining

²⁷ Cf. section 3.6.2.

²⁸ The high expectations of regnant scholarly formalism, structuralism, and semiotic iconography would likely be the reason for the neglect as pointed out by Didi-Huberman (2005).

affect.²⁹ Thus, it is only possible here to make a few generalisations as to the intellectual trajectory of the affective turn in its relation to the sensory turn.

Primarily focussed on the non-discursive constituencies of cultural experience and subject formation, or, as Clare Hemmings (2005: 551) puts it, the “qualitative experience of the social world” affect theorists are more interested in “states of being” than in social determinist perspectives of subjectivity. For instance, according to O’Sullivan (2001: 125), delving into the realm of affect is akin to thinking about art in terms “beyond representation”. In this sense, therefore, affect theory may share the pictorial/iconic turn’s interest in “presentation” (Moxey 2004) as well as being similar to one of the strands as discussed above (Bacci & Melcher). Based on Jean-François Lyotard’s notion of art’s “excess” or “rapture”, of art’s “[...] harbour[ing] within it [...] a potential of associations that overflows all the determinations of its ‘reception’ and ‘production’ [...]” (qtd O’Sullivan 2001: 125), O’ Sullivan theorises affect – or “excess” – not as transcendent, but as “*immanent* to matter” (O’Sullivan 2001: 126). Critical of Marxist and deconstructive emphases on ‘reading’ art as a text, O’Sullivan (2001: 126) argues that affects are “moments of *intensity*, [...] reaction[s] in/on the body”, which are “immanent to experience” taking place at the level of “matter”.

Occurring on an “*asignifying* register”, affects are not connected with “knowledge or meaning” (O’Sullivan 2001: 126). Affects cannot be read, argues O’Sullivan (2001: 126), they can only be experienced. In O’Sullivan’s (2001: 127) estimation, since affect is experienced in the present – not in the deconstructive sense, however, as “inaccessible to consciousness”, or a kind of *beyond* experience, but rather as immanent experience – it is an “event” or “happening”. This event is not “always already captured by representation” or “determined by the scene of the event” in the deconstructive way of thinking, but

²⁹ Susan Best (2011: 5) notes that in psychological and psychoanalytic literature, as well as “interdisciplinary studies” (which may include sensory scholarship) the terms, affect, feeling and emotion are used in contrasting and often contradictory ways especially with regard to whether or not these are conscious or unconscious experiences.

as a “genuinely unexpected” event (O’Sullivan 2001:127). Instead of “clos[ing] down the possibility of accessing the event that is art”, thinking of art as an event – or the “event site” (Badiou qtd O’Sullivan 2001: 127) – in affective terms, would be to regard art as “[...] a mechanism for accessing a kind of *immanent beyond* to everyday experience”. In other words, art functions as a kind of play, a performance, distinguishable from the mundane. Although art as an event is activated through representation – after all, we may see recognisable objects – to regard art as an event means to look beyond the work as merely representation.

But how can an encounter with a work of art regarded as an event then be articulated? How is this event recognised, enabled, and, importantly, the ekphrasistic question: how does one verbalise the experience that is incommunicable through language? As Hemmings (2005) points out, affect is predominantly theorised as inarticulable and, for the most part, beyond interpretation. For instance, in *Peregrinations* Lyotard (qtd Sullivan 2001: 128) writes:

[One must] become open to the ‘It happens that’ rather than the ‘What happens’ [...] [and this] requires at the very least a high degree of refinement in the perception of small differences [...]. In order to take on this attitude you have to impoverish your mind, clean it out as much as possible, so that you make it incapable of anticipating the meaning, the ‘What’ of the ‘It happens [...]’. The secret of such ascesis lies in the power to be able to endure occurrences as ‘directly’ as possible without the mediation of a ‘pre-text.’ Thus, to encounter the event is like bordering on nothingness.

How is one to explain such experiences of the “it happens”? In *Visualising feeling: affect and the feminine avant-garde*, Best (2011) contends that affects are not beyond interpretation.³⁰ She argues that feeling and emotion have been neglected in art history which has, according to her, for much of the twentieth

³⁰ In order to account for her own affective experiences of art, Best draws on a interplay of psychoanalytic theory and psychology as well as an extensive use of Casey’s philosophical account of artistic expression as an ingredient of a work of art, as opposed to something which it conveys.

century emphasised social and historical contexts rather than personal affective engagements between viewers and art.³¹ Her perspective on the matter of the alleged inarticulability of affective experiences is that it is simply owing to art history's reluctance to deal with feeling and emotion that the discipline possesses a “[...] limited vocabulary to describe artistic feeling [...]” (Best 2011: 7). Overall, Best (2011: 4) finds art history's emphasis on social and historical context rather than on the work of art itself and the ways in which it is encountered – or, the “affective engagement presented by works of art” – to be problematic.³²

Affective engagement referred to here should preferably be understood as personal engagement rather than some gut-punched visceral level of contact. In addition, Best's (2011: 7) reference to “artistic feeling” is surely suggestive of the artwork's expressive symptoms as well as the spectator's emotive response rather than the artist's feelings. Would it not then be better to replace ‘artistic’ with ‘aesthetic’ or ‘imaginative personal involvement’? Furthermore, as for the supposed inarticulability of affect, would it not be preferable to think of affect as opening up the means for connection or contact into many other dimensions (such as life, feeling, meaning, knowledge, trust, and so forth). For although affect certainly is not always legible it issues the invitation to legibility in the same way it discloses many other possibilities.³³

A noteworthy example of an approach to art that is more interested in the physical properties of images and their affect on viewers than in their social function is that taken by Claire Farago & Robert Zwijnenberg in *Compelling visuality: the work of art in and out of history* (2003). In their introduction the editors argue that the essays in their volume ask questions about the actual and

³¹ This view would find support in Paul Crowther's (2002: 478) assessment of the emergence of poststructuralist tenets in art historiography from the 1970s.

³² In addition, Best (2011: 4) argues that, “[...] given the traditional alignment of femininity with feeling and emotion as opposed to the masculine domains of thinking and reason”, art history has tended to “under-read [...] the specific modes of affective engagement presented by works of art” while over-reading for meaning.

³³ For instance, a fingerprint as basic contact/connection opens up into detection, interpretation and is an index of presence.

personal experiences of the beholder of the work of art. In other words, the various contributors take the traditional art historical enquiry further to include “[...] questions that contemporary art historians generally dismiss as ahistorical or anachronistic [...]” (Farago & Zwijnenberg 2003: vii). These ‘other’ questions ask “[...] what [the beholder] actually see[s], touch[es], and experience[s] when confronted with a ‘historical’ work of art” (Farago & Zwijnenberg 2003: vii). Thus, the theme of the volume is to explore and better understand the relationship between – or the image-event that transpires from – the active confluence of the particular and compelling presence and materiality of the work of art – from the past or the present – and the compelling experiences of contemporary spectators. In this respect their approach aligns with Di Bello & Koureas’ (2010: 1) interest in the materiality of art and the particular bodily experiences of those who respond to it.

Farago & Zwijnenberg (2003: xi) contend that “[...] most scholars today deny or refuse to recognize that their engaged, embodied responses constitute an intrinsic and necessary part of scholarly investigation”. Such refusal may be due to the problem that a subjective interpretation, not grounded in historical or contextual fact, easily slips into an ‘anything goes’ approach. Equally, it is part of the ascetic legacy of Kantian disinterestedness, of Positivist academic neutrality (sailing under the flag of objectivity) and of an interpretive hermeneutics lacking the crucial components of personal engagement, application, appropriation, solidarity and commitment.

But, as Farago & Zwijnenberg (2003: xiii) succinctly put it, “[...] subjective experience does not produce a purely subjective interpretation”. At the same time, however, it would seem that, for these authors a critical interpretation and reflection are possible only when an art historian’s subjective experience – his or her affective and initial response to the work of art – is grounded in historical

interpretation. In other words, in their narrow view, personal experience ought always to be accompanied by textual analysis.³⁴

4.4 Just looking: sensory squabbles in art historiography

In a close examination of recent literature dealing with art from the perspective of sensory studies, two main antagonisms against art history have come to light. On the one hand, the disapproval of art history's putative visual-centric bias is clearly evident in sensory scholarship. On the other, art historiography's supposed continuing allegiance to a notion of an ideally detached observer of art is repeatedly condemned (Bacci & Melcher 2011, Halsall 2004, Johnson 2011, Jones 2006, Marks 2011: 240). These two problems are fleshed out and interrogated in the following sections.

Although these are not the only qualms against art history raised by commentators in the burgeoning field of sensory studies, these two antagonisms which are overtly evident in the rhetoric of sensory scholarship are unpacked and analysed here because it is not self-evident, to me at least, why art history should be under fire on these grounds. Finally, I probe the potential of the sensory turn to introduce novel ways in which to approach not only art that sets out to engage the audience in multisensorial ways (such as immersive or interactive installations which overtly invite participation) but also pictorial art that appears – on the surface at least – to require limited multisensorial engagement with them.

³⁴ Their's is a narrow view considering the recent debates among historians regarding the issue of 'presentism' as discussed above in section 4.2.2.

4.4.1 Art historiography's 'eye'solation

Art historiography has been accused of prioritising vision. Criticism of the dominance of sight in art history's methodological tool kit³⁵ is rooted in the broader cultural and philosophical interrogation of sight having allegedly become the "master sense of the modern era" (Jay 1988a: 3) as discussed in Chapters 2 and 3. For example, Halsall (2004: 103) argues that, as a modern discipline, art history "[...] follows the modern paradigm of cognition, theory, experience, and [...] art [...]" by prioritising sight.³⁶ Within the framework of the development of formalism in art historiography's methodology, Halsall contends that the sense of sight was made superior to other modes of experience particularly by Alois Riegl (1858-1905)³⁷ and Heinrich Wölfflin (1864-1945)³⁸ respectively in their attempts to lend scientific objectivity and autonomy to the discipline.³⁹ In other words, Halsall links the claim for autonomy in modern art

³⁵ 'Tool kit' here refers to Didi-Huberman's (2003: 38) critique of Baxandall's notion of a 'mental tool kit' employed by art historians.

³⁶ It is, of course, far too reductive to speak of there being only one modern paradigm and the notion of any single overarching narrative of either modern art or modern art historiography should best be avoided. What Halsall seems to be referring to here is presumably the dominant model of cognition and experience that is also referred to by Jay (1988a: 3).

³⁷ As a key figure in developing modern methods of art historiography, particularly a certain strain of formalism, the Viennese art historian, Riegl connected modernity and visuality in his explication of the balance between optic and haptic conceptions of space and its representation in art. In accordance with his positivist understanding of style, Halsall (2004: 110) maintains that Riegl "[...] identified the history of art as a slow shift toward a modern perceptual and conceptual sensibility". According to this modern sensibility space was understood optically "[...]" as a rational and abstract concept" (Halsall 2004: 110). Cf. Iversen (1993), Iversen & Melville (2010: 91-96), Podro (1972 & 1982), Olin (1992), and Woodfield (2001) for various more nuanced accounts of Riegl's approach to art history than that given by Halsall.

³⁸ In *The principles of art history: the problem of the development of style in later art* Wölfflin (1950 [1915]: 11) summarises his position on art in the following way: "Every artist finds certain visual possibilities before him, to which he is bound. Not everything is possible at all times. Vision itself has its history, and the revelation of these visual strata must be regarded as the prime task of art history". If this statement is to be taken as the crux of Wölfflin's approach to art history, as Iversen & Melville (2010: 71) do, his visual emphasis is difficult to deny. Further, his visual vocabulary for describing the differences between a Classical and Baroque style are well-known, namely, linear/painterly, planar/recessive, closed/open, multiplicity/unity, and absolute/relative clarity. Even though the terms referring to the Classical can be linked with a tactile or haptic orientation, it would seem that for Wölfflin "[...]" the optical has a certain aesthetic privilege [...]" (Iversen & Melville 2010: 76). Halsall (2004: 111) also finds a link between the scheme for formal visual analysis developed by Wölfflin and Impressionism's reduction of the act of painting "[...]" to the replication of the visual sense".

³⁹ In their rationale outlined on their website, the Concordia Sensoria Research Team (CONCERT) evidently concur with Halsall in their announcement that they intend to "[...]" enlarge conventional visual models of the aesthetic and bring to the fore previously suppressed aspects of aesthetic experience. This investigation will constitute the first comprehensive study of the

with the theoretical and methodological endeavours of modern (formalist) art historians.⁴⁰

Halsall may, however, have over-simplified Riegl's approach to art history. Margaret Olin (1989), for example, has pointed to the ways in which Riegl's attention to the spectator contradicts the fundamental principles of the dominant strain of formalism. Furthermore, in considering the development of formalist positions in art history, it would, of course, be more precise to replace the term 'formalism' with its plural, 'formalisms'. For, as Iversen & Melville (2010: 61) point out, there are marked differences between the positions put forward by art historians (and art critics) that have been subsumed under the category, 'formalist'. For instance, Wölfflin's "brand of formalism" (Iversen & Melville 2010: 62) differs quite distinctly from that of Greenbergian formalism, to which I refer below. Furthermore, it is precisely their differences that Iversen & Melville (2010: 90) want to keep in play, rather than iron out.

Both Riegl and Wölfflin, at least according to Halsall's (2004: 111) perhaps reductive argument, considered the structured methods and procedures of formalist art history to be broadly linked to modernism. These art historians propagated a discipline of art history, which could itself stand as separate and self-contained, based on a formal analysis of "[...] the separate and self-contained visual qualities of the work" (Halsall 2004: 111). Their efforts to produce a systematic account of the history of art thus parallel the development of formalism in the production of art at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth.⁴¹

role of smell, taste and touch in art" (*Senses [s.a.]*). The group of researchers, including Howes (director of CONCERT), Classen and the art historians, Jim Drobnick and Jennifer Fisher, refer not only to the "visualist facade of formal art" but also to Western art history's overall "visual emphasis".

⁴⁰ Jones (2006: 10) concurs with Halsall, stating that "[f]ormalist art criticism yoked itself precisely to this hegemonic [the visual] sense".

⁴¹ Cf. Michael Podro's more nuanced understanding of formalist art history in *The critical historians of art* (1982).

More specifically, the turn to the visual at the foundation of both formalism and modernism, was considered by Mikhail Bahktin & Pavel Medvedev (1978: 43) to be connected to a turn toward a formalist understanding of vision and visuality. In this regard, Bahktin & Medvedev (1978: 43) commented that: “It was not what was seen that was new, but the forms of seeing themselves”. In other words, emphasis was given not to the empirical act of seeing but to the ‘ways of seeing’ employed by human beings at differing times and in different cultural contexts. This leads Halsall (2004: 112) to maintain that “[...] formalism led to a bias toward the visual over and above other ways of conceptualizing experience”. In particular, the prominence given to the discriminating capabilities of the eyes⁴² presumably lent the discipline, now grounded in objective reality, scientific credibility. Thus, Halsall (2004: 112) regards this transition from connoisseurship to *Kunstwissenschaft* as a serious attempt to validate art history as a “rigorous and systematic” discipline.

In the same vein, in another generation and on another continent, Greenberg’s formalist approach to modernist aesthetics has also been accused of prioritising the visual. Caroline Jones (2006: 7)⁴³ finds that in his writing on modern art Greenberg “[...] exemplifies the sensory channelling required of eager aspirants to modernity”. Jones (2006: 9) examines the ways in which the work of the American artists who “followed [Greenberg’s] formalist project” became increasingly “optical” at the same time that the art critic praised the pictoriality and opticality of their work. Critical of sensory experience in general, vision was ambiguously caught up in Greenberg’s aversion to the senses. However, as Jones (2006: 8) points out, Greenberg paradoxically “[...] fetishized sight, which had traditionally been the sense capable of producing the most ‘distance’ from

⁴² Particularly in Konrad Fiedler’s typical terms presented in *On judging works of visual art* (1957 [1879]).

⁴³ Taking a constructivist approach, Jones is interested in the ways in which the senses are produced and treated in culture. Thus, rather than following what has been described as the essentialising route of popular science, according to which human nature is considered to be hardwired, she prefers to consider “[...] the powerful social machinery we put in place to organize physical phenomena”. “Eye glasses and sedatives [...]” she argues, “[...] are social, not natural sensory structures” (Jones 2006: 11). For this reason, the new media works she includes in her text, *Sensorium: embodied experience, technology, and contemporary art* (2006) challenge and destabilize the “sensory map bequeathed to us” (Jones 2006: 11).

the body". Greenberg (1992 [1961]: 757) undoubtedly celebrated the pure visual qualities and "purely optical experience" of a work of art. As one of the foremost supporters of modern art, according to Greenberg (1992 [1961]: 758), modernist painting leaves a viewer's body behind as "[...] the illusion created by a Modernist is one into which one can only look, can travel through only with the eye". In other words, in confining itself only to that which is given in visual experience, modernist art does not – "should" not, according to Greenberg (1992 [1961]: 758) – refer to "[...] anything given in other orders of experience [...]"⁴⁴.

The accusation of art history's supposed visual-centrism should likely be understood more broadly than the rhetoric quoted above immediately conveys. For, the reductive allegation that art history is not or has never been interested in looking beyond the visual at all fails to acknowledge the multiple approaches and alternate strains in the various developments within the discipline. For, as it has already been noted, in Vischer's theorisation of people's empathic connections with art, viewers' bodies were not left behind. Along the same lines, Wölfflin's investigations in the late nineteenth century into visitor's kinaesthetic encounters with buildings did not privilege visual encounters in architecture.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Architecture has also been berated for its ocularcentrism. Pallasmaa (2005: 19) describes modern architecture as inhumane in its neglect of the other senses and the privilege it gives to vision. This sensory suppression, he argues, has resulted in the design of both buildings and cities in which people experience alienation, detachment and solitude. Citing the technologically advanced spaces of airports and hospitals as examples of spaces which produce a feeling of isolation, Pallasmaa (2005: 19) maintains that modern architecture overall "[...] has not facilitated human rootedness in the world". In short, according to Pallasmaa (2005: 19), "[...] modernist design at large has housed the intellect and the eye, but it has left the body and the other senses, as well as our memories, imagination and dreams, homeless". Citing the writings of Le Corbusier, Walter Gropius and Laszlo-Moholy-Nagy as examples, Pallasmaa (2005: 27) finds that modern architecture celebrated the eye with little or no regard for how the other senses might experience a building. Even our contemporary cities, he argues, are increasingly designed for the eye only, "[...] detached from the body by rapid motorised movement, or through the overall aerial grasp from an airplane" (Pallasmaa 2005: 29). Through the schematised nature of urban planning, "[...] the idealised and disembodied Cartesian eye of control and detachment [...] has been privileged. In contrast to architects for whom the hegemony of the eye is celebrated, for Pallasmaa, anti-ocularcentric architects would include Frank Lloyd Wright, Alvar Aalto and Louis Kahn in whose designs the kinaesthetic, the tactile and the textural are emphasised. Similarly the buildings designed by Glenn Murcutt, Steven Holl and Peter Zumthor emphasise and heighten the audience's "multitude of sensory experiences" (Pallasmaa 2005: 70).

⁴⁵ As already mentioned in Chapter 3, footnote 4, in one of his early works entitled *Prolegomina zu einer psychologie der architektur* (1886), Wölfflin described the kinaesthetic encounter

Likewise, even though Halsall (2004: 112) contends that Panofsky's intention of injecting a new and rigorous approach – iconography – into art history overall gave primacy to the visual structure of images, this critique is also difficult to sustain. For Panofsky (1970 [1955]: 205), in opposition to approaches to art that focussed on form only, was at pains to point out that, "[i]n a work of art, 'form' cannot be divorced from 'content': the distribution of colour and lines, light and shade, volumes and planes, however delightful as a visual spectacle, must also be understood as carrying a more-than-visual meaning". Since few art historians since the formalists would easily attempt to separate *what* a painting depicts from *how* it depicts it, the accusation against art history's emphasis on the visual may be misguided. Nevertheless, despite his interest in art's 'more-than-visual-meaning', Panofsky was not interested in the presence effects of art which, to some sensory scholars, cannot be omitted from the conversation around art.

Perhaps the accusation is intended to be understood as a critique only against certain art historical accounts that do not consider a person's embodied encounters with art. However, even studies concerned with people's responses to art, it has been argued, such as reception theory or reader-response criticism which developed since the 1970s in literary studies and since the 1980s by art historians such as Belting (1981), Michael Fried (1980) and Wolfgang Kemp (1983), are, for the most part, focussed on people's *visual* engagement with art (Johnson 2011). Johnson (2011: 59) maintains that in their "reception-orientated art historical research" these scholars are still "almost exclusively" interested in "the ocular" or "[...] how beholders, both real and imagined, have *looked* at art objects" (my italics, JL).

Whether or not art history is, or has been, predominantly ocularcentric is of less interest to me in this chapter than the premise that art history should apparently

between bodies and architectural forms. According to Gallese (2011: 459), in the development of his ideas at that time, Wölfflin was influenced by Vischer's theories regarding people's particular bodily and muscular responses to particular forms. With the later publication of *Principles of art history* in 1915, Wölfflin appears to have left these earlier lines of thought behind.

sever itself from the visual. Why should art history, which can be defined as the study of *visual* art, not prioritise vision? Why is the dominance of the visual in art history problematic? For, in its broadest sense, art history deals with *visual* art. Why is art history then berated for its commitment to the visual?⁴⁶ After all, as Merleau-Ponty (1993 [1945]: 146) stated in *Eye and mind* “[painting] comes from the eye and addresses itself to the eye”. In the same way, most other forms of visual art – such as sculpture, photography and drawing – are intended to be seen by sighted human beings. In the next section an attempt is made to consider, from the perspective of sensory studies, what is allegedly ‘overlooked’ when the visual and how it is ‘seen’ are assumed to be central to the art history/visual culture studies project.

According to Halsall (2004: 110), it is because “[...] our experience is not explicable in terms of separate senses [...]” that the supremacy of vision in art history must be challenged. He suggests that what “[...] needs to be acknowledged [is] that all sensory experience forms part of an inter-connected experiential continuum” (Halsall 2004: 110). In other words, the problem with the discipline of art history, in Halsall’s opinion, is its *isolation* of the sense of sight from the rest of embodied experience without acknowledging that spectators see *because* they are embodied and not *despite* their embodiment, a point already closely examined in Chapter 3.⁴⁷ This means that the rhetoric against art history’s ocularcentrism should be understood as a charge against the discipline’s oversight of a person’s multisensorial engagements with art in terms of the other senses functioning in collaboration with sight.

For Di Bello & Koureas, however, the problem is more complicated than this. These authors contend that, even when art history acknowledges vision as

⁴⁶ As I have already suggested, architecture is under fire on the same grounds. Pallasmaa (2005: 10) noted that by the mid-1990s he had become aware and concerned about “[...] the disappearance of sensory and sensual qualities” not only in the design of buildings but also the teaching of architecture. In the realm of architecture the neglect of the multisensory body would likely be an even more pressing problem than in art history. For architecture, by its nature, may have more at stake (than visual art) in this discussion considering that sentient bodies physically move through its spaces.

⁴⁷ Cf. the discussion of cross-modal plasticity in section 3.6.2.3 and synesthesia in 3.7.

connected to the other senses, “[...] art historical analyses [...] only rarely go beyond the *visually embodied observer*” (Di Bello & Koureas 2010: 1). Instead, as has been argued already, Di Bello & Koureas (2010: 1) support art historical methodologies “[...] that can account for bodily experiences and the materiality of works of art”.⁴⁸ Johnson’s research on tactility in the art produced and received in the context of Early Modern Italy would be an example of the kind of research to which Di Bello & Koureas are no doubt referring. Johnson (2011: 60) contends that tactility, amongst other sensory registers, was fundamental to the appreciation of many artworks created from roughly the early fifteenth through the seventeenth centuries, in other words, during the Renaissance and Baroque periods. Critical of art historians whose research deals with this period and who have ignored issues relating to touch, Johnson commends Baxandall, Suzanne Butters and Jennifer Montagu, who depart from other mainly ocularcentrist research on this period. What is of particular interest to Johnson is not so much the textual theme of touch in some of the artworks made in this period, or even touch as the subject matter of the works. Instead, the actual physical handling of the object by its producers and receivers is the foundation of her investigations.

Overall then, sensory studies, as it has manifested in art history thus far, and specifically in the texts referred to above, avoids ideologically driven, discursive and semiotic interpretations of art and attempts to begin a broader conversation about the role and status of the embodied sensual beings that encounter specific materialities of art. In this sense, then, and as Jay (2011: 314) puts it in his introduction to the forum on the senses in *American Historical Review*, “In the realm of the senses”, historians may “[...] at long last, [be] com[ing] to their

⁴⁸ I can only speculate on what precisely Di Bello & Koureas (2010: 1) mean by these two components: “bodily experience” and “the materiality of artworks”. Based on the discourse on the sensory turn that has emerged so far in the texts already mentioned previously, sensory scholarship does not only acknowledge the role of the classical five senses in our experience of art, culture and everyday life. Instead, the intellectual breadth of analyses of art from this perspective extends to the role of the psyche, imagination, memory and the spiritual, all of which are recognised as combining or collaborating to produce a person’s embodied experiences of art.

senses". Or, as Howes (2005: 2) puts it more bluntly, "the tower of babble" may (finally) be toppling.⁴⁹

4.4.2 Sensory denigration in modern aesthetics

Although that tower may well be leaning slightly, it is still quite intact, having been built on the rock-solid foundation of modern aesthetics, on whose intellectual foundation, it has been argued, hinges the primacy given the visual sense in negotiating artworks.⁵⁰ The discourse of aesthetics can perhaps at best be described as a theoretical minefield with many diverse views regarding precisely what the concept means and the ways in which it has been theorised and applied in different contexts.⁵¹ Despite its varied formulations in philosophy, Kant has been described as "[...] the single most influential theorist of modern aesthetics" (Duncum 2005: 12)⁵² and, in sensory scholarship, Kant's refinement of aesthetic experience is often contrasted with the ideas of Baumgarten (1714-1762). In this section, I do not attempt an in-depth analysis of Kantian

⁴⁹ In his prefaces to *The Art Seminar* series, Elkins (2006: vii) begins by stating that "[i]t has been said that there is too much theorising in the visual arts". He includes two interesting graphs visually demonstrating the "babble" that Howes (2005: 2) may be referring to. The first graph shows that since the 1980s there has been a steep rise in writing on art from the theoretical perspectives of the gaze, psychoanalysis and feminism. On the other hand, a second graph shows that interest in "[...] some of the more influential art historians of the twentieth century, writers who came before the current proliferation of theories, are waning" (Elkins 2006: viii). Panofsky and Gombrich are apparently among the art historians now found to be less interesting to contemporary researchers.

⁵⁰ In the same way, argues Pallasmaa (2005: 29), architectural theory and criticism have given priority to people's *visual* experience of architectural form via the gestalt laws of visual perception.

⁵¹ Cf. Podro's *The manifold in perception: theories of art from Kant to Hildebrand* (1972) as well as Summers' *The judgement of sense: Renaissance naturalism and the rise of aesthetics*. (1987) both of which offer insightful arguments on the notion of modern aesthetics.

⁵² It is important to also keep in mind that Kant's understanding of aesthetic judgement has been understood in at least two different ways. As Osborne (2000: 4) notes, in post-Kantian philosophy the understanding of the significance of aesthetics manifested in two radically different ways. Broadly speaking, within the mainstream of the 'analytical' or Anglo-American tradition the world is viewed from "a logical point of view" with Kant's "indeterminate judgement" considered as "pretentious vagueness" (Osborne 2000: 4). On the other hand, in the so-called 'continental' or 'modern European' tradition, according to which the world is viewed "[...]" from an aesthetic point of view [...]" Kant's understanding of aesthetic judgement as reflective and undetermining "[...]" has provided the starting point for a variety of engagements with both the metaphysical and epistemological traditions [...] involv[ing] alternative conceptions of the philosophical project itself" (Osborne 2000: 4, 5).

aesthetics or its various later manifestations, transformations and critiques in discourses on the nature or validity of aesthetic experience of art. This brief discussion may therefore be accused of glossing over the ways in which Kantian aesthetics has been both understood and challenged. The aim of this discussion is merely to highlight what has been found to be problematic about art historiography by exploring a major force of the rhetoric against modern aesthetics that has manifested in the terrain of sensory scholarship. And, over and again, the thrust of the argument has been centred on Kant's notion of aesthetic judgement.⁵³

Modern aesthetics is a product of the seventeenth and eighteenth-century Enlightenment project which saw immense strides made not only in the acquisition of scientific knowledge but also in both artistic activity and writing about it. This was a seminal period which laid the foundation for the later development of a philosophy of art which would be changed only slightly over the subsequent two centuries. By the end of the nineteenth century philosophical aesthetics was predominantly elitist, exclusive and interested only in that which is elevated above common experience (Casey 1973: xvi). Berleant (1991: 11) concurs that the “[...] pattern of thought that developed at [that] time has become integral to discussions about art, hardening into a set of axioms that have since acquired the stature of unquestioned and inviolable dogmas”.⁵⁴

⁵³ Fiedler should likely also come under fire for his denigration of the senses in aesthetic experience. Drawing on the prevailing neo-Kantian philosophy of his time, Fiedler (1876: 216) contended that “[t]he mental development of man begins only when he ceases to be confined to mere sensory perceiving, and starts to regard perceived reality as a given material world which has to be elaborated, processed and transmuted in conformity with the demands of his understanding”. Further than this, Fiedler historicised, particularised, individualised and visualised the mental category of form. Whereas Kant considered form to be a universal, timeless and *a priori* category in/of the mind, Fiedler conceived of form to be a plastic, flexible and historically changeable quality.

⁵⁴ Although the theory of aesthetic experience that developed in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries has been contested by figures such as Henri Bergson, John Dewey, Merleau-Ponty and Dufrenne, some of whose contributions are discussed elsewhere in this study, the founding principles of modern aesthetics, it would seem, are still widely regarded as being firmly entrenched in later discussions of aesthetic experience (Berleant 1991: 15, Diaconu 2006: 2, Duncum 2005). Traditional aesthetic ideas, argues Berleant (1991: 14) (if reference may be made to such a concept) “[...] continue [...] to prevail in the way the arts are explained and treated”. Furthermore, he maintains that “[...] we are still impeded by a dualistic conceptual structure and its corollary, the reduction of experience to a subjective response” (Berleant 1991: 15). It would appear then that, despite efforts to the contrary, the theorisation of aesthetic

More recently, Berleant (2003: 1) has once again claimed that the principles upon which theories of aesthetics were based two and a half centuries ago, for the most part, still apply to accounts of aesthetic experience in the twenty-first century.⁵⁵

The development of a theory of aesthetic experience is closely related to empiricist theories of experience which developed in British philosophy at the same time. Regarding sense experience as the sole source of knowledge, the British empiricist school, and in particular Locke, George Berkeley (1685-1753) and David Hume (1711-1776), variously viewed experience “[...] as the composite product of separate, discrete sensations” (Berleant 1991: 14).⁵⁶ According to the empiricist model of experience, argues Berleant (1991: 14), “[...] we derive all knowledge from these [sense data] by combining and ordering them into the more complex structures of our cognitive world”. Ultimately, however, because sensation was linked to the mind (for sensory experience was understood to be judged by the mind) in the empiricist tradition going back to Aristotle, experience was reduced to a subjective (and, moreover, passive) response. According to Berleant (1991: 14), although empiricist theory claimed

experience is currently still firmly rooted in earlier modern assumptions. On the other hand, in some twentieth century artistic circles and in certain intellectual spheres anything connected to aesthetics is entirely avoided. For example, conceptual art's opposition to the aesthetic in the 1960s and 1970s is well known. In addition, as Osbore (2000:2) points out, “[...] cultural studies and art theory of the 1970s and 1980s [...]” vehemently separated themselves “[...] from anything connected to aesthetics [...]”.

⁵⁵ Berleant (1991: 11) lists the three main principles of a theory of art as follows: 1) “that art consists primarily of objects”, 2) “that these objects possess a special status” and 3) “that they must be regarded in a special way”. Berleant's view on aesthetics is undeniably narrow for philosophers of aesthetics, art historians and artists have, in various ways, challenged these principles. It would be better to avoid sweeping generalisations that assume the existence of only one aesthetic paradigm. As Jacques Rancière (2009: 1, 15) affirms in his ‘Introduction’ to *Aesthetics and its discontents*, in recent years aesthetics has received “a bad reputation” and its history is, for the most part, one of “confusion”. Among the reasons for this reputation are no doubt aesthetics' apparent elitism and “reduction of experience to a subjective response” (Berleant 1991: 15). For these reasons aesthetics has, for the most part, fallen out of favour with social historians of art and practitioners of visual culture studies. Sensory scholarship repeatedly criticises the narrow, modern, humanist view of aesthetic experience as Berleant set it out above. As already pointed out, I briefly discuss aesthetics here in an attempt to shed some light on the critique of aesthetics from the viewpoint of sensory scholarship so as to contextualise that position and to arrive at a theory of embodied aesthetic experience in Chapter 5.

⁵⁶ Locke viewed perception as a product of the “[...] ideas that we receive from sensation” (Berleant 1991: 26). For Berkeley, our perceptions are “[...] ideas actually imprinted on the senses” (Berleant 1991: 26). Hume called these perceptions “impressions” (Berleant 1991: 26).

that aesthetic experience is immediate and direct, it nevertheless regarded a person to be separate from the world outside, thus maintaining the rationalist philosophical division between a perceiving subject and a privileged object. Therefore, Berleant understands empiricism to relegate sensory experience to judgement by the mind thereby establishing and maintaining the rationalist dualistic relationship between perceiver and world.⁵⁷

On the other hand, Baumgarten considered aesthetic experience to be influenced by all the senses.⁵⁸ Numerous sensory scholars have pointed out that Baumgarten's works, such as the two volumes of *Aesthetica* (1750/1758), have long been neglected in Anglo-American theories dealing with aesthetic experience (Di Bello & Koureas 2010, Gross 2002, Howes 2011, Shusterman 1999)⁵⁹ and warrant closer critical attention.⁶⁰ In fact, Richard Shusterman (1999: 300) contends that Baumgarten envisaged aesthetics in a manner far different to what is today defined within philosophical aesthetics as the "theory of fine art and beauty".⁶¹

⁵⁷ The emergence of the idea of man as a subject is important here. Gere (2010: 154) points out that in contrast to the way in which Renaissance perspective represents the relation between viewers and the world, the mode of viewing and spectatorship that emerged in the seventeenth century reflected a particular notion of 'man' as a subject, "[...] separate from [the world] and not heterogeneous to it".

⁵⁸ The specific connection between the arts and the senses did not come from Baumgarten but from Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1729-1781) (Marks 2011: 240, Rée 2000: 58). More specifically, however, according to Marks (2011: 240), Lessing only connected "the higher senses of vision and hearing" with the aesthetic experience of art.

⁵⁹ Cf. Gross, 'The neglected programme of aesthetics' (2002) in which the author argues that Baumgarten's *Aesthetica* should be revisited in order to reach a more inclusive understanding of the concept of aesthetics.

⁶⁰ The fact that *Aesthetica* has not yet been translated into English is undoubtedly evidence of, and perhaps the reason for, this neglect in the Anglo-American tradition. Although Georg Friedrich Meier, a student of Baumgarten, transformed his teacher's lecture notes into accessible German, and extracts have been translated into Italian and French, the full Latin text was only recently translated into German in 2007 by Dagmar Mirbach.

⁶¹ Baumgarten adopted the word aesthetics in its classical usage where sensory pleasure was related to the experience of beauty rather than art. In other words, classical theorists were concerned with the experience of natural objects or young bodies as beautiful rather than objects produced as art (Rée 2000: 58). Baumgarten used the term *aesthetica* in its traditional sense – that is "[...] to denote the objects of sensory knowledge in general [...]" (Rée 2000: 58). It was Lessing who used the term in the sense of the philosophical doctrine that it became which has since developed into a theory that "[...] describe[s] the science of the fine arts and perhaps the source and criterion of artistic value" (Rée 2000: 58).

Baumgarten coined the term ‘aesthetics’ based on the Greek *aisthesis* (sensory perception and not perception through the intellect)⁶² maintaining that “[...] cognition through the senses has its own significance, as sense perceptions generate specific and valuable meanings which do not need and cannot be translated into rational thoughts” (Di Bello & Koureas 2010: 4).⁶³ In other words, whereas modern (rationalist) philosophy denied the involvement of the senses in aesthetic experience, perhaps even relegating the sensing body to the status of a machine (Jones 2006: 8), Baumgarten insisted on the “[...] cognitive value of sensory perception, celebrating its rich potential not only for better thinking but for better living” (Shusterman 1999: 300). For this reason, sensory scholarship, or at least the kind proposed by Di Bello & Koureas (2010) and Howes (2011), for example, urges researchers of art and visual culture to re-examine Baumgarten’s concept of aesthetics.

While Howes (2011: 168) and Di Bello & Koureas (2010: 4) see in Baumgarten’s approach an avoidance of the intellectualisation of sensory experience, Baumgarten clearly also aligned himself with the rationalist position in that he not only accorded the senses a lower position among the cognitive faculties, but also restricted the range of sense perceptions that were worthy of study (Duncum 2005: 11).⁶⁴ In other words, Baumgarten argued that the senses must be “[...] controlled, improved, and properly directed through aesthetic

⁶² Osborne (2000: 2) notes that although in Aristotle’s formulation *aesthesis* was not considered to be “[...] a form of *episteme* or intellectual knowledge [...]” it did at the same time however [...] involve a *judgement of sense*”. In *De Anima*, Aristotle (qtd Osborne 2000: 2) contends that “each sense [...] judges/discriminates the specific differences of its own sensible object”. In other words, in its earliest forms, or at least since Aristotle, the aesthetic has been considered distinct from cognition and intellectualism, for Aristotle “[...] attributed an independent non-intellectual cognitive value to the senses” (Osborne 2000: 2).

⁶³ It is important to note that here Di Bello & Koureas somewhat overstate what Baumgarten says. For, Baumgarten distinguishes between the intensive clarity of scientific or logical cognition and the extensive clarity (confusion in the sense of fusing together widely diverse and vivid sensory impressions) of sensible cognition. Furthermore, the emphasis on ‘cognition’ in the quote betrays Baumgarten’s commitment to the broad development of Rationalism. As one of the initiators of the Enlightenment in Germany his aim was to extend the reach of rational knowledge – extending rational cognition beyond the mathematical-physical domain of natural science into the practical domain where sensory cognition operates.

⁶⁴ Intellectualisation of sensory experience was Baumgarten’s very aim. He rejected the restriction of clear and distinct ideas to scientific knowledge (which in his time meant mathematical and physical knowledge) which alone was considered to deliver certainty and a basis or model for philosophy and the whole rationalist enterprise.

training” (Shusterman 1999: 301). On Baumgarten’s terms, the senses – and therefore the body – had to be subjected to and guided by discursive reasoning. Not entirely disregarding the presumed “confused and indistinct ideas” that are supposedly the “commerce of the body” (Howes 2011: 168), however, Baumgarten’s contribution to the concept of aesthetics was to include both the clear and distinct concepts of Descartes as well as the so-called ‘confused’ discernments of a sensory logic by way of his notion of “the unity-in-multiplicity of sensible qualities” (Howes 2011: 178). In other words, while Baumgarten valued those senses that could be reconciled with or accommodated in reason, he nevertheless also noted the “[...] importance of feelings, imagination and sensory experience” (Duncum 2005: 11).

Howes (2011: 168) notes that Baumgarten’s “[...] new science was quickly appropriated and just as quickly subverted by his contemporaries”. Most decisively, according to Howes (2011: 168), was the publication of Kant’s *Critique of the power of judgement* (1790) which apparently realised Baumgarten’s “[...] worst fears concerning the intellectualisation of aesthetic perception”.⁶⁵ Although Howes’ assessment of Kant’s position on aesthetic perception may be somewhat overwrought, many sensory scholars argue that art historiography continues to hinge on notions of a rational, distanced and detached person – the art historian, connoisseur, or the properly disinterested beholder – who is able to enjoy a “pure aesthetic experience” by “[...] exercising

⁶⁵ Osborne (2000: 3) notes that while “Kant may have rejected Baumgarten’s notion of pure sensory knowledge [...]” his conception of aesthetic judgement, at the same time, belied his anti-cognitive attitude. Osborne (2000: 3) explains that, according to Kant, “[...] not only is sensible intuition an indispensable element of knowledge, but the faculty of understanding plays an essential, albeit logically undetermining role in aesthetic judgement itself”. In other words, Osborne brings attention to the “cognitive ambiguity of the aesthetic”, especially as it is dealt with by Kant in *Critique of aesthetic judgement* (1790) where it is “[...] subjected to a productive but unresolved double-coding”. On the one hand, the “[...] aesthetic is *opposed to* and *excludes* the understanding, which is the seat of concepts, conceived as representations of forms of judgement”. In this sense, the aesthetic refers to the independent functioning of the faculty of sensibility. On the other hand, however, Kant also refers to the relation between the faculty of sensibility with the faculties of understanding and reason. This relation, notes Osborne (2000: 3, 4), is one of reflection with aesthetics being concerned with “[...] the harmony of these three faculties and with the unity of subjectivity itself”.

the proper form of judgement” (Howes 2011: 168) through the faculty of sight – and hearing in the case of music – and not the other bodily senses.⁶⁶

Sensory experience (or the lack thereof), it has been noted, has been fundamental in the production of a modern discourse on aesthetic experience (Diaconu 2006: 2, Duncum 2005: 10, Howes 2011: 168).⁶⁷ However, once again, not all the senses have been treated equally. Mădălina Diaconu (2006: [s.p.]) points out that “[...] modern aesthetics regards sight and hearing as the only senses [...] able to produce art”. As a result, it has been argued that the so-called ‘secondary’, ‘lower’ or ‘base’ senses of touch, taste and smell “[...] cannot produce art because they deal with ephemeral stimuli and *consume* their objects” at the same time that “[...] other forms of art, such as music, theatre, dance, etc., [...] are as transitory as the stimuli of these secondary senses” (Diaconu 2006: 1 [my italics, JL]).⁶⁸ Furthermore, the ‘secondary’ senses “[...] are doubly near by the physical contact and emotional intimacy involved [...]” with the result that apparently “[...] we are not able to keep a distance from the subjective character of the experience in order to adopt a critical and reflective attitude, which is a basic presupposition of the aesthetic experience” (Diaconu 2006: 1). In other words, precisely because the senses of taste, touch and smell bring us into close contact with what we experience, critical reflection, it has been argued, is apparently not possible via these sensory modes.

As a result, the establishment of a philosophy of modern aesthetics has been generally understood to regard sensory and bodily experiences as subordinate

⁶⁶ From the perspective of philosophy, Diaconu (2006: 2) concurs that “[...] aesthetic theory [has not yet] le[ft] behind the ideal of an universal subject”. The important systematic point in the various eighteenth-century debates in this field is that (an) aesthetic (mode of) experience and acts of the imagination were gradually identified as distinct from rational or logical thought on the one hand, and sensory experience and feeling on the other hand. Of course this does not prohibit later proponents of empiricism or rationalism from still, in various manners, confusing it with sensory experience or ratiocination.

⁶⁷ For Howes (2011: 168), modern aesthetics basically amounts to the “disincarnation of aesthetics” which is similar to Christopher Pinney’s (2001: 160) contention that conventional aesthetics “anaesthetises” experience.

⁶⁸ The distinction of the senses in this way also recalls the empiricist distinction between so-called primary, secondary and tertiary qualities – the first (like number, weight, and so forth) belonging to objective rational knowledge, the secondary and tertiary (such as colour for instance) supposedly being more subjective and illusive.

to the competence of the reasonable or rational mind whose internal structures afford clarity of knowledge (Duncum 2005: 10-11). In other words, in this view of aesthetic experience, the mind orders, structures and gives meaning to art, and in particular, the beautiful (Berleant 1991: 11).⁶⁹ In *The critique of pure reason*, Kant (1952 [1781 or 1787]: 14) writes that “[...] it is quite possible that our empirical knowledge is a compound of that which we receive through [sensory] impressions, and that which the faculty of cognition supplies from itself [...].” This means that, while the senses provide the ‘content’ of our cognition, our faculty of understanding provides the ‘form’ by means of which we can grasp it. Kant’s (1952 [1781 or 1787]: A51/B75) famous expression that “concepts without percepts are empty, percepts without concepts are blind” means that without mental categories, neither sensation nor cognition are possible. For Kant, it is only through the *a priori* function of imagination (*Einbildungskraft*) that the sensory impressions are synthesised into a coherent totality.⁷⁰ As Kearney (1988: 169) puts it, for Kant, “[...] it is precisely the *a priori* function of imagination to present our actual experience in the particular form laid down by the pure concepts of the understanding”. Therefore, Kant’s idealist synthesis of human perception of external objects with *a priori* or innate knowledge enabled the resolution of disputes between empirical and rationalist approaches to understanding or accounting for human acquisition of knowledge.

⁶⁹ Berleant furthers this point by explaining that British theorists of the eighteenth century such as Lord Shaftesbury (1671-1713), Francis Hutcheson (1694-1746) and Thomas Reid (1710-1796) investigated how and why some objects evoke a sense of beauty and harmony. In *Essays on the powers of the human mind*, for example, Reid (1803: 545) located beauty “[...] in the moral and intellectual perfections of mind, and in its active powers”. In this sense, the mind (of the artist) supplies the material from which art is made with the “principle of meaning, regulation, and order” thereby transforming it into something of beauty (Berleant 1991: 12).

⁷⁰ It should be noted that this category changed in the course of Kant’s writing. In his first Critique (*Kritik der reinen Vernunft*) it was used in a sense (aisthesis) close to empiricism’s sensory experience (i.e. the receptive function of sensory impressions). In the third Critique (*Kritik der Urteilskraft*) it has attained the status of productive imagination, the mark of originality and creative genius.

4.4.3 Aesthetic disinterestedness

Tied up with its resistance to art historiography's alleged ocularity, sensory scholarship has also contested what it finds to be art historiography's continued allegiance to a notion of ideally detached observers, who, owing to their *looking* at works of art via a particular mode of attention, are meant to be 'disinterested' in what they see (Howes 2011: 168).⁷¹ Modern aesthetics gave rise to the



Figure 15: Karen Knorr, Connoisseurs series, *The analysis of beauty* (1986-1988)

notion of a disinterested viewer, who is ideally separated, isolated and distanced from the work of art which s/he contemplates. Both the modern Western idea of art and its production have traditionally, or at least since the

⁷¹ Jerome Stolniz (1961: 131) contends that "[w]e cannot understand modern aesthetic theory unless we understand the concept of 'disinterestedness'. On the varieties of aesthetic disinterestedness cf. Kreitman (2006).

Enlightenment, been based in large part on a ‘disinterested’ aesthetic experience according to which art is validated by a learned group of people, such as art critics, curators, dealers and museum-directors whose “aesthetic way of seeing” (Gablik 1991: 40) hinges on their ability to detach their intellectual experience of an image from their so-called ‘unreliable’ multisensorial physical bodies as demonstrated in Karen Knorr’s astute rendition of the situation in *The analysis of beauty* (1986-1988) (Figure 15).

The connoisseur’s in Knorr’s photograph bring to mind Charlie Gere’s (2010: 151) description of his father, John Arthur Giles Gere (1921-1995) who was Keeper of the Prints and Drawings Department at the British Museum. According to the younger Gere (2010: 151), his father “possessed an eye”. Moreover, John Gere was described by Kenneth Clark as having “[n]ot just any eye, but a better eye [...] than anyone else alive today” (qtd Gere 2010: 151). For Gere (2010: 151) this description characterises “[...] a certain kind of art history and the assumptions of elitism and superiority it embodied”. Moreover, Gere (2010: 151) describes his father as a “self-confessed connoisseur” who described the quality of possessing an eye as requiring:

a particular combination of qualities of mind, some more scientific than artistic and others more artistic than scientific: a visual memory for compositions, exhaustive knowledge of the school or period in question, awareness of all the possible answers, a sense of artistic quality, a capacity for assessing evidence, and a power of empathy with the creative processes of each individual artist and a positive conception of him as an individual artistic personality (J. Gere qtd Gere 2010: 151, 152).

This attitude regarding the work conducted by the art historian prioritises what Kevin Hetherington (1999: 66) refers to as the “Kantian gaze of the connoisseur”. By disavowing the heterogeneity of the material world, the astute Kantian eye, owing to its disinterestedness, is evidently able to “[...] make claims about the beauty of [an] object that can be taken as universal and communicated to an aesthetic community” (Hetherington 2010: 66). The connoisseur thus employs a particular gaze – demonstrated so aptly in Knorr’s

photograph – made possible by taking up a “judicious distance” (O’Doherty 1986: 16) in front of an artwork. In favour of a “mindful” aesthetic experience, Kant wrote that “[...] the proper aesthetic response is a disinterested satisfaction, a pleasure that arises from the inner life of the mind rather than the senses” (Duncum 2005: 12).

In *Inside the white cube: the ideology of the gallery space*, O’Doherty (1986: 41) describes the connoisseurial eye as “the snobbish cousin” of the spectator. He wants to distinguish between the concept of a “Spectator” and that of an “Eye” in order to highlight the ideological construction of the particular (disembodied) gaze of art historians and academics as it arose alongside the production of modern art. According to O’Doherty (1986: 41) “[t]he Eye can be trained in a way a Spectator cannot. It is a finely tuned, even noble organ, esthetically and socially superior to the Spectator”. Close, refined and lengthy observation are the skills required of this modern ‘Eye’ which has the sophisticated ability to discriminate, resolve, balance, weigh, discern as it perceives.

The construction of the modern ‘eye’, as O’Doherty describes this particular way of seeing art, is cemented in the eighteenth-century rationalist notion of the “beholder” or “onlooker”. In *The critique of the power of judgement* (1914 [1790]), Kant takes Descartes’ rationalist philosophy further in his concept of aesthetics as a mode by which a properly disinterested observer can judge well formed objects.⁷² Kant (1914 [1790]: 46) argues that “[t]he satisfaction which we

⁷² It is important to note that Kant was not the first philosopher to deal with the concept of disinterestedness. Stolniz (1961: 132) traces the origin of the concept to early eighteenth century British thought and maintains that Lord Shaftesbury was the first philosopher to “call attention to disinterested perception” albeit in the realm of ethical theory, where Shaftesbury opposed the concept to interest or ‘interestedness’. Simply put, his argument was that disinterestedness is a particular mode or kind of attention that does not bear any thought of the consequences or the reward that may be associated with such attention. Interestedness, on the other hand, would then be a mode of attention that is focussed on the consequences or use of a particular action (Stolnitz 1961: 132, 133). Shaftesbury’s ideas influenced Edmund Burke’s theorisation of the concepts of ‘beauty’ and ‘sublimity’ in *A philosophical enquiry into the origin of our ideas of the sublime and beautiful* (1757) where the desire for possession of an object becomes associated with “non-disinterestedness” whereas love “[...] is the pleasure or satisfaction which is felt in perceiving a beautiful object disinterestedly” (Stolniz 1961: 135). In other words, for Burke, “[...] a beautiful object can be perceived as such only if the sole interest of the perceiver is in perceiving” and not in possessing (Stolniz 1961: 135). In Burke’s

combine with the representation of the existence of an object is called interest. Such satisfaction always has reference to the faculty of desire [...]" According to Kant (1914 [1790]: 47, 48)

[e]very one must admit that a judgement about beauty, in which the least interest mingles is very partial and is not a pure judgement of taste. We must not be in the least prejudiced in favour of the existence of the things, but be quite indifferent in this respect, in order to play the judge of things of taste.

In a footnote, Kant (1914 [1790]: 48) explains his use of the term 'disinterested', as follows:

[a] judgement upon an object of satisfaction may be quite *disinterested*, but yet very *interesting*, i.e. not based upon an interest, but bringing an interest with it; of this kind are all pure moral judgements. Judgements of taste, however, do not in themselves establish any interest. Only in society is it *interesting* to have taste [...].

Broadly speaking, 'disinterestedness' can be described as "[...] an attitude denoting the perception of an object for its own sake without regard to further purposes, especially practical ones, and requiring the separation of the object from its surroundings in order that it may be contemplated freely and with no distracting considerations" (Berleant 1991: 12). Such disinterestedness is acquired by means of exercising a particular mode of attention. According to Kantian aesthetics, universal claims can be made about the beauty of an object only if the observer maintains such a dispassionate disinterest in it.⁷³

Through Kant's writing, the concept of aesthetic disinterestedness acquired an "integral place in aesthetic theory" (Berleant 1991: 12 & 2003: 1). For Kant

estimation, the sublime is experienced when a dangerous or terrifying object is regarded disinterestedly. This is only made possible if the percipient is able to maintain a distance from the object, although this distance is not accomplished through rational or intellectual motivation (Stolniz 1961: 136). The experience of sublimity is, for Burke at least, considered to be disinterested.

⁷³ Hetherington (1999: 66) maintains that "[f]or Kant, aesthetic judgement is the product of a disinterested eye [...]. The object before our eyes is of no real interest to Kant [...]."

regarded aesthetic perception as distinguished from that which has a practical end: “it is distinct from the apprehension of objects in ordinary experience” (Berleant 1991: 12). Kant regarded the faculty of taste, by means of which an object is regarded by a transcendental subject as satisfying or not, as entirely disinterested. And the experience of the ‘beautiful’ – the object of satisfaction – is therefore also a matter of disinterestedness. Kant (1914 [1790]: 47) explains: “[n]ow when the question is if a thing is beautiful, we do not want to know whether anything depends or can depend on the existence of the thing either for myself or for anyone else, but how we judge it by mere observation (intuition or reflection)”.

As Gere (2010: 155) puts it, the Kantian viewer/connoisseur “[...] in a proper disinterested manner [...] orders the chaotic and heterogeneous sense impressions generated through the categories of beauty and taste”. As a result of his giving priority to abstract thinking over perceptual knowledge, Kant may have reduced the importance of the physiological component of vision in aesthetic experience, at least according to Berleant’s interpretation. For, in Berleant’s view (1991: 12), Kant “[...] separat[ed] the experience of beauty from sensory pleasure or ordinary emotions” thereby removing aesthetic experience from “somatic activity”. In other words, the aesthetic philosophy that emerged after Kant’s formulation, removed the body from aesthetic experience by privileging the intellect, resulting in the long exclusion of the body from “the discourse of [art history]” according to Duncum (2005: 10).⁷⁴

In his attempt to reconcile the empiricist and rationalist schools of thought mentioned earlier, Kant theorised that, the human mind – more specifically, pure thought (*reinen Vernunft*) – possesses innate categories by means of

⁷⁴ This account, which has only focussed on Kant’s position regarding aesthetic experience as particularly disinterested is, of course, reductive and does not acknowledge various other formulations of aesthetic experience which occurred at the same time as well as subsequent to Kant’s seminal work. Berleant (1991: 216) is of the opinion, however, that Kant’s work not only dominated but also shaped other perspectives on this topic, and therefore played a significant role in establishing what he regards to be the dominant tradition in aesthetic theory. Cf. Michael Fried’s *Absorption and theatricality: painting and beholder in the age of Diderot* (1980: 103, 104, 131-32) for the ways in which aesthetic experience has been theorised differently.

which one is able to know the world. According to Kant's formulation, aesthetic disinterestedness therefore appears to hinge on the denigration of the senses, even though sensory impressions provide the material to be ordered and organised by the mind. He was only interested in those senses "that arise from [...] the finer feelings" (Duncum 2011: 11) paying no attention to "[...] coarse feelings [...] which can take place without any thought whatever" (Kant 1965 [1764]: 46). In short, the senses apparently have to be disciplined by the mind. Somatic sensual pleasures, Duncum (2011: 10-12) concludes, have been regarded by a long line of philosophers – before and since Kant – as 'vulgar', 'coarse' and deceitful. In this way, both aesthetic theory and Western philosophy "have denigrated" (Duncum 2011: 10) the body. In transcendental philosophy, even though it may arise through perception, knowledge "[...] must be emancipated from the senses" (Marks 2011: 240).

Moreover, modern aesthetics is grounded in the evolution of the Western sense of self and, in particular, Kant's theory of how the subject attains knowledge of both the world and the self.⁷⁵ For Kant (1974 [1798]: 35), it is vision, in part, that allows "[...] the subject, by reflection, to know the object as a thing outside him". In this way, although grounded far deeper than vision, the distinction between subject and object is to some extent made possible by vision which, guided by reflection, "[...] allows the subject to know the object" (Foster 2010: 132).⁷⁶ In other words, and according to this view, the production of the Western sense of self is apparently enabled in part at least by the separation of the subject from what s/he sees and therefore knows. Consequently, the division and isolation of

⁷⁵ Cf. Charles Taylor's (1989) *Sources of the self: the making of the modern identity*. In addition, cf. Christoph Menke's (2000: 35-55) description and critique of the German Idealist formation of the term 'subjectivity' in the eighteenth century.

⁷⁶ That this distinction is grounded far deeper than vision is clear in the following famous passage from his second Critique (*Kritik der praktischen Vernunft*): "Two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing wonder — the starry heavens above me, and the moral law within me. I need not search for them, and vaguely guess concerning them, as if they were veiled in darkness or hidden in the infinite altitude. I see them before me, and link them immediately with the consciousness of my existence. The former begins from the spot I occupy in the outer world of sense, and enlarges my connexion with it to a boundless extent with worlds upon worlds and systems of systems. The second begins with my invisible self, my personality, and places me in a truly infinite world traceable only by the understanding, with which I perceive I am in an universal and necessary connexion, as I am also thereby with all those visible worlds" (Kant 1949 [1788]: 258).

the senses, argue Di Bello & Koureas (2005: 7), “[...] seem to be fundamental in defining a clean and proper self or identity, at both conscious and unconscious levels”.

In its critique of modern aesthetics, sensory scholarship has evidently failed to acknowledge the contribution made by Arthur Schopenhauer who reinterpreted Kant’s aesthetics in the nineteenth century. In Schopenhauer’s (1966 [1818]: 273) view, “[a] philosophy like the Kantian, that ignores entirely [the physiological] point of view, is one-sided and therefore inadequate. It leaves an immense gulf between our philosophical and physiological knowledge, with which we can never be satisfied”. In other words, for Schopenhauer, the physiological body is the seat of subjective aesthetic experience. Both fascinated and influenced by the explosion of research and publishing on the physiology of the human body that was occurring at the time, Schopenhauer’s second edition of *The world as will and representation* (1818) included large amounts of scientific material in support of his views.⁷⁷

Sensory scholarship has therefore argued that the senses of touch, smell and taste have in general remained outside traditional aesthetic theories. Diaconu (2006) maintains that one of the reasons for their exclusion from aesthetic theories has to do with the ways in which these senses tend to operate synaesthetically. Tactile qualities, she argues, can be seen and not only felt, and taste and smell are so intertwined that they are regarded as joining together to form the so-called oral sense (Diaconu 2006: 1). A second reason for the rejection of these senses, notes Diaconu (2006: 1) has much to do with the notion that taste, touch and smell – philosophically regarded as the secondary, ‘lower’ or “base” (Jones 2006: 2) senses – “[...] deal with ephemeral stimuli and consume their objects”.⁷⁸ This characteristic makes it difficult, if not impossible,

⁷⁷ It was especially Xavier Bichat’s work dealing with medical theory, and in particular death, that inspired Schopenhauer. In fact, Schopenhauer regarded their work, from philosophical and physiological perspectives respectively, to be complementary and suggested that their texts be read together (Crary 1990:78).

⁷⁸ Cf. the earlier discussion regarding the hierarchisation of the senses in Chapter 3, section 3.3.

for the subject to maintain the required distance from the object – the hallmark of a “critical and reflective attitude” emphasised in traditional aesthetics – as the secondary senses require “physical contact and emotional intimacy” (Diaconu 2006: 2).

Marks (2011: 239) concurs that traditionally only sight and hearing, have been regarded in Western philosophy as “vehicles of knowledge” and in Western aesthetics as “vehicles of beauty”. As a result, even though art history may, in the last few decades have turned attention to include objects previously regarded as ‘low’ or popular art – or, visual culture – Marks (2011: 239) finds that neither art history nor visual and/or cultural studies have “[...] extended to non-visual objects, except for the audiovisual arts such as cinema”. This means that the senses of taste, touch and smell – the proximal senses – have continued to be dismissed and neglected in Marks’ (2011: 239) view. In this way, an account of aesthetic experience has developed that hinges on the ideal separation between ‘disinterested’ perceiver and art.

In positioning the emergence of the modern gallery space as a crucial factor in the construction of a particular kind of viewing subject/spectator⁷⁹ of art, O’Doherty (1986: 15) describes the way in which the body was marginalised in encounters with modern art. He describes the body of the observer in the gallery as “[...] an odd piece of furniture [...] [which] seems superfluous, an intrusion” (O’Doherty 1986: 15). This is because the gallery “[...] offers the thought that while eyes and minds are welcome, space-occupying bodies are not [...]” (O’Doherty 1986: 15). In this way, the multisensorial body was eliminated from the gallery and museum in the construction of the ideal modern viewer of art.

As a result of the denigration of the senses of taste, touch and smell, argue Di Bello & Koureas (2010: 1), these senses “have been marginalized by aesthetics, art history and criticism”. Furthermore, they contend that, whilst art

⁷⁹ It is interesting to note that while for sight we only have singular terms (the spectator, beholder, viewer and so forth) for hearing we have the collective term audience.

history continues to isolate the visual forms of art “[...] rely[ing] heavily on mechanical reproduction techniques that have been available since the nineteenth century”, artists have increasingly challenged, disregarded or worked outside the boundaries of sight (Di Bello & Koureas 2010: 1). In this way, since the nineteenth century, works of art have been produced that “include, or powerfully evoke, non-visual elements” (Di Bello & Koureas 2010: 1). In other words, challenges to the primacy of vision in human experience, as well as the notion of the disinterested subject/viewer of the work have led to what may be termed an *anti-ocularcentric* theme or tendency in artistic practice. In various ways, both artists and theorists have challenged the supremacy of vision in people’s encounters with art.⁸⁰

Examples of artworks that evoke non-visual elements and the other senses can, of course, be identified much earlier even than the nineteenth century. For instance, allegories of the senses were a common theme in seventeenth century European paintings with the Dutch artist, Adam van Noort (1652-1614), being amongst the artists who depicted all five senses in one painting (Jütte 2005: 83). It was at this time that the senses came to metaphorically represent human feelings or behaviour. The moralistic-didactic messages incorporated into the paintings warn of the need to take a cautious approach to the use of the senses.

Still-life paintings which often evoked all the viewer’s senses through their seductive attention to details were especially popular in the seventeenth century in the Netherlands and in Naples (Bacci 2011: 11; Merriam 2011: 1).⁸¹ For instance, in 1617 Peter Paul Rubens and Jan Brueghel the Elder collaborated on a series of allegorical paintings that each addressed one of the five senses. Painted for the Archduke Albert and Archduchess Isabella – both of whom are included in the imaginary ‘cabinets of wonder’ in, for instance, a double-portrait

⁸⁰ I return to this topic in Chapters 6 and 7.

⁸¹ Gustave Moreau’s Symbolist paintings of intricately patterned surfaces, detailed flowers and musical instruments are another example of paintings that powerfully evoke textures, sounds and scents (Howes 2011: 169). More recent examples of such attention to sensuous detail can be seen in Jane Wildgoose’s digital photographic still-lifes (Ede 2011: vii).

on the table in the foreground in *Allegory of sight* (1617) (Figure 16) – the paintings are collectively known as *Allegory of the senses* or *The five senses*. The paintings are representative of the common practice in the seventeenth century to commission paintings of the collector's 'cabinet of wonder' or 'curiosity collections', as these collections were known.



Figure 16: Peter Paul Rubens and Jan Brueghel the Elder, *Allegory of sight* (1617)

In the central painting in the series, *Allegory of sight* (Figure 16), Cupid shows a painting dealing with the Christian theme of Christ healing a blind man to a partially draped Juno, a personification of sight (Merriam 2011: 2). The room with light streaming through its window, illuminating the clutter of objects within, represents visual perception.⁸² Included among the objects are a globe, an astrolabe and a telescope, all of which allude to scientific exploration and

⁸² This painting also demonstrates the convention used up until the early nineteenth century where paintings clutter every available space on the walls, becoming like wall-paper. This hanging arrangement contrasts markedly with the clean white cube of modern galleries as argued by O'Doherty (1986: 16) in whose enclosed spaces and on whose pristine walls each picture is considered to be a self-contained and isolated entity.

discovery through visual technologies.⁸³ In addition, the painting contains copies of works by other artists working in Antwerp at the time and includes a copy of Raphael's *Saint Cecilia*, which alludes to the introspective vision of the soul. These paintings and objects would have been familiar to people who viewed it at the time and would have caused them to marvel at "art's power to re-create the world" (Merriam 2011: 2).

In all of these allegorical paintings of the senses, however, the sense of sight remains the medium through which the others are activated. In other words, the sensuousness of touch, taste, smell and hearing are visually evoked, but not experienced directly through stimulation of a viewer's sense organs other than sight. New directions in art produced in the twentieth century have more directly involved the sensory participation of what may be termed the 'sensorially emancipated' spectator. Marcel Duchamp's ready-mades, and in particular the urinal entitled *Fountain* which he exhibited in 1917 under the name R. Mutt, are examples of some of the ways in which artists have challenged the regime of the Kantian gaze. As Hetherington (1999: 68) puts it:

A piece of porcelain that one urinated in, displayed in a museum, mocks the idea of formal and disinterested judgement, one can only be shocked or laugh at the idea established by the spatial location of such an item and the idea that such an object can have beauty. Such an object is heterogeneous and one can only behave in an undisciplined way before it.

In this way, Duchamp invited the 'unruly' senses into the gallery.

⁸³ Particularly significant on the right-hand side is the painting of the Virgin and Child surrounded by a garland of flowers. At more or less the same time these two painters collaborated on the production of such a painting. The topic of course derives from the altar liturgy but it also came to stand for art collections (parallels between the picking/selecting/harvesting the best and the combination/arrangement of the flowers and the *objets d'arts* of a collection). In addition, it also carries humanist-poetic allusions to the so-called Glycera *topos* (the mythical first weaver of flower garlands). This is also a reference to the other senses and to poetry – to *intertextere* or the interweaving or mixture of floral colours, shapes, scents and sweetness; and to *mellifica mixtura, poetica mela*, the so-called nectar harvest of the honey bee, the making of honey or poetry when the sensory floral qualities are taken as metaphors for the words, sense (meaning) and ideas a poet would harness. The flower garland thus emblematises a multisensory and polysemic humanist allegory.

4.5 Installations and the corporeal sensorium

It has been suggested that installation art operates in a different relationship to the body of the viewer than do two-dimensional paintings, drawings or photographs. This is because a wide variety of installation art invites viewers to literally participate in or enter into parts of the works by using their entire bodies (Berleant 1991: 4 & 2003: 1).⁸⁴ In other words, installation pieces on the whole appear to appeal more directly to senses other than sight than pictorial art does. In this way installations open up the possibility for an open and unfolding dialogue between participants and pieces thereby allowing for the production of personal meanings and “ideas in process” (Salley 2013: 36).⁸⁵

Bacci (2011: 12) suggests that contemporary art has thus “[...] undergone a multisensory turn, concern[ed] with maximising its expressive powers by investing several sensory modalities simultaneously, rather than sublimating its entire message through sight”. Put somewhat differently, Achille Bonito Olivia, in conversation with Bacci (2011: 12) contends that contemporary installation and performance art represents a “polysensory comeback” in that these pieces present, rather than represent, real materials. This way of thinking would, of course, suggest that other forms of art, such as paintings, drawings and photographs are merely representations. Perhaps, the notion of art as representation is in all cases mistaken; for all works of art (not only installations and performances) are performative presentations concretely engaging embodied people in eventful experiences.

The multisensory experiments such as those described below may well represent a welcome corrective to ocularcentrism. In fact, their lasting contribution may be the opening of a better way than ocularcentrist practices in

⁸⁴ Berleant (1991: 4) argues that traditional theories of aesthetic experience are insufficient to describe people’s experiences of contemporary artworks in which a person’s participation with and within the work is unavoidable and even desirable. He argues that, due to technological changes and the use of new media in artworks, engagement has replaced disinterestedness and participation has replaced contemplation both of which are key components of aesthetic experience conceived of in the traditional sense (Berleant 1991: 4 & 2003: 1).

⁸⁵ I deal with the effect of pictorial art on viewers more closely in Chapter 6.

engaging earlier (in fact all) art. In other words, all art ought to be considered as performative presentations.

No doubt, a closer examination of how installations and performance art renegotiate the relationship between their material and affective presence and an embodied responder is helpful in re-articulating experiences with art beyond the limits of visual spectatorship.⁸⁶ Noteworthy examples of artists who have produced such ‘polysensory’ art include, for example, the photographers Cindy Sherman, Victor Burgin and Mary Kelly, the architect Peter Eisenman and video/performance artist Dan Graham. Born out of the minimalist, conceptual and performance art of the 1960s and 1970s which aimed to decentre the eye as the primary sense organ in the interactions between the pieces and their audiences, contemporary multisensorial approaches can also be found in works created by Joseph Beuys, Nam June Paik, Claus Rinke, Marina Abramovic, Vito Acconci, the artists associated with Fluxus and Viennese Actionism, such as Günter Brus, Hermann Nitsch and Rudolf Schwarzkogler all of whose works, to a greater or lesser extent, fit the category of multisensory art.⁸⁷ The anti-ocularcentric sentiment expressed in their work is embedded in an earlier historical trajectory already evident before, but mainly reaching critical point in Europe after the First World War when the hegemony of the *ancien scopic régime* was heavily criticised on many fronts.

In other words, while a certain tradition in the discipline of art history may have been (and continues to be) predominantly ocularcentric, art produced in the twentieth century has not always appealed to the sense of sight only. In various ways, the notion and the very possibility of a viewer who gazes at art from a disinterested position has been confounded by art itself. Including some of the works produced by the Dadaists in the second decade of the twentieth century,

⁸⁶ Jones (2006: 10) argues that despite Greenberg’s valorisation of the optical in modern art, some twentieth century artists “resisted, or drifted into fruitful peripheries”. Thus her book, *Sensorium: embodied experience, technology, and contemporary art*, critically engages with artworks that address the senses previously marginalised in modernism.

⁸⁷ Even more directly appealing to the senses of smell, touch and indirectly taste, Meret Oppenheim in the U.S. worked with chocolate and Piet Mondrian made works from candy and sugar cane. Marcel Duchamp made a sculptural *trompe-l’oeil* cage with marble sugar cubes.

the Surrealists in the 1930s, as well as mid-twentieth century artists already mentioned above, Jones (2006:18) argues that some twentieth century artists “[...] formed an underground explicitly to counteract modernist sensory hegemonies”.⁸⁸ For instance, a striking example of an artwork focussed on bringing smell back into the art world – after its eradication in modernity – is Carolee Schneemann’s *Meat joy*, (1964) (Figure 17), a group performance incorporating raw fish, chickens, sausages, wet paint, rope, scrap paper and the sweaty, smelly bodies of the performers.⁸⁹



Figure 17: Carolee Schneeman, *Meat Joy* (1964)

⁸⁸ Berleant (1991: 20-31) points out the ways in which artists associated with Impressionism, Cubism, Futurism, Dadaism, Expressionism, Abstract Expressionism, Optical Art, Conceptual Art, Happenings and Performance Art dissolved the notion of art as a representational object which ought to be viewed from a distance. Instead, the perceptual experience and embodied participation of the viewer in these works was actively encouraged. And contemporary art, he argues, often appeals to our kinaesthetic and tactile sensibilities thereby “[...] expanding the limits of aesthetic perception beyond the traditional aesthetic senses of sight and hearing” (Berleant 1991: 39). The engagement between artwork and perceiver is not only evident in the visual arts, but also in some examples of architecture, music, dance, theatre and novels produced in the course of the twentieth century. Furthermore, in many of the above cases, art deliberately merges with ordinary life, thereby integrating the conditions of daily existence – the mundane and everyday – into the possibilities of aesthetic experience (Berleant 1991: 40-42).

⁸⁹ In the 1960s anthropologists began raising questions about the sociocultural embeddedness of smell and taste (Diaconu 2006: 2). At the same time, the history of smell appeared as a sub-discipline in historiography. Cf. Mark Jenner’s article ‘Follow your nose? Smell, smelling, and their histories’ (2011) which surveys olfactory studies over the last decades.

Included in Jones' (2006: 18) list of "[...] marginal transgressives who widened the installation/performance wedge [...]" that had erupted within modernism's clean white cube, are John Cage, Allan Kaprow, much feminist performance art, Julian Beck and the Living Theatre, Christian Jankowski, Ryoji Ikeda and the Situationists. These artists and movements – including Happenings and Environments – ultimately aimed to "destroy modernist sensory segmentation" (Jones 2006: 19). In this way, "[...] the arts (themselves) have deliberately overridden the perceptual separation [...]" which has been, according to Berleant (1991: 39), "[...] among the main factors in aesthetic experience".⁹⁰ As a result of the multisensorial nature of installation art by means of which the relationship between art/event and viewer/responder is reciprocal and continuous, Berleant (1991: 40) contends that "[...] all the elements of the aesthetic situation [...] combin[e] to form a unity of experience".⁹¹

Keenly interested in the relationship between a person and art, in the 1960s, minimalist artist, Robert Morris examined the influence of the material and spatial particularity of a work of art and its context of display on perception. In *Untitled L-Beams* (1965) for example, Morris arranged three large L-shaped beams, of similar shape and size, in varying configurations so that when one moves around them, the viewer becomes aware of a clear disjunct between what is seen and what is known. For, in the context of their perception the L beams constantly changed appearance although we know they are the same objects. This is because the objects were staged in such a way that the

⁹⁰ As already pointed out in Chapter 2, following O'Doherty's (1986:15) argument in *Inside the white cube*, by eliminating the presence of a spectator/participant in the frame photographs of installations often reinforce the modernist exclusion of the body rather than challenge this notion.

⁹¹ This unity of experience, specifically between the eye and the body, has been traced by O'Doherty (1986: 51) to the Minimalist art of the late 1960s and 1970s. In viewing Minimalist art, argues O'Doherty (1986: 51), "Eye" and "Spectator" were not so much fused as working in tandem, or cooperatively. In these situations, "[t]he Eye urges the body around to provide it with information – the body becomes a data-gatherer". Even earlier than this, O'Doherty (1986: 43) sees the invitation to the body of the viewer in the modern gallery space to emerge with Analytic cubism. More specifically, O'Doherty (1986: 43) finds that *Merzbau* (1924-1943), a collage by Kurt Schwitters, addresses the space of the spectator and not only the eye although at that time "[...] the idea of a surrounded Spectator was not yet a conscious one".

experience of the L beams is dependent on the way in which they relate to the viewer. Michael Fried (1967: 825, 832) famously attacked Morris' goal in this regard as being "theatrical", which stood, according to him, in stark contrast to "authentic" modernist art's instantaneous "presentness". Like many minimalists, Morris' thinking about art and its perception was informed by Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of perception* which offered a strong argument against the prevailing Greenbergian emphasis on the pure opticality of modern art. Interested in how people actually encounter art objects in the specific places of their display, Morris' phenomenologically informed minimalist sculptures are part of the anti-ocularcentric undercurrent of twentieth century art discussed above.

4.6 Conclusion

In light of the contemporary interest, if not increase, in installation and performance artworks, which directly activate far more than the sense of sight only, it would appear viable to ask how a discipline can continue to concentrate only on the ways in which people see art or visual culture – at the expense of the other corporeal senses. How can vision remain the thrust of art history? For, poststructuralist art historical methods, which emphasise the ideological and discursive strategies of pictorial discourse, are in some ways guilty of a kind of 'blindness' to the varied ways in which audiences interact with immersive installations through their entire bodies which touch, hear and smell at the same time that they see. Evidently the ongoing criticism of the discourse of aesthetics, aided by the critique of the hegemony of vision in art historical methodology and art practice, has led to the recognition that humans are not merely socially constructed beings and images are not merely representations of discursive power, waiting to be interpreted (Grodal 2003: 129). Consequently, intellectuals engaged in sensory scholarship are not only interested in the social function of

images, or their physical properties, but also the way in which they are encountered by embodied – sensorially emancipated – audiences.⁹²

What methods does a researcher of the multisensorial experience of art employ in generating a substantive argument regarding such subjective experiences? According to sensory scholars, social art history does not sufficiently provide the tools or the strategies that would facilitate this kind of analysis. Are art historians/visual culturalists required to close their eyes in order to more appropriately engage with art and become aware of their other sensory experience? Perhaps it would be necessary to search elsewhere for the tools required for engaging with the non-visual senses?

What ought to be recognised is that the visual sense is informed and shaped by broader sensory experiences. This means that the sensory turn asks art historians, visual culturalists and spectators of art to be sensitive to or become aware of their sensual experience of art. As sensorially perceptive academics chisel away at the disinterested relationship traditionally sought after in research on their objects of study and their spectators, the sensory revolution is pressurising art history to introduce novel approaches into its expanding ‘tool kit’. The challenge to the academic practice of art historians who search beyond the visual and into the embodied dimension of aesthetic experience, is whether or not they are able to sufficiently thicken their analyses of multisensorial experiences and ensure that art history retains its significance as a rigorous discipline. In other words, the task of art history is to thicken discussions and explanations of aesthetic appreciation and experience in order to ensure that these endeavours remain dense and critical. This is the main topic dealt with in the next chapter.

⁹² Another term that could usefully describe the concept of a sensorially-emancipated and fully engaged viewer is ‘full-bodied’. This enriched anthropological concept includes bodily functions beyond the restrictive sensory, physical, physiological, neurological and affective dimensions, to include personal human action and experience in culture, society and history. This concept is far less reductive than functionalised accounts of human engagement with art and instead recognises that both the human body and works of art are multifunctional or metafunctional entities or individualities.

This may entail a re-examination of aesthetic experience as not only multisensorial, multi-medial and trans-medial but also as self-reflexive. For, approaches to works of art that describe only the ways in which the works appeal to the bodily senses, both visual and non-visual would, I suggest, impoverish art history and ultimately not undo the hegemony of elitist notions of aesthetic experience. For this kind of inversion would not solve the problem of how aesthetic experience is understood. Instead, studies that take into account the psychic suggestions made by works of art and recognise the site of the imagination as integral in aesthetic encounters, are needed. In other words, art historical methodologies that consider not only sensers' engagements with works of art, but also their wider imaginative interactions with them, may lead to a far more nuanced account of peoples' experiences of art than either vision-centred or multisensorial approaches on their own can provide.

In this chapter I examined the accusation that art historiography prioritises vision in that the participation of the other senses in the activity of seeing and experiencing art is virtually entirely overlooked. Although art historiography may have already acknowledged that artworks evoke multiple senses/sensations, it is fair to suggest that the discipline overall has yet to substantively account for people's multisensorial interactions with installation, performance, interactive, environment, site-specific and digital art. In the following chapter I investigate some ways in which art historians may join the sensory revolution.

PART II

CHAPTER 5

MAKING SENSE OF SENSORY STUDIES

However different this contribution of the different senses to thought and sensation may be, in our inner selves everything flows together and becomes one. We usually call the depth of this confluence imagination [Einbildung], but it does not consist only of images [Bildern], but also sounds, words, signs, and feelings, for [which] our language would have no name. Sight borrows from feeling and believes that it sees what is only felt. Sight and hearing decode each other reciprocally. Smell seems to be the spirit of taste, or at least a close brother of taste. From all this now, the soul weaves and makes for itself its robe, its sensuous universe.¹

The notion that aesthetic experience is produced or emerges from the imaginative interaction between embodied sensual/sensory beings and the material presence of art has come to light as one of the tenets of a certain strand of intellectual endeavour in the wide sphere of discourse that has emerged so far in sensory scholarship. This is the particular variety of sensory studies that I want to pursue in the next three chapters. In other words, rather than denying the involvement of the body in a mode of (disinterested) aesthetic experience, which was one of the governing notions of modern aesthetics, an aesthetics of embodiment and engagement, is stressed here as integral to understanding a person's embodied and imaginative interaction with art. Acknowledging that a perceiver, or senser, of art is embodied and interacts imaginatively with the material and affective qualities of an artwork in its extended and expanded environment means that aesthetic experience is not limited to a mental or cognitive function but involves bodily perception. This is therefore my point of departure in the following chapters.

In order to do so, I propose that there are at least three ways in which multisensoriality and embodiment can be approached in relation to works of art. My aim is not to suggest that the three modes presented here are exhaustive or all-inclusive or that they represent the only ways in which to analyse art from the approach of embodied multisensoriality. It is more the case that categorising the

¹ Johan G. Herder (2002 [1778]: 204-205) *On the cognition and sensation of the human soul*.

modes in this way enables me to more clearly understand some of the approaches that have emerged in multisensorial discourse on art at present and to suggest ways in which the analyses of art that are enabled by means of these approaches can productively be articulated. The following brief description serves only to introduce each. A far broader explanation of each mode is described in this and the following two chapters.

In the first mode an encounter with an artwork in relation to the setting (which includes its particular ambience and atmosphere) in which it is exhibited or in which a person meets it is investigated. The environment includes the incidental sounds, smells, textures, sights, tastes as well as the expanding location and its particularities and the movement/s it elicits in the people who move through the setting. All of these, I attempt to show, influence a person's experience of a work of art. In this chapter, I analyse South African artist, Hannelie Coetzee's land art work, *Buigkrag* (2012) (Figure 21) in its site in nature in order to elaborate on this mode.

The second mode, which is discussed in Chapter 6, explores the ways in which a two-dimensional artwork – in this case, a video – engages an embodied person. Spanish-born artist, Casilda Sanchez' video, *As inside as the eye can see* (2010) (Figure 25) is analysed by closely considering the empathic relationship between the images on-screen and a viewer. The point is to argue that even when a viewer is not required to physically touch a work of art, or move around it, a spectator/responder is nevertheless engaged in some form of bodily activity, encompassing the visceral, thought and imagination when in the 'presence' of the work. Furthermore, it is precisely this experiential encounter from which the video's potential meanings unfold.

The third mode, on which I elaborate in Chapter 7, is applied to an exhibition in which the various individual installation pieces themselves stimulate the senses more directly than in the previous two works discussed in Chapters 5 and 6, owing to the particular materials that must be touched, moved, and physically

interacted with. In this endeavour South African artist, Berco Wilsenach's exhibition, *Die blinde astronoom (The blind astronomer)* (2013) (Figures 29-38) is analysed.

5.1 Embodiment: views from inside

Referring to 'someone who watches or observes', the terms 'viewer', 'spectator', or 'beholder', which are commonly employed in discussions of art, are not adequate to the task of describing the dynamic interaction between an actively engaged person and the material and affective qualities of art in the way in which I am attempting to go about it here. For, as Alexander Dumbadze (2010: 125) contends, and as I have argued throughout, many accounts of art "suffer from a sort of tunnel vision" by focussing solely on the opticality of the works under discussion without acknowledging that other factors may "disrupt" a person's encounter with art.² There are several factors which 'disrupt' one's (purely visual) encounter with the three works that I discuss in the following chapters, not least of which is the difficulty of actually viewing and interacting with them, for only one of the works – Sanchez's video – was exhibited in a space resembling a conventional gallery.

Various terms have been used to describe such an active and engaged responder to art, including, "perceiving subject" (Dufrenne 1973 [1953]), "whole-body-seer" (Hull 1990: 217), "appreciative experiencer" (Berleant 2003: 1), "senser" (Di Bello & Koureas 2010: 3), "fully embodied being" (Di Bello & Koureas 2010: 12) and "sensorially emancipated perceiver" (Lauwrens 2010: 9) all of which hinge on a notion of embodied aesthetic experience. But what does the concept 'embodiment' mean? And, what are the implications of aesthetic experience understood as embodied mean for the way in which art is investigated? Does our status as embodied human beings only include

² Cf. Dumbadze's (2010: 125) critical discussion of Dan Flavin's fluorescent light sculptures produced in the 1960s, of which, he argues, virtually nothing is written regarding the undeniable buzzing sound made by the lights.

recognition of our multisensorial dimension, as implied by the ‘turn’ toward the *senses* in the sensory turn? In other words, does embodiment only refer to the ways in which the senses of sight, hearing, smell, taste and touch operate in the process of perception, even if that operation is understood to operate synaesthetically, as I argued in Chapter 3?

In this chapter, I attempt to understand some of the ways in which the notion of an embodied subject who encounters art may be understood. As an extension of the definition of embodiment examined here, I also suggest that there are at least two interrelated ways in which the embodied subject and her/his experience of art can usefully be analysed. On the one hand, aesthetic experience must be understood as an embodied activity or process. On the other, which is undoubtedly closely related to the previous statement, aesthetic experience must be understood as a participatory activity taking place between a person and art. Thus, in this chapter I explore *aesthetic experience as embodied*³ as well as *aesthetic experience as engaged participation* by reflecting on what these concepts mean particularly in terms of an investigation of a close encounter with the land art work, *Buigkrag*. Although these two concepts undoubtedly share a mutual interrelationship, I unfasten them here only in order to more clearly understand their implication for undertaking a productive approach to art from the perspective of embodiment.

Embedded in the theoretical paradigm in which the body has taken centre stage,⁴ sensory scholarship rejects the ‘Cartesian’ impoverishment of the body,⁵

³ The anthropologist, Thomas Csordas’ (1994: 12) definition of embodiment combines the domain of “[...] perceptual experience and [a] mode of presence and engagement in the world”. In a similar way, the notion of aesthetic experience as embodied is derived from Berleant’s (2003) understanding of aesthetic embodiment which is explored in section 5.3.

⁴ See my earlier discussion of the ‘corporeal’ or ‘somatic turn’ in Chapter 4, section 4.3.

⁵ It is not only Descartes’ position on vision that is ambiguous, as I argued in Chapter 2, but also his position on the body. Karen Jacobs (2001: 10, 11) points out that, in his reference to the purpose of the pineal gland, which, according to Descartes’ mediates information supplied by the actual two eyes to the ‘eye of the mind’, a “shadow of embodiment” can be noticed in his writing. According to Jacobs (2011: 11), it is the presence of the pineal gland in Descartes’ philosophy that indicates that “[...] the embodiment of the gaze, however seemingly overcome by the faculties of mind, is likely to resurface elsewhere and is, indeed, lodged in and as the body from the start”.

asserting instead that human experience is not only sensorially embodied, but that it is also affected by, amongst others, a person's class, sexuality, gender and ethnicity (Di Bello & Koureas 2010: 3). In addition, in the introduction to *Art, history and the senses*, Di Bello & Koureas (2010: 3) argue that a person's "full sensorium [is] alive with currents of desires, repulsions, volitions, affects and pleasures that are cross-modal and cross-sensual". From this description, evidently Di Bello & Koureas (2010: 3) do not subscribe to a reductive account of embodiment as *sensory* experience only, but include a broader domain of human experiences in their conception of embodiment. Furthermore, presumably in order to avoid the accusation that their sensory-orientated approach to art may result in functionalised and/or universalising claims to embodiment and human experience, Di Bello & Koureas (2010: 3) point out that the collections in their book could "[...] be likened to a study, at microscopic level, of the multi-sensorial interactions at work in individual works of art and at specific times and places, rather than an engagement with an overarching narrative or theory of art and the senses". In other words, on their terms, acknowledging that a viewer or recipient of art is embodied includes more than merely considering the operation of the five senses in this encounter.

In *Art and the senses* Bacci & Melcher (2011) have evidently taken a similar stance to Di Bello & Koureas regarding what falls under the rubric of a sustained study of art and the senses. According to these authors, sensory perception is multiple and integrated with other modes of being, arguing that "[...] no sense exists in isolation from the other senses, the body, and one's personal experience in a specific culture" (Bacci & Melcher 2011: 1). Evidently, at the heart of the matter, is a rhetoric of embodiment that has come to characterise sensory research, at the same time that the notion of embodiment extends well beyond the realm of the sensory only.

Moreover, from the literature study, it has become clear that the assumptions that underpin some varieties of a multisensory methodology of embodiment have developed from an unexpected and curious marriage between philosophy

(in particular phenomenology and more specifically Merleau-Ponty's theories regarding the phenomenology of perception) and neuroscience which has broadened scientific understandings of how the brain works.⁶ In the following section, I attempt to more clearly understand some of the ways in which embodiment has been theorised from the perspective of the humanities and social sciences.

5.2 Phenomenology and embodiment

Current theoretical activity even beyond the field of art history and visual culture studies is increasingly investigating the embodiment not only of vision and perception but also of aesthetic experience. In fact, Bacci & Melcher (2011: 2) suggest that the social sciences, critical studies and anthropology appear to have been more open to a “sensory-oriented reading of their subject” than art history and visual culture studies have tended to be thus far. Moreover, in the mind/brain sciences, they argue, “[...] perception is no longer [regarded as] synonymous with vision” (Bacci & Melcher 2011: 2).

Recent research by cultural geographers such as Tim Ingold (2000), Christopher Tilley (1994, 2004), and Wylie (2007), who investigate the relationship between landscape as “a real, palpable, worldly presence” and a person’s embodied lived experience, could be cited as examples of such research.⁷ As Wylie (2007) explains in his book *Landscape*, research in

⁶ In Chapter 3, specifically in sections 3.6 and 3.7, I explored some of the ways in which neuroscience has given shape to current conceptions of synesthesia and cross-modal plasticity. A list of authors who refer to Merleau-Ponty or neuroscience or the two intellectual perspectives together would be altogether too long to insert here. Overall, Bacci & Melcher's *Art and the senses* indicates the marriage between phenomenology and neuroscience quite clearly over its 31 chapters. To this list, Broadhurst (2012), Freedberg & Gallese (2007) and Sarah Pink (2011) could also be added. Broadhurst (2012) especially regards Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology and neuroscience to be “[...] two methodologically divergent yet complimentary intellectual tendencies” both of which she weaves together in an analysis of contemporary performance.

⁷ The key term here is ‘wordly’ which refers to the phenomenological concept of *Lebenswelt* or ‘lifeworld’. According to Husserl’s formulation of *Lebenswelt*, truth or the evidence for truth is only revealed through present experience in the world. In *The crisis of the European sciences* (1936) Husserl already began to turn phenomenology away from the notion of a transcendental

landscape studies and cultural geography in the mid-1980s to mid-1990s tended to emphasise the visual aspects of landscapes and the ways in which seeing landscape is constructed through cultural and social conventions. Since the late 1990s, however, what Wylie (2007: 13) refers to as “a new generation of landscape phenomenologists” has emerged.

According to Tilley (2004: 1) phenomenology is useful to cultural geography because it aims to “[...] reveal the world as it is experienced directly by a subject as opposed to how we might theoretically assume it to be”. Thus, Tilley (2004: 1) describes phenomenology as a “style or manner” rather than a set of rules or doctrines to be followed. This open-ended approach, therefore, allows for an analysis or understanding of a person’s experiences, not only of a natural setting but also of a work of art, to emerge or flow through a description of a particular encounter or interaction.

Landscape phenomenologists look beyond the discursive and interpretative focus of earlier cultural geography which viewed landscape as a representation of cultural, political and economic power. Instead, their main point of entry into the landscape is from the standpoint that “[...] landscape is defined primarily in terms of embodied practices of dwelling – practices of being-in-the-world in which self and landscape are entwined and emergent” (Wylie 2007: 14).⁸ Their interest is not so much in how power and ideology are articulated in landscape, but rather in the non-representational and affective connection between dwellers and their world(s). These kinds of investigations, with their roots firmly embedded in phenomenology, clearly also intersect with the kinds of practices

ego and consciousness toward a notion of a prereflective lifeworld of everyday experience. He argued that, owing to the continuous flux of experience, the existence of absolute truth or knowledge is impossible. Instead, for Husserl knowledge is defined or emerges through a dynamic process occurring in the living present. In this sense knowledge is a movement rather than a fixed or stable possibility (Holmes 2014: [s.p.]). The concept of the lifeworld can be understood as a horizon, which includes not only our personal but also intersubjective experiences and which is the background on which all our experiences become meaningful.

⁸ In this sense, the project of landscape phenomenologists is closely intertwined with that of existential phenomenology whose basic themes include: lived experience, modes of being, ontology and lifeworld (Van Manen [s.a.]). Heidegger’s (1996) notions of ‘being-in-the-world’ and ‘dwelling’, the latter often regarded as unmistakably poetic and spiritual (Wylie 2007: 179), are related to these main themes.

and approaches that were revealed through the examination of sensory scholarship in Chapter 3.⁹

While the American art historian, David Freedberg and the neuroscientist, Vittorio Gallese (2007: 198) maintain that the phenomenological position “[did] not [find] much traction in the field of art history” in the twentieth century and specifically in the Anglo-American varieties of this discipline, evidently, it has emerged – or is currently re-emerging – as a helpful theoretical framework for scholars investigating the embodied interactions of spectators and their world.¹⁰ It appears that phenomenology may have lost favour with art historians and art critics precisely on these grounds. Avoiding investigations of the interactions between spectators and art – in particular their emotional responses to art – Gombrich,¹¹ Robin Collingwood,¹² Nelson Goodman¹³ and Greenberg¹⁴ as well as historians and critics sympathetic to the ‘new art history’ or ‘social art history’ of the 1970s and beyond, mostly eliminated, or at least avoided, the realm of the empathetic, the pre-rational and experiential (Freedberg & Gallese 2007:

⁹ Phenomenology has not only proven useful in new initiatives in cultural geography, but also in recent work in film studies. For example, following the writing of Vivian Sobchack (1990, 1992, 2004) and Marks (1999), Jennifer Barker (2009) bases her analyses of film in theories of embodied perception. Investigating the ways in which “[...] meaning and significance emerge in and are articulated through the fleshy, muscular, and visceral engagement that occurs between film’s and viewers’ bodies”, Barker (2009: 4) avoids conventional analytical approaches employed by film theorists who aim to interpret films as texts. Instead, Barker turns her attention towards the sensuous relationship between viewers’ bodies and films. This avenue of film theory is explored further in my analysis of a video work in Chapter 6.

¹⁰ Paul Crowther (2002: 2) agrees that phenomenology has not been very influential in understanding the visual arts, maintaining that a reason for this state of affairs may be that phenomenologists have not often used “visual idioms” in their writing. Broadhurst (2012: 227), who concurs that phenomenology has not been prominent in art historiography, suggests that a reason for the tendency to overlook/disregard phenomenology as a viable critical approach, in particular from the perspective of analytical philosophy, may have much to do with its ambitious aim to “[...] lay bare a fundamental grammar of elements by which consciousness constructs a world”. Michael Ann Holly (2002) has a different opinion on the matter suggesting that phenomenology *has been* one of the approaches often used in art historiography. Cf. footnote 16 below.

¹¹ Cf. Gombrich (1967) who sidesteps emotional and empathetic responses to art whilst dealing with the ‘psychology of pictorial representation’.

¹² Cf. Collingwood (1938) who argued, following Kant, that art “should be separated from the emotional and from the realm of physical and spontaneous response” (Freedberg 2007: 199). In other words, art came to be associated with cognition only.

¹³ Cf. Goodman (1976) who argued that the emotions function cognitively in aesthetic experience.

¹⁴ Cf. Greenberg (1992 [1961]) who based his assertions regarding the opticity of the picture plane in the spectator’s cognitive assessment thereof.

199).¹⁵ The realm of affect and emotion, to which I referred in Chapter 4, could also be regarded as a neglected area of theorisation, as Best (2011) has noted. Instead, the theorisation of art from the perspective of social art history has privileged the notion of a fully cognitive viewer whose rational judgement of art is based on their objective detachment from it. In other words, by removing emotional, empathetic and spontaneous responses, art came to be understood as “a matter of pure cognition” (Freedberg 2007: 199) and aesthetics as a disembodied and purely mental experience.

That Freedberg is referring specifically to the practice of art historiography in the Anglo-American context is a matter that should not be overlooked. Continental art historians have been more open to other ways of theorising art including reception or viewer response theory, hermeneutics, phenomenology, and philosophical aesthetics. For instance, Hans Robert Jauss (1982) and Wolfgang Iser (1979) are, according to Michael Ann Holly (2002: 449), among the “leading contemporary German reception theorists” whose fundamental point of enquiry is “[...] the exchange between the work of art and its beholders (even its scholarly ones) [...].” Their analyses of art, which Holly (2002: 448) describes as being rooted in phenomenology, are driven by their understanding of art as a performance that is completed by its recipients.¹⁶

In the hands of sensory scholars – and more broadly other intellectuals interested in understanding viewers of art, landscape or film as embodied participants in the manner described above – phenomenology has apparently once again come to be regarded as a useful philosophical perspective. Evidently, the popularity of this theoretical approach amongst its proponents at least, owes much to its questioning of the mind/body and subject/object dualism characteristic of Western Rationalism, thereby rejecting the assumption that a

¹⁵ I return to the topic of a person’s empathetic interaction with a work of art in Chapter 6.

¹⁶ Cf. Holly’s (2002: 448) useful survey of reception theory and its “[...] curious lack of influence on disciplinary enquiries” in art historiography. Interestingly, in her overview Holly (2002: 448) includes phenomenology in the “litany of approaches” (which include feminism, Marxism, semiotics, deconstruction and identity politics) that have *popularly* been employed in the practice of art history since the 1980s. Evidently, Holly and Freedberg have differing opinions on the matter of the popularity of phenomenology in research on art.

subject can ideally detached her/himself from the world via the employment of rational cognition.

Notwithstanding its recent popularity in the theoretical circles mentioned above, however, phenomenology has also been heavily criticised. Wylie (2007: 179-180) has pointed out that phenomenology “has always been subject to criticism”, and that some theorists, especially those whose research is located within the critical, radical and Marxist traditions, have viewed its anti-objectivist and even “spiritual tenor” with some suspicion.¹⁷ For instance, from a critical Marxist or feminist approach, phenomenology can be considered problematic owing to its supposedly individualist philosophy which emphasises “[...] the actions, values, emotions and perceptions of individuals” (Wylie 2007: 180). Viewed through this critical lens, phenomenology overlooks the various social, historical, economic and political contexts that shape and determine those individual perceptions and experiences. In other words, phenomenology is considered an uncritical theoretical approach that celebrates human individuality as autonomous and somehow free from ideological fabrication. For these theorists, phenomenology fails to deal with the various forms of power relations – such as gender, race, class and ethnicity – that determine and constrain identities. Catherine Nash (2000: 660) sums up this critical perspective by stating that:

My wariness about abstract accounts of body practices and the return to phenomenological notions of ‘being-in-the-world’ arises also from the danger [...] that they constitute a retreat from feminism and the politics of the body in favour of the individualistic and universalizing sovereign subject.

While much of the critique lodged against phenomenology has especially been voiced by theorists working to expose the ideological and discursive construction of identity, another line of criticism is sceptical of phenomenology’s alleged romantic view of autonomous individuality and subjectivity and its aim of

¹⁷ Wiley (2007: 179) draws attention to the “mythopoetic or cosmological dimension” of Heidegger’s notion of dwelling in the sense that it invokes “[...] a more primordial, flickering and obscure alliance of earth, sky, divinity and mortality”.

“re-achieving a direct and primitive contact with the world” as Colin Smith (2002: vii) has described this philosophical perspective.

Equally problematic, from this point of view, would be phenomenology’s close association with “transcendental philosophy” and its endeavours to “put [...] essences back into existence” (Smith 2002: vii). In this sense, phenomenology’s aim to re-establish a more ‘direct’ and ‘primitive’ or ‘wild’ relationship between an individual and the world can potentially be regarded as a nostalgic search for a supposedly more authentic, presumably ‘natural’ connection between people and the world. In other words, phenomenology’s presumed romanticisation of non-objective or non-rational relationships and experiences of environments would be contested from a poststructuralist position. As Wylie (2007: 183) puts it, phenomenological approaches “[...] run the risk of romanticising the pre-modern, and particularly the non-Western, in a manner that inadvertently perpetuates notions of the historical pre-eminence and priority of Western cultures”. Its emphasis on agency, subjectivity and perception are precisely the constructions that poststructuralism exposes through its analysis of linguistic, symbolic and discursive structures that fabricate these categories (Foucault 1970: 342-343).

The challenge for me, however, is to think beyond these limitations and find alternative ways in which to imagine intersubjective lived experience as informed by the social, political and discursive. Therefore, bearing these criticisms in mind, I want to examine in particular the French philosopher of phenomenology, Merleau-Ponty’s theories regarding the non-dualistic relationship between mind and body and subject and world for his position has been frequently cited in intellectual activities that acknowledge the multisensorial embodiment of human experience (Barker 2011, Broadhurst 2012, Franzini 2011, Freedberg & Gallese 2007, Gallese 2011, Pérez-Gómez 2011, Pallasmaa 2005 & 2011, Pink 2011).¹⁸ And, as I argued in Chapter 1,

¹⁸ The list would, of course, include the landscape phenomenologists and film theorists already mentioned above. It is interesting to note that none of the contributors to Di Bello & Koureas’

Merleau-Ponty's theories on the phenomenology of embodiment are gaining renewed interest in a wide array of contemporary research.

In his preface to Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of perception*, Smith (2002: xxii) explains that:

The phenomenological world is not pure being, but the sense which is revealed where the paths of my various experiences intersect, and also where my own and other people's intersect and engage with each other like gears. It is thus inseparable from subjectivity and intersubjectivity, which find their unity when I either take up my past experiences in those of the present, or other people's in my own. For the first time [...] [t]he philosopher tries to conceive the world, others and himself and their interrelations.

In other words, although Merleau-Ponty has been criticised for his generalising description of embodiment and alterity (by Emmanuel Levinas and Irigaray for instance),¹⁹ his notions of our interrelation with others and the world potentially, if not explicitly, makes allowance for an approach that takes into account the different experiences of others and their influence on our own, without reducing those experiences to sameness. A critique against Merleau-Ponty's apparent subjectivism may therefore be somewhat misdirected.

Furthermore, within the context of my own argument that direct experience has a primacy and authority in investigations on art – which may potentially also be criticised as individualistic and subjective – a broadly (Merleau-Pontian) phenomenological approach that recognises the intersection and engagement of my experience with that of other's "like gears" (Smith 2002: xxii) recognises that the first-hand experience of a wider audience is part of the conversation surrounding people's embodied engagement with art. In other words, and as will be shown especially in Chapters 6 & 7, my own experiences are not separate

Art, history and the senses draw on Merleau-Ponty's theories and he is only referred to in a passing statement by the editors in their introductory chapter.

¹⁹ I deal more closely with their critique of Merleau-Ponty in Chapter 6.

from those of others as I “take up” (Smith 2002: xxii) our intersubjective experiences in my own.

Born in France in 1908 and influenced by Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) and Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty has been described as “*the philosopher of the body*” (Wylie 2009: 147) who revolted against disembodied consciousness. Working in the European phenomenological tradition, and more specifically, the German tradition of phenomenology, Merleau-Ponty understood human perception to be multisensory and the relationship between an embodied perceiver and the world to be fundamentally intimate (or intertwined) and corporeal. In this way, Merleau-Ponty ‘re-embodied’ both the eye and the mind thereby radically overturning their previous ‘Cartesian’ disembodiment.²⁰ Equally, Merleau-Ponty’s emphasis on the body was directed against phenomenology’s inherent ‘mentalism’ and anti-psychologism. For this reason, his account of embodied perception and engaged subjectivity have provided the theoretical underpinning for much of the research produced by sensory researchers.

For the purpose of suggesting some ways in which a person’s experience of particular artworks might be articulated in terms beyond visuality, Merleau-Ponty’s conception of embodiment is especially useful to the task. Therefore, I first explore his notion of embodied perception and thereafter move on to a closer examination of his account of the intimate, chiasmic and corporeal relationship between a subject and the world. These distinctions are my own and are not implicit in Merleau-Ponty’s writing. It would be more accurate to say that for Merleau-Ponty being embodied means also to be intimately interlaced or intertwined with the world. In other words, in opposition to the subject-object division, constructed in ‘intellectualist’ strains of philosophy, Merleau-Ponty understands a person and the world to be mutually involved and interdependent.

²⁰ Johnson (1993: 389) notes a correlation between Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of perception and certain strands of American Pragmatism.

In the next section, I draw from three texts by Merleau-Ponty in particular, all of which reveal the philosopher's sustained interest in understanding the relationship between human consciousness and nature, and which also mark a particular stage in his philosophical position. *Phenomenology of perception* (1945) was influenced both by research being done at that time in the scientific fields of psychology and biology as well as Husserl's thinking, which he engaged with critically. Although Merleau-Ponty did not attempt to find validation for his theories in scientific evidence, he nevertheless used scientific research regarding perception extensively throughout the text.²¹ 'Eye and mind', which was first published as an essay in January 1961, was the last work Merleau-Ponty published before his sudden death on 3 May 1961 at the age of 53. This text is interlaced, both "chronologically and intellectually" (Johnson 1993: 37) with *The visible and the invisible*, which Merleau-Ponty began writing in January 1959. When he died he had written 200 pages of this text with 110 pages of working notes. These were edited and published posthumously in 1964 in French by Claude Lefort. The fourth chapter of *The visible and the invisible*, entitled 'The intertwining - the chiasm', which was written shortly after the author had written 'Eye and mind', is described by Johnson (1993: 37-38) as presenting Merleau-Ponty's "most arresting ontological ideas". In other words, the development in Merleau-Ponty's thinking is clearly evident in his earlier phenomenological position set out in *Phenomenology of perception* and his later, speculative turn to an ontology based in *flesh* in the latter two works. Owing to their importance in elucidating Merleau-Ponty's ontology of vision and embodiment the two later texts are examined closely in the discussion below.

²¹ Merleau-Ponty engaged with gestalt theory which was emerging in psychology at the time. He challenged the classical Gestalt theories according to which it was argued that even the most elementary experience is structured, with the most basic structure being figure/ground. Gestalt theorists argued that structures exist in nature and that such structures cause structured responses. Merleau-Ponty (2002 [1945]: 6), on the other hand, asserts that we perceive phenomena always in relation to the contexts within which we meet them. "The perceptual 'something'" he argues, "is always in the middle of something else, it always forms part of a 'field'" (Merleau-Ponty 2002 [1945]: 4).

5.2.1 Maurice Merleau-Ponty: on embodied perception

In an effort to subvert both the hegemony of vision and ‘Cartesian’ biases in Western philosophy, Merleau-Ponty continuously returned to the topic of vision and its embodiment (Van de Vall 2008: 27; Wylie 2009: 147). In his account of embodied vision, Merleau-Ponty insisted on the corporeal nature of all human experience, knowledge and perception. In this way, he tried consistently to develop an alternative theory of visual perception to that described by the regime of the scientific model of vision as well as linear perspective (Iversen & Melville 2010: 109, Van de Vall 2008: 40).

Merleau-Ponty’s notion of vision should be understood within the context of his conviction that both empiricist and rationalist approaches to the relation between a person and the world overlook, or negate, the corporeality of perceptual experience (Vasseleu 1998: 21). Whereas empiricism regards the body as an object which responds to the world and to sensations, rationalist – or consciousness-based approaches – as already argued, view the body as secondary to the thinking mind which synthesises and reflects on information received via the body (Vasseleu 1998: 21). Merleau-Ponty (1968 [1964]: 235), on the other hand, considers the “[...] specular as an essentially incarnate reality, bound to and produced within a corporeal and social context”. In short, in Merleau-Ponty’s anti-Platonic conception, vision is inseparably enmeshed in the visible world which is at once a tactile space from which it cannot transcend “to a unified, self-reflexive or panoptic viewpoint” (Vasseleu 1998: 21).

Merleau-Ponty’s critique of linear perspective, its use in art and its assumption of a unified, transcendent subject, as discussed in Chapter 2, are demonstrated in his essay, ‘Cézanne’s doubt’ (1945). Merleau-Ponty lauds Cézanne for attempting to show in his paintings our physical immersion in the lived world. Moreover, Merleau-Ponty (1993 [1945]: 62) is impressed that Cézanne moved beyond the Impressionists’ emphasis on instantaneous perceptual sensation and atmosphere, thereby relocating (or reclaiming) the object and imbuing it

with the “impression of solidity and material substance”, in particular through the use of colour and by abandoning artificial contours. According to Merleau-Ponty (1993 [1945]: 64), by painting “the lived perspective” and not a geometrically constructed one, Cézanne’s paintings, such as *Lac d’Annecy* (Figure 18) succeed in revealing our immersion in the world which he later referred to as the *flesh* of the world.²² In this way, for Merleau-Ponty (1993 [1945]: 62) Cézanne makes “visible how the world *touches us*”.



Figure 18: Paul Cézanne, *Lac d’Annecy* (1896)

Merleau-Ponty is interested in developing a notion of thought as emerging out of sensory immersion and experience in the world, rather than in opposition to it as in the objectivist or intellectualist conceptions of thought. In this endeavour, he poses an unusual question regarding the cultural determinism of perception

²² Cf. Chapter 6, section 6.8.1 in which I expand on Merleau-Ponty’s notion of “flesh”.

as discussed previously.²³ In a working note in *The visible and the invisible* Merleau-Ponty (1968 [1964]: 212) asks: “[h]ow can one return from this perception fashioned by culture to the ‘brute’ or ‘wild’ perception [...]. By what act does one undo it (return to the phenomenal, to the ‘vertical’ world, to lived experience?)”.²⁴ These questions no doubt reflect the main protocols of the philosophy of phenomenology in general which seeks to describe the mental contents of consciousness directly and understand the relationship between a person and the world.²⁵

Merleau-Ponty (2002 [1945]: 13) had already grappled with the idea of a pre-cultural, pre-discursive, primitive or ‘wild’ perception in his earlier text *Phenomenology of perception* when he argued that children’s perceptions of the “[...] apparent size of objects at different distances, or of their colour in different lights [...]” is more accurate (“perfect”) than that of adults. For this reason, he argued that in order to understand sense perception our “pre-objective realm” has to be more closely explored (Merleau-Ponty 2002 [1945]: 13). In other words, in order to understand the phenomenon of perception, it would be necessary to at least allow for the possibility that sensations can be separated from theoretical or abstractive thought.

Merleau-Ponty’s critique of the Enlightenment model of vision (discussed in Chapter 2) involves both the ways in which this model denies the embodied nature of human experience, perception, sensation and knowledge and the way

²³ Cf. my discussion of the modernity thesis in Chapter 3, and specifically section 3.6.1.

²⁴ These awkward questions fly in the face of poststructuralist critiques of notions of unmediated, pre-cultural and natural experience. Van de Vall (2005: 37), however, finds that asking such questions – about the possibility of sight being altered by historical and cultural change – is necessary in any theory not only on art but also on visuality and visual culture. She contends that, in theories on vision and visual culture, often whatever “[...] falls outside the scope of the cultural and historical domain of representation is not interesting, or cannot be answered, or simply does not exist” (Van de Vall 2005: 39). For example, the main point of departure of Crary’s (1990: 6) *Techniques of the observer* is that “[...] there is no observing subject prior to this continually shifting field”. According to Crary (1990: 6), vision always operates within “[...] an irreducibly heterogeneous system of discursive, social, technological, and institutional relations”. Therefore, according to this view, there is no ‘wild or ‘brute’ perception that is not always already determined by culture.

²⁵ According to ‘classical’ phenomenology, the phenomenon exists as an intra-mental or intentional object.

in which it constructs an empty space between a subject and an object in the visual field. In other words, according to Merleau-Ponty's position on the phenomenology of perception, the body is not merely a transmitter of messages. When Merleau-Ponty (2002 [1945]: 11) explains that "the sensible is what is apprehended *with* the senses" he does not mean that the sensory apparatus is a conductor or an instrument that carries sensation as the empiricists do. Rather, sensations are produced and experienced *with* the whole body which exists in an environment, rendering perception inseparable from embodied experience.²⁶

For Merleau-Ponty, the lived body is the place from which knowledge of the world emerges. In other words, rejecting the 'Cartesian' notion of a dualistic understanding of mind and body, for Merleau-Ponty perception is wholly embodied. In 'Eye and mind' Merleau-Ponty (1993 [1961]: 132) writes that "[v]ision is not the metamorphosis of things themselves into the sight of them; it is not a matter of things belonging simultaneously to the world at large and a little private world. It is a thinking that unequivocally decodes signs given within the body". In other words, in arguing that embodied vision is thinking, Merleau-Ponty completely rejects the 'Cartesian' notion of an interiorised subject contemplating and judging representations in the mind.

Similarly, Merleau-Ponty denies the possibility of a mind separate from and superior to a body. Perception is made possible only through the body. As Merleau-Ponty (2002 [1945]: 246) explains, according to the intellectualist position on the matter of the separation of body and mind, "[b]eing is exclusively for someone who is able to step back from it and thus stand wholly outside being. In this way, the mind becomes the subject of perception [...]" For

²⁶ Merleau-Ponty emphasised the "simultaneity and interaction" (Pallasmaa 2005: 20) of all the senses. He argued that "[...] my perception is [therefore] not a sum of visual, tactile and audible givens: I perceive in a total way with my whole being: I grasp a unique structure of the thing, a unique way of being, which speaks to all my senses at once" (Merleau-Ponty 1964 [1947]: 50). Although sight may be the sense through which perceptual experience is entered into by sighted human beings, that experience is simultaneously grasped through the multisensory channels of our entire bodies. In the same way, vision itself, remarked Dufrenne (qtd Berleant 1991: 85), "[...] is born from what is happening in the body."

Merleau-Ponty (2002 [1945]: 246) in order to accomplish this task would entail “ceasing [...] to be in order to know”. Contrary to this impossible view, for Merleau-Ponty (1964: 14), “[...] the perceiving mind is an incarnated mind”, in the sense that the mind is flesh. This means that there is no possibility of a mind that by itself commands a body; rather both mind and body are involved in perception. Our eyes and ears, he argues, are at once entities in the world at the same time that they sense the sensible in the world and are therefore entirely incapable of taking up a position “on the hither side” of the world as required by the intellectualist framework of perception (Merleau-Ponty 2002 [1945]: 247). In short, mental faculties do not – and, more accurately, *cannot* – supervise and organise what is received from distinct physical sense organs; the mind is inseparable from embodied experience.

More specifically, this position challenges the notion of an interiorised subject drawing conclusions about an exterior world or discrete set of objects supposedly distinct from the person who perceives them. This means that there is no possibility of a stable, identifiable boundary between an internalised subject and the external world to which the mind assigns meanings. As Merleau-Ponty (2002 [1945]: 150) puts it: “I am not in front of my body, I am in it, rather I am with it” which means that my body is the point from which meaning emerges. “Pure sensation” does not exist by itself, but is more accurately produced when I experience the quality of its light, colour, sound and so forth (Merleau-Ponty 2002 [1945]: 5). For example, the red of the carpet on the floor which Merleau-Ponty looks at is not a specific red in itself but is the red the philosopher sees owing to the shadow cast on it and the quality of the light that influences it in a particular spatial configuration.

That which is perceived by a human body “[...] by its nature, admits of the ambiguous, the shifting, and is shaped by its context” (Merleau-Ponty 2002 [1945]: 13). Merleau-Ponty (2002 [1945]: 13) explains this phenomenon by means of Franz Carl Müller-Lyer’s (Figure 19) now well-known optical illusion of two lines of equal length being perceived as either longer or shorter depending

on the direction of the arrows placed at either end. In this example, Merleau-Ponty demonstrates that objects or things in the world are produced for and by subjects through their experience of them in a particular context. In this illusion the lines do not become unequal, but only different to each other. For Merleau-Ponty (2002 [1945]: 13), perception is a “direction” or intention rather than a “primitive function”. “In Müller-Lyer’s illusion” he explains, “one of the lines ceases to be equal to the other without becoming ‘unequal’ (Merleau-Ponty 2002 [1945]: 13).²⁷

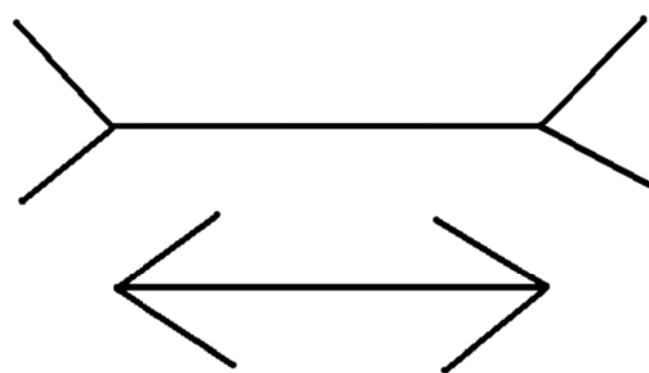


Figure 19: Müller-Lyer illusion (1889)

For Merleau-Ponty the body can produce meanings in ways that cannot be accounted for via the rationalist conception of the acquisition of knowledge. “My body is that meaningful core which behaves like a general function, and which nevertheless exists, and is susceptible to disease” he argues (Merleau-Ponty 2002 [1945]: 170). “In it we learn to know that union of essence and existence which we shall find again in perception generally [...]” (Merleau-Ponty 2002 [1945]: 170). According to Merleau-Ponty (2002 [1945]: 170) we must therefore “reawaken” our experience of the world with the understanding that “[...] we are in the world through our body”. This reawakening involves relinquishing our all embracing trust in the “objective and detached knowledge of the body” underneath which we will find “that other knowledge we have of it” (Merleau-

²⁷ Cf. my earlier reference to Segal’s research dealing with Sander’s *Parallelogram* in section 3.6.2.2.

Ponty 2002 [1945]: 170). And when we perceive or sense the world, what happens at the same time is a reawakening of “[...] sediments left behind by some previous constitution, so that I am, as a sentient subject, a repository stocked with natural powers [...]” (Merleau-Ponty 2002 [1945]: 249).

This means that bodily experience, on Merleau-Ponty’s terms, must be acknowledged as foundational to all experience. Merleau-Ponty (2002 [1945]: 271) understands the senses as being “never-ending[ly] integrat[ed] into one knowing organism”. This means that the human body is not “a collection of adjacent organs” but must instead be regarded as a “synergic system” which means that all its functions “[...] are exercised and linked together in the general action of being in the world” (Merleau-Ponty 2002 [1945]: 272). In the following section, I unpack the relationship between subjects and/in the world as understood by Merleau-Ponty.

5.2.2 Merleau-Ponty: on engaged experience

As has been argued in Chapter 2, in Descartes’ *Optics* space is constructed as “a network of relations between objects” as if space is seen from a third-party positioned somewhere outside it (Merleau-Ponty 1993 [1961]: 138).²⁸ Merleau-Ponty, however, regards space to begin with the subject.²⁹ He argues that

²⁸ Merleau-Ponty (1993 [1961]: 130) regards Descartes’ *Optics* as an attempt to make our understanding of vision “crystal clear” by “exorcis[ing]” the “spectres” (by which he likely means the ghostly images of shadows, reflections, light and colour) of our vision. According to Merleau-Ponty (1993 [1961]: 130), Descartes wants (but fails) to “[...] make illusions or objectless perceptions out of them [and] brush them to one side of an unequivocal world”. In short, Descartes attempts to “eliminate the enigma of vision” (Merleau-Ponty 1993 [1961]: 135), in order to find the basis of vision in thought, and not the other way around which is precisely what Merleau-Ponty seeks to achieve.

²⁹ Thinking of space in this way is thus contrary to the Euclidean view on space. Cf. Arnold Berleant’s (1991: 55-57) discussion on Euclidean space in *Art and engagement*. In Euclidean terms, both space and perceiver, independent from each other, are fixed and unchanging and the objects that appear in space are also distinct and separate from each other. By contrast, Merleau-Ponty’s approach to space could be understood as influenced by modern relativity physics and Albert Einstein’s theories in this regard. Modern relativity physics understands space as dynamic and unfolding. Space and time are therefore regarded as a continuum “[...] that is curved in the presence of a gravitational field and in which the time and position of events can be fixed only relative to the location of the observer” (Berleant 1991: 58). Even beyond what

space is not seen “according to its exterior envelope”, but from within because “I live it from inside: I am immersed in it” (Merleau-Ponty 1993 [1961]: 138). For Merleau-Ponty (2002 [1945]: 354) my body is “inescapably” connected with the phenomena of the world, arguing that:

[...] the system of experience is not arrayed before me as if I were God, it is lived by me from a certain point of view; I am not the spectator, I am involved, and it is my point of view which makes possible both the finiteness of my perception and its opening out upon the complete world as a horizon of every perception.

This account of the world and a person’s place amongst the objects within it positions us as always both a subject *and* an object in an environment. This means that the world – space – does not exist in front of a subject but always around her/him. In other words, “[w]hen we look”, as Wylie (2007: 150) explains, “what is occurring is an *enlacing together* of body and world”. Merleau-Ponty (1968 [1964]: 163) explains this as follows:

Visible and mobile, my body is a thing among things; it is caught in the fabric of the world, and its cohesion is that of a thing. But because it moves itself and sees, it holds things in a circle around itself. Things are an annex or prolongation of itself [which means] the world is made of the same stuff as the body.

Thus, Merleau-Ponty (2002 [1945]: 248) does not recognise a space between body and world at all, but argues that the “sensor” (or, “the subject of sensation”) is at once part of the sensible. More precisely, a “transaction” takes place between them so that “[...] it cannot be held that one acts while the other suffers the action, or that one confers significance on the other” (Merleau-Ponty 2002 [1945]: 248). Whilst in everyday language in general and in scientific discourse in particular, detachment from the world is considered a desirable position from which to acquire knowledge of it (recall my earlier examples, ‘from

Einstein himself proposed, according to this relativist position on space and time, events are understood as being linked to the presence and position of an observer. In other words, things do not occur independently of the subject “in absolute spatial and temporal frames” (Berleant 1991: 58), but occur rather *because* of the subject. Cf. Milič Čapek’s (1961: 161, 176) discussion of the reciprocity between perceiver and perceived in *Philosophical impact of contemporary physics*.

‘my perspective’, ‘I see what you mean’ and ‘from my point of view’),³⁰ Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of subjectivity insists on the corporeal and engaged nature of human experience rather than the detached rationality or intellectualism of ‘Cartesian’ subjectivity.

This means that “[...] the thing is inseparable from a person perceiving it, and can never be actually *in itself* because its articulations are those of our very existence, and because it stands at the other end of our gaze or at the terminus of a sensory exploration which invests it with humanity” (Merleau-Ponty 2002 [1945]: 320). In this sense, Merleau-Ponty’s notions of perception can be related to the ways in which reception theorists understand how meaning unfolds or issues from a person’s encounter with an artwork. In Holly’s (2002: 451) useful overview of reception theory, she explains that according to Jauss – “the renowned practitioner of reception history” – an artwork (or literary piece, for that matter) does not bear an eternal or universal meaning. In other words, while an artwork has been created at a particular time and in a particular context, its meaning emerges at the meeting with an engaged and responsive participant. According to Jauss (1982: 21), a work of art is thus “[...] not an object that stands by itself and that offers the same view to each reader in each period. It is not a monument that monologically reveals its timeless essence”.

In ‘Eye and mind’, Merleau-Ponty (1993 [1961]: 129-130) uses an example of the mirror image to point out the opposing ways in which the phenomenologist and the ‘Cartesian’ understand the visible world. In this example, he points out how our sense of ourselves and our understanding of our relation to others is “fashioned in the experience of seeing” (Van de Vall 2005: 40). As a technical object, the mirror exists “between the seeing and the visible body” and “emerges because I am a visible see-er” argues Merleau-Ponty (1993 [1961]: 129). In this way, the mirror “illustrat[es] and amplify[ies] the metaphysical structure of our flesh” thereby completing my externality (Merleau-Ponty 1993 [1961]: 129).

³⁰ Cf. Chapter 2, section 2.3.

The mirror is an important object for Merleau-Ponty in that it can be used to demonstrate our connection with what we see reflected in it. For, the reflected self we see is not an empty, flat object before us but intricately part of our sense of ourselves. He refers to Schilder's experience of seeing himself smoking in front of a mirror in order to explain our complicated relationship with our mirror image.³¹ Merleau-Ponty (1993 [1961]: 129) explains that when Schilder sees himself smoking he does not only *recognise* "the sleek, burning surface of the wood" but, more importantly, also *feels* that surface. "The mirror's phantom draws my flesh into the outer world" argues Merleau-Ponty (1993 [1961]: 129) and my own "psychic energy" produced in the "invisible of my body" is placed upon the body I see.

Merleau-Ponty, moreover, employs the example of the mirror image, and the way in which Descartes conceives of that image, to expose, discredit and reject the 'Cartesian' understanding of vision: "The Cartesian does not see *himself* in the mirror; he sees a puppet, an 'outside'" (Merleau-Ponty 1993 [1961]: 131). In other words, the reflected image in the mirror is not "a body in the flesh" but merely "an effect of the mechanics of things" (Merleau-Ponty 1993 [1961]: 131), no doubt perfectly explicable to the 'Cartesian' mind. Furthermore, *if* the 'Cartesian' "recognises himself" in the mirror, "[...] if he thinks it looks like him, it is his thought that weaves this connection. The mirror image is in no sense a part of him" (Merleau-Ponty 1993 [1961]: 131). In other words, for Descartes "[t]he thing and its reflection are two separate things" (Van de Vall 2005: 41) only related to each other "externally by causality" (Merleau-Ponty 1993 [1961]: 131). In this 'Cartesian' account of vision, therefore, "[...] the inner reflexivity of visual perception – vision's entanglement in and distance from the visible – is neglected" (Van de Vall 2005: 41).

³¹ The reference is to P. Schilder's *The image and appearance of the human body* (1935).



Figure 20: Dieter Appelt, *La tache attristant le miroir où l'haleine a pris* (1977)

For Descartes, the mirror image is explained via thought, whilst for Merleau-Ponty we are inextricably bound up with our mirror image; it is part of us as we are part of it, as interestingly demonstrated in Dieter Appelt's *La tache attristant le miroir où l'haleine a pris* (1977) (Figure 20). In this photograph, that which is invisible – breath – is made not only visible, but also tangible, for one would be able to actually touch the trace, the excess, the remnant of a life-giving breath before it disappears from sight. In this way, the seeing man and the seen man – himself – are linked by his breath and attention is drawn to the space between them, which is not empty but divided by an unbridgeable object – the mirror. In this sense, the photograph both demonstrates and complicates Merleau-Ponty's notion of being in the *flesh* of the world, via our awareness of the presence of the mirror between the man and his reflection. And yet, it is as if the breath ethereally transgresses the border between both, being at once part of the seen

and the seeing.³² Simply put, for Descartes there is no vision without thought, while for Merleau-Ponty the relationship between vision and thought is far more complicated than this. Merleau-Ponty (1993 [1961]: 135) contends that “*it is not enough to think in order to see*”. His account of vision fundamentally alters the notion of an empty space between the perceiving subject and the perceived world, effectively overturning ‘Cartesian’ accounts of subjectivity which presuppose that ‘a seeing eye’ is somehow disinterested and disembodied, and entirely outside and distant from the world it claims to know.

Merleau-Ponty’s anti-Cartesian philosophy is especially evident in *The visible and the invisible* (1968 [1964]) in which he discusses vision, embodiment and subjectivity and in which his new ontology of vision unfolds. In the chapter entitled ‘The intertwining – the chiasm’, Merleau-Ponty (1968 [1964]: 130-155) elaborates on his account of the complicated relationship between ourselves and the world which is based on the assumption that our vision is “formed in the heart of the visible”. He describes this relationship as being as intimate as the closeness of the sea and beach.³³ However, this “strange adhesion of the seer and the visible” (Merleau-Ponty 1968 [1964]: 139) does not mean that “we blend into [the visible world]” or that “[...] it passes into us, for then the vision would vanish at the moment of formation, by disappearance of the seer or of the visible” (Merleau-Ponty 1968 [1964]: 131). This means that we are not individuals independent of the world who then “open” ourselves to the world. There is therefore no space between us and what we look at in the world because “the gaze”, argues Merleau-Ponty (1968 [1964]: 131), “clothes [the world] with its own flesh”. And even though we envelop and veil the world when we look at it, the world is at the same time unveiled to us through that looking. Furthermore, according to Merleau-Ponty (1968 [1964]: 133), “[...] one cannot

³² Appelt may even be grappling with the nature of photography which itself creates distances between the lens and the objects it captures.

³³ Irigaray (1993 [1945]: 152) finds Merleau-Ponty’s analogy of the sea and the beach to allude to intra-uterine life where the one who sees the world cannot see the foetus inside her: “one who is still in this night does not see and remains without a visible (as far as we know); but the other seer cannot see him. The other does not see him, he is not visible for the other, who nevertheless sees the world, but without him.”

say if it is the look or if it is the things that command". In other words, the seer and the world are intertwined in a non-hierarchical relationship.³⁴

Merleau-Ponty (1968 [1964]: 133) illustrates the intertwining – or reversibility – of a subject and an object in the famous example of one hand touching the other; the hand that touches is the subject and the hand being touched the object. But at the moment of touching, these roles become indistinguishable from one another or, more accurately, reversed for we do not know which hand is doing the touching and which is being touched. In other words, for Merleau-Ponty the embodied subject is always a body firmly immersed in the world of which it is also intricately part:

The subject of sensation is neither a thinker who takes note of a quality, nor an inert setting which is affected or changed by it, it is a power which is born into, and simultaneously with, a certain existential environment, or is synchronized with it (Merleau-Ponty 2002 [1945]: 245).

To illustrate the intertwining of a person and the world, the philosopher describes the relationship between a person or "sentient" and the world of things or "sensibles" by using an analogy of falling asleep:

[S]leep comes when a certain voluntary attitude suddenly receives from outside the confirmation for which it was waiting. I am breathing deeply and slowly in order to summon sleep, and suddenly it is as if my mouth were connected to some great lung outside myself which alternately calls forth and forces back my breath. A certain rhythm of respiration, which a moment ago I voluntarily maintained, now becomes my very being, and sleep, until now aimed at as a significance, suddenly becomes a situation (Merleau-Ponty 2002 [1945]: 246).

³⁴ Merleau-Ponty's account of the reversibility of people and places, and in particular landscapes, has proven helpful to new developments in cultural anthropology as I briefly pointed out earlier. For example, Ingold has written extensively on people's interactions with the natural world. He argues that the spaces in which we live, or more precisely our dwellings, are not separate from the outside world, but are already outside. He argues that "[...] mingling with what we see, we are simultaneously somewhere and everywhere. Flitting like an agile spirit from one place or topic to another as the focus of our attention shifts, we do not so much see things as see *among them*" (Ingold 2008: 381).

In the same way, he argues, when we give our attention to sight or sound, it is as if the sensible object “takes possession of my ear or my gaze” (Merleau-Ponty 2002 [1945]: 246). A part of my body or even my entire body then “surrenders” (Merleau-Ponty 2002 [1945]: 246) itself to the sensible object. In this way, sensation is considered to be a form of communication between the body and the world. The self “has already sided with the world” (Merleau-Ponty 2002 [1945]: 251), is open to the sensible and has “synchronized” with it. A body, which experiences sensations as “a modality of a general existence” is “already destined for a physical world” which it has both access to and the ability to open upon via the senses (Merleau-Ponty 2002 [1945]: 251, 252).

This fundamentally alters the way in which the relationship between a perceiving subject and the perceived world is understood, effectively overturning ‘Cartesian’ accounts of subjectivity which presuppose that the contemplative mind of the viewer is disembodied, and entirely outside the world it claims to know. Following Merleau-Ponty’s conception of sensation, understood as being embodied, gazing at (and hearing, and touching) the world is done not from outside it, but from within it, as reciprocally as the man and his mirror image in Appelt’s photograph. For Merleau-Ponty, our bodies are simultaneously seeing and seen, touching and touched, active and passive, observer and observed, subject and object. Furthermore, as Vasseleu (1998: 24 points out, Merleau-Ponty understands perception to be “[...] a creative receptivity rather than a passive capacity to receive impressions. This creativity is an activity which is inseparable from its corporeality; likewise, incarnation in the world is inseparable from its capacity for such activity”, which suggests the complex way in which the man is ‘touched’ by his mirror image.

5.3 Aesthetic embodiment and engagement

Although his limited treatment of painting only is unfortunate, Merleau-Ponty’s ideas on embodied and engaged perception can prove useful to discussions of

our aesthetic experience of a wider variety of art forms. Therefore, in the section that follows I explore the possible ways in which his philosophical ideas can inform a conception of aesthetic experience in a manner that refuses the modern rationalist notion according to which aesthetic experience is produced by the intellect operating separately from the body.

It would appear that there is a close affinity between Merleau-Ponty's non-dualistic position regarding the involvement of the mind and the body (in other words, an embodied mind) in human experience, combined with his understanding of the reciprocal relationship between the body and the world, and Berleant's notion of aesthetic embodiment and aesthetic engagement.³⁵ However, Berleant (1991: 89) expressly separates himself from phenomenologists such as John Dewey, Merleau-Ponty and Dufrenne owing to, what he believes to be, their emphasis on the body of the perceiver rather than the *interaction* between perceiving subjects and their environment. In so doing, argues Berleant, these scholars tend to invoke a separation between subject and object rather than overcoming it.

Instead, Berleant (1991: 89) supports a "participatory model" which transcends all such divisions. In other words, a conscious body and the world are considered bound up with each other in a continuity of experience. In this model, "[...] every vestige of subjectivity disappears and the irreducible continuity of person and place becomes the fundamental term in grasping the meaning of environment" (Berleant 1991: 89).³⁶ Berleant argues that experience

³⁵ Berleant is the founding editor of the online journal *Contemporary Aesthetics*. In his first book *The aesthetic field: a phenomenology of aesthetic experience* (1970), which is influenced by phenomenology and pragmatism, he establishes the aesthetic field as a contextual framework within which questions in aesthetics and the arts arise. In his subsequent work, his notions of aesthetic engagement and participatory aesthetics are applied to environmental aesthetics.

³⁶ The notion that the subject is an active participant and contributor in the world is not a new one. Recent thinking in this regard can be found in the American pragmatist tradition and in continental existential-phenomenological philosophy, whose roots go back even further than this to empiricism (Berleant 1991: 85). According to these views, and in contrast to traditional dualisms discussed in previous chapters, there is no gap between a body and an environment, object and self, "inner consciousness and external world" (Berleant 1991: 85). Human consciousness and culture are considered to be interconnected, resulting from an intimate connection between people and their environments. Berleant (1991: 85) refers to this mode of thinking as the "active model". Summarily, according to this view, people are regarded as actors

– not only aesthetic experience but also our experience in the human world – is always immediate and direct. This does not mean that such experience is cut off or separated from other “modes of the human realm” (Berleant 1991: 208) such as the social, political and moral for these are the modes through which direct experience is mediated. In other words, Berleant (1991: 210) considers mediated experience to be direct. At the same time, direct experience is thought of as vital and dynamic.

Despite Berleant’s contention to the contrary, on my reading, there are distinct similarities between his and Merleau-Ponty’s respective positions on perception. For instance, Berleant’s ideas regarding the intimate and chiasmic relationship between the mind and the body and the body *in* the world, is undoubtedly strongly sympathetic to Merleau-Ponty’s theories. Although Berleant’s intellectual position on the topic of aesthetic experience does not appear in the literature dealing with art and the senses, I propose that his ideas are helpful in describing a person’s engagement with an artwork in the manner of an aesthetics of embodiment and engagement which is the main task of this chapter. It may even be the case that Berleant’s ideas are more helpful than Merleau-Ponty’s when closely analysing art. I attempt to make this clearer in the discussion below.

Critical of the modern conception of aesthetic disinterestedness,³⁷ Berleant (2003: 1) maintains that “[...] aesthetics today labors under the burden of a conceptual apparatus that has lost its relevance and impedes our ability to understand and appreciate the arts, especially their recent development”.³⁸ In addition, the “burden” of aesthetic disinterestedness has “[...] obstruct[ed] our appreciative experience of other human creations, such as built environments,

in the world, “fully implicated in its dynamic processes” (Berleant 1991: 86) as opposed to being spectators of it.

³⁷ Cf. my discussion of the principles of aesthetic disinterestedness in Chapter 4, section 4.4.2. In addition, cf. the lively debate between Berleant and Ronald Hepburn on aesthetic disinterestedness in ‘An exchange on disinterestedness’ in *Contemporary aesthetics* 2003(1).

³⁸ Among the ‘recent’ developments in the arts that Berleant is referring to is no doubt the kind that expressly or directly invites a person’s physical participation, such as the art forms mentioned in Chapter 4, section 4.5.

agricultural landscapes, industrial sites, and the like" (Berleant 2003: 1). In other words, according to Berleant, although still pervasive in writing about aesthetic encounters, modern aesthetics and its associated concept of disinterestedness, is no longer a relevant approach to account for a person's experiences with art, and more specifically, contemporary art. For, the aesthetics of disinterestedness, and its contemplative ideal, fails to offer "[...] an enlivening understanding of how art works" (Berleant 2003: 2).

It cannot be denied that a variety of techniques, media and approaches have emerged in contemporary art that in various ways demand a viewer's movement and full-bodied attention and involvement. A modernist conception of a viewer who is ideally immobile, distanced, passive, contemplative and properly focussed on a work's claims to providing access to transcendental truths does not suffice to describe how a person engages with art of this kind, or any art at all for that matter.³⁹ Berleant's (2003: 2) 'non-Kantian' revision of the terms of aesthetic experience is, therefore, helpful for understanding the multi-faceted nature of experiencing participatory art which is no longer understood as ideally "disinterested" but aesthetically engaged.

Drawn into a "perceptual unity", Berleant (1991: 46) contends that a perceiver and art are inseparably related in at least three ways: through "continuity, perceptual integration, and participation" (Berleant 1991: 46).⁴⁰ The notion of continuity means that art is intimately related to daily life and the social and cultural realms and other modes of experience, including the practical and religious.

³⁹ For, as is shown in Chapter 6, spectators are always involved in some degree of bodily activity when encountering art even if that activity is not immediately noticeable or apparent. In this sense then, modern aesthetics is not even suitable to understanding a person's interaction with more 'traditional' kinds of art either, such as painting for instance.

⁴⁰ For Berleant (1991: 212) there are four dimensions of the aesthetic field, namely, "creation, object, appreciation, and performance". These dimensions do not occur independently but are "[...] functionally interdependent aspects of a unified occasion" (Berleant 1991: 212). All four are present in every work of art – whether pictorial, three-dimensional, architectural, literary or performance (music and dance). It is only the character of the ways in which they occur that differs in each aesthetic situation.

Perceptual integration refers to the intimate relationship between a perceiver/appreciator and an artwork as well as the integration of all the senses in that experience. This kind of experience is marked by “the experiential fusion of the senses” (Berleant 1991: 46) or synaesthesia. But, it is not merely a question of the combination of the senses in this experience. For, as complex human beings, the character of our appreciation is also coloured by meanings, associations, memories and the imagination. “Ideas and beliefs [...]” argues Berleant (1991: 48) “[...] become embodied in our direct experience”. In other words, our sensory experience is “subtly infused” (Berleant 1991: 48) by the meanings and attitudes that have become part of our psyche through a process of acculturation and that contribute to the various levels of our awareness. In this sense, Berleant’s view on people’s encounters with art appears to be similar to Di Bello & Koureas as well as Bacci & Melcher’s notions of embodied multisensory experience as described above.

Berleant also broadens the notion of embodiment by stressing that “the active nature of aesthetic experience” occurs across various realms, such as the “sensory, conscious, physical and social” (Berleant 1991: 48). This notion of engaged aesthetic experience between an embodied perceiver and a material artwork relies on a concept of art as not consisting exclusively of objects but rather on art as situations or events which allow aesthetic experiences to occur (Berleant 1991: 49). And these experiences are enabled by the aesthetic field in which “[...] the object, the perceiver, the creator, and the performer are the central forces at work, affected by social institutions, historical traditions, cultural forms and practices, technological developments in materials and techniques, and other such contextual conditions” (Berleant 1991: 49), none of which ought to be singled out in an analysis of an aesthetic experience.⁴¹ In this way, an aesthetics of embodiment would acknowledge a person’s bodily participation in works of art, in the sense that the expanding field in which art is encountered is

⁴¹ In contrast to Berleant’s notion of the continuity of these aspects, in Chapter 7 I explore Dufrenne’s *Phenomenology of aesthetic experience* (1973 [1953]), in which the French philosopher not only separates aesthetic perception according to three levels, but also investigates the so-called ‘perceiving subject’, ‘aesthetic object’ and the ‘reconciliation’ of these two aspects in an aesthetic encounter separately.

considered not as an empty or geometrical space (in the ‘Cartesian’ sense) in which a physical body moves, but as deeply invested with the awareness, feelings, associations and meanings that are brought by the embodied participant.

On my reading, however, Berleant (2003: 2) evidently supports the conditions on which the idea of aesthetic disinterest is based by maintaining that when viewing art “[...] attention should be intently focussed on the situation” so as to avoid being distracted by “features or factors irrelevant to the aesthetic occasion”. “A casual wandering gaze [...]” he argues, “[...] or a dwelling on associations that distract one from the perceptual situation diminish the effect of the art” (Berleant 2003: 2). This is a curious statement; for surely that which “distracts” (Berleant 2003: 2) or “disrupts” (Dumbadze 2010: 125) our purely visual encounter, such as the buzzing sound of the fluorescent lights in Dan Flavin’s sculptures or the malodorous smell of Damien Hirst’s *1000 Years* (1990), is intricately woven into our experience of art in a particular time and place.

While I disagree that disturbing “features and factors” surrounding the encounter between a person and a work of art must be avoided – for surely they form part of the dynamic interaction between a person and art – Berleant’s (2003: 2) contention that focussed attention will lead to “an attitude of thoughtful receptive regard”, is nevertheless important. In other words, in a complex way, Berleant (2003: 2) appears to support a notion of aesthetic experience as at once “activist” and “participatory” and “thoughtful” and “receptive”. No doubt, this is surely because aesthetic experience comprises varying degrees of committed engagement with art. Surely it cannot be enough to merely experience a work of art on a sensory or visceral level; surely an aesthetic experience must involve some measure of thoughtfulness and reflexivity even if the point is awareness of direct experience. I return to a more sustained discussion of the issue of aesthetic reflexivity in Chapter 6. For the moment, I want to delve into the contentious issue of our imaginative encounters with art.

5.4 Embodiment and imagination

In extending the notion of embodiment further, I have already suggested that a person's embodied encounter with art is also an imaginative and playful interaction. For Esrock, the functioning of the imagination in the perception of art is undeniable in the process whereby works are turned into performances and images into events as is evidently also foundational in Berleant's (1991: 49) understanding of aesthetic experience.⁴² Although the humanist imagination has been radically discredited and decentred in postmodern discourse and in deconstruction in particular, Richard Kearney (1988: 361) calls for a restoration of "[...] some notion of a properly human imagination". This notion of imagination must differ from its humanist predecessors for whom the idealist subject is an autonomous individual and sole master and centre of all meaning. In light of the deconstruction of imagination, what appears to be needed – what we are "obliged to make" (Kearney 1988: 361) – is an ethical decision to respond to each other. This entails that we respond ethically to the other's call by respecting the other's otherness; that we recognise that the other exists as an other. Closely resembling Emmanuel Levinas' (1989 [1946]) call for recognition of our infinite responsibility to others, Kearney (1988: 361) proposes recognition of a particular person "[...] whose very *otherness* refuses to be reduced to a mimicry of *sameness*".

An ethical understanding of imagination in contemporary times means acknowledging its role in the relationship between the self and the other. Transcending both egocentric and anthropocentric consciousness, understanding imagination in an ethical way avoids a return to the autonomous subjectivity of the modern age, replacing it with a relationship that is "[...] more human than humanism" (Kearny 1988: 363). At the same time, such a notion of imagination must negotiate its way around the many ways in which subjectivity has been denounced by postmodern philosophy, structuralism and post-structuralism. For Kearney (1988: 395), an ethical imagination refuses to

⁴² Esrock's approach to the imaginative interaction between spectators and works of art is discussed more closely in Chapter 6, section 6.2.

subscribe to the idea that “[...] the self is nothing but a heap of reified technique or commodified desire”. This is because the ethical imagination is responsive to the call of the other. Remembering its “[...] commitments to the other (both in its personal and collective history)”, this self “[...] recalls that these commitments have not yet been fulfilled” (Kearney 1988: 395). Thus the ethical imagination is always aware of its responsibility to the call of the other.

Kearney (1988: 395) refers to this subject as the “narrative self”. The narrative self is not “some permanently subsisting subject” but rather a constantly “self-rectifying identity”, whose story is never complete. And precisely because “[t]he identity of the narrative self [...] is ceaselessly reinterpreted by imagination” the concept of selfhood always includes “change and alteration” (Kearney 1988: 395). Furthermore, the notion of a personal identity “[...] includes that of a *communal* identity” because the “self and the collective mutually constitute each other’s identity” (Kearney 1988: 395). This mutuality is made possible by each receiving the “[...] other’s stories in their respective histories” (Kearney 1988: 396). Conceived of in this way an embodied person who experiences art is neither an autonomous subject nor an isolated individual.⁴³

The imagination is thus another ingredient in the complex notion of human embodiment. Following Paul Ricoeur’s understanding of the imagination, Taylor (2006: 94) maintains that imagination “[...] is not something marginal to or occasional in thought but rather permeates all thought and conceptualisation”. Ricoeur (qtd Taylor 2006: 94) argues that “[i]magination is not an alternative to perception [...] but an ingredient of perception [...] encapsulated within the framework of perception”. Following research into the psychology of perception, Ricoeur asserts that “[...] there is no such thing as a brute impression, an impression that is direct and unadorned by human structuring [...]”, concluding that instead “[...] perception is always structured by physiological and imaginative processes” (Taylor 2006: 94). Thus, whereas Merleau-Ponty (1968

⁴³ Kearney (1988: 396) quotes Paul Ricoeur when he concludes that “[s]elf-identity, in whatever sense, is always a ‘tissue of narrated stories’”. Moreover, narrative identity is an ongoing task because the self always has an “unlimited” (Kearney 1988: 396) responsibility to others.

[1964]: 212) was fascinated by the idea of accessing “brute” or “wild” perception, for Ricoeur, there is no way in which perception can be unaffected by cultural structuring in which the imagination also plays a role. But, to my mind, this does not mean that we do not experience directly or that all our experiences are entirely discursively produced. Although Ricoeur suggests that the imagination and psychological processes ‘structure’ experience, would it not be more helpful to think of these processes as permeating experience, in Kearney’s sense, and regard them as always changing the ways in which people encounter art? This means that direct experiences are regarded as playful interactions always imaginatively produced and reproduced in both mediated and immediate intersubjective encounters.

Understanding perception as at once both direct (or immediate) and structured (or mediated) may be a helpful way in which to understand and explore a person’s engaged encounter with art. For, although Merleau-Ponty wants to locate unmediated perception, Van de Vall (2005: 52) finds that, contrary to what Merleau-Ponty searches for, “brute or wild perception is something that presents itself *through* history rather than despite it, without being reducible to historical events or contexts”. In other words, searching for unmediated experience is unproductive, for all experience is in some way filtered through culture. However, this does not mean that ‘raw’ or immediate experience does not occur. For Van de Vall (2005: 52), “[...] a mediated experience can be directly, authentically, bodily felt”. This means that “[...] raw being [...] is what may be sensed in or through or because of [...] what is structurally or systematically determined” (Van de Vall 2005: 52). In other words, direct bodily experience need not be regarded as the opposite pole of mediated experience, but can be regarded as at once immediate and mediated.

5.5 Out of your mind: embodiment and affect

In a discussion of immediate bodily experience the conversation around embodiment has undoubtedly begun to enter the realm of affect.⁴⁴ Massumi (1995: 87) argues that “[m]uch could be gained by integrating the dimension of intensity into cultural theory”. Intensity, which Massumi equates with affect, involves the inexplicable and the inassimilable. By ‘intensity’ or affect, Massumi means the emotional state that is brought about or occurs when the expectations that are part of an ‘image event’ are suspended or, at the very least, disrupted. Intensity increases when something occurs that breaks the narrative continuity of a particular event.

He describes the encounter between a person and an image as an ‘event’ in which new meanings can potentially be generated that occur counter to the prescribed or expected narrative as described on the level of the semantic or the semiological. Massumi (1995: 87) argues that:

Nothing is prefigured in the event. It is the collapse of structured distinction into intensity, of rules into paradox. It is the suspension of the invariance that makes happy happy, sad sad, function function and meaning mean. Could it be that it is through the expectant suspension of that suspense that the new emerges?

Our task is to give attention to such occurrences. As Massumi (1995: 88) points out, however, this task is made difficult by the absence of a “cultural-theoretical vocabulary” that can account for the event of image reception. The lack of “an asignifying philosophy of affect” can easily give rise to such descriptions falling back on psychological categories which poststructuralism has already deconstructed. Of course, it is precisely because “the skin is faster than the hand” that, once perceived and categorised, affect has already been “captured” resulting, according to Massumi (1995: 96), in its immediate closure.

⁴⁴ This discussion is an extension of the discussion on the affective turn already begun in Chapter 4 in section 4.3.2.

Theorists of affect point out that it should not be considered to be the same as emotion.⁴⁵ For, according to Massumi (1995: 88), emotion is already the category imposed on the intensity – the affect – through linguistic systems and conventions. Affect, on the other hand, is unqualified intensity, and is thus “[...] unownable or recognizable, and [...] resistant to critique” (Massumi 1995: 88):

Brain and skin form a resonating vessel. Stimulation turns inward, is folded into the body, except that there is no inside for it to be in, because the body is radically open, absorbing impulses quicker than they can be perceived, and because the entire vibratory event is unconscious, out of mind. Its anomaly is smoothed over retrospectively to fit conscious requirements of continuity and linear causality.

Although critics of affect suggest that the concept approaches that of a supposedly “[...] pre-reflexive, romantically raw domain of primitive experiential richness – the nature in our culture”, Massumi (1995: 90) points out that this is not the case. More precisely because affect occurs too quickly to be perceived, and therefore occurs somewhere other than in the mind, it cannot be considered to constitute an experience. On the other hand, “[...] volition, cognition, and presumably other ‘higher’ functions usually presumed to be in the mind, figured as a mysterious container of mental entities that is somehow separate from body and brain, are present and active in that now not-so-‘raw’ domain” (Massumi 1995: 90). This is because, although the domain of affect is asocial, it is not pre-social. According to Massumi (1995: 91), this means that intensity combines social elements with other levels of functioning that arise from the traces of past events and their contexts which are stored “[...] in the brain and in the flesh, but out of mind and out of body understood as qualifiable interiorities, active and passive respectively, directive spirit and dumb matter”. These traces are reawakened or reactivated. Once again, it would seem that

⁴⁵ Eric Shouse provides some clarity on the concepts feeling, emotion and affect. Feeling can be considered personal and biographical and is given meaning, identified and labelled in relation to previous experiences (Shouse 2005: [s.a.]). Emotions, on the other hand, are the display of feelings; they are performed within a cultural and social context. Emotions could be described as feelings that are brought under conscious control. Affect is, therefore, different to both feelings and emotions as it occurs outside consciousness and remains unformed by social or cultural convention. In this sense, it is abstract and cannot be fully explained or accounted for in conventional linguistic terms.

direct, affective experience does not necessarily imply unmediated experience. Understood in this way, intensities are emerging or incipient actions or expressions which are part of the concrete activity of the body. Affect, thus, always precedes will and consciousness (Shouse 2005: [s.p.]). In other words, affect is pure potential, it has the power to influence consciousness by heightening our awareness of our biological state (Shouse 2005: [s.p.]). Therefore, affects give rise to an awareness of the creation of new meanings.

For O'Sullivan (2001: 128) the “[...] world of affects, [...] is our own world seen without the spectacles of subjectivity”. We need to “sidestep our selves”, argues O'Sullivan (2001: 128) and reach “beyond’ our subjectivity”. Although to step outside our subjectivity would seem impossible, as it would appear to be for Ricoeur (as previously discussed), according to O'Sullivan (2001: 128) we do this all the time, since we are not only “[...] involved in molecular processes that go on ‘beyond’ our subjectivity” but, more pertinently, “we ‘are’ these processes”.⁴⁶ We are, as it were, “bundles of events, bundles of affects (in a constant process of destratification)”.⁴⁷ To recognise this “other side” of ourselves requires practices and strategies which “[...] *imaginatively* and *pragmatically* switch the register” (O'Sullivan 2001: 128).

Summarily, an affect theory, argues Hemmings (2005: 552), “[...] is all of our affective experiences to date that are remembered [...] in the moment of responding to a new situation”. In other words, according to this view, traces of past affective experiences are uncontrollably called up – or “registered” in Hemmings’ (2005: 552) terms – in lived experience influencing and shaping those new encounters. In this way, the body, with its unique likes, dislikes, desires and revulsions is recognised as operating in ways not easily reducible

⁴⁶ In a footnote, O'Sullivan (2001: 133) suggests that this “insight” can be achieved “[...] through drugs, through meditation, through anything that, if only for a moment, dissolves the molar aggregate of our subjectivity”.

⁴⁷ Here O'Sullivan is specifically drawing on Gilles Deleuze & Felix Guattari's strategies for destratification in *A thousand plateaus* (1988). In the chapter entitled “How to make yourself a body without organs” Deleuze & Guattari unpack strategies for accessing affect. However, they warn us that one should tread cautiously in this process of sidestepping the self. Instead one should “[...] keep small rations of subjectivity in sufficient quantity to enable you to respond to the dominant reality” (Deleuze & Guattari 1988: 160).

to explanation through social narratives and power relations. The affected/affective body is thereby accorded an autonomy refused by poststructuralist emphases on discourse and interpretation. O'Sullivan (2001: 130) contends that recognition of the affective and intensive qualities of art – the realm of affects – would require the end of a certain kind of art history: the kind “[...] that attends only to art's signifying character, that which understands art, positions art *work*, as representation”. For O'Sullivan (2001: 130) attending to art's asignifying functions instead of trying to interpret art as representation would lead to a more interesting and complex understanding of art and its transformative function. In this way, “art history becomes a kind of *creative writing*” (O'Sullivan 2001: 130), whose main purpose is to explore “art's creative, aesthetic and ethical function” (O'Sullivan 2001: 130).

While affect occurs or is transacted between bodies, those bodies are simultaneously affected by environments and other affecting and affected bodies in them. Eric Shouse (2005: [s.a.]) explains that “[...] affect plays an important role in determining the relationship between our bodies, our environment, and others, and the subjective experience that we feel/think as affect dissolves into experience”. In a manner similar to Merleau-Ponty's notion of bodies engaged in the flesh of the world, as well as Berleant's notion of aesthetic experience as taking place between bodies, events, performances and so forth, affective encounters, or intensities, become experiences between people and situations or environments. Massumi (1995: 95) refers to this interaction as intensities “infolding” into each other. This means that as one affecting body meets another affecting body in a particular context, they are both affected by the other. This does not mean each body takes on the intensity of the other, but rather that each responds to the other, perhaps ideally imaginatively and ethically in Kearney's (1988: 395) terms. With this in mind, affect is thus a necessary, if difficult, component of embodiment that should be addressed in an investigation which seeks to give expression to embodied aesthetic encounters without collapsing that analysis into an interpretation of meanings. The way in which affect has been defined above means that the

realm of the unconscious must be acknowledged as participating in a person's encounter with art.

5.5.1 A caveat

As was pointed out in the previous chapter, at least two opposing approaches to the notion of embodiment have already emerged in sensory circles. On the one hand, there is a strain of thought within the sensory turn associated with the affective turn that avoids constructivist assumptions of how embodied beings interact with the world. However, to suggest that sensory scholarship wholeheartedly rejects the cultural determinism of sensory experience would not be accurate. For just as visual culture studies has made us aware that seeing has a history,⁴⁸ anthropological studies of the sensorium set out to show the ways in which the senses and sensory experience are socially and discursively constructed.

For instance, in her analysis of the cultural meanings assigned to the different senses in Western societies, Classen (1997: 402) argues that “[s]ight may be linked to reason or to witchcraft, taste may be used as a metaphor for aesthetic discrimination or for sexual experience, an odour may signify sanctity or sin, political power or social exclusion”. In this way, different cultural groups produce a ‘sensory model’ of the meanings and values associated with the senses. In other words, and as Howes (2006: 114) succinctly puts it, “a ‘sensory model’ [is] a way of ordering and understanding the senses that is not purely cognitive or limited to individual experiences but is a communal perceptual orientation”.

Evidently, far from ignoring the cultural dimension of sensorial experience, a great deal of sensory studies considers the human sensorium as a product of culture which fundamentally mediates human experience. Therefore, although one might be tempted to connect the sensory turn to the affective turn, one

⁴⁸ I am thinking here in particular of John Berger's *Ways of seeing* (1972) which, arguably, catapulted the rise of subsequent social and cultural critiques of art and visual culture.

must tread cautiously in drawing such a conclusion. For, treating embodied and multisensorial aesthetic experience as non-discursive only does not satisfactorily describe the objectives of sensory scholarship.

While I have sketched an account of two opposing views on embodiment as they have emerged in sensory scholarship I do not subscribe to an either/or understanding of what it means to be embodied. In my view, both positions can productively be co-ordinated to suggest that the human body is at once a physiological/biological/affective entity as well as a product of a specific culture. In other words, a person's encounter with art must take into consideration their openness to interactions with the ideas and experiences of others. Following Kearney (1988: 395) personal identity includes communal identity in the complex amalgam he refers to as the "narrative self". This means that the subject of experience is thus not an autonomous or isolated subject in the modern, humanist sense. Instead, her/his experiences are permeated by the "ingredient" (Ricoeur qtd Taylor 2006: 94) of the imagination. Furthermore, whether or not one ought to entirely "side-step" (O'Sullivan 2001: 128) subjectivity, or retain "small rations" (Deleuze & Guattari (1988:160) thereof, a notion of embodied encounters with art must be aware of the complex processes and layers at work in people's interactions with art. Thus, I set both perspectives on embodiment to work in tandem in my account of embodied and engaged aesthetic experience as it is set out here.

Based on my investigation of sensory studies thus far (which was dealt with mainly in Chapter 4), and my extension of this investigation in Chapter 5 to determine what is meant by embodiment from the perspective of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenologically-based understanding thereof, combined with Berleant's notion of aesthetic embodiment and engagement, as well as theories of the imagination and affect, in the following section I analyse a land art work in a multisensory environment more closely. For, if embodiment is as complex as the above discussion has revealed, an aesthetics of embodiment and engagement ought to take into account even more than merely recognising that

a person's experience of art is influenced by their multisensory experience of it. Instead, moving beyond spectatorship and toward a conception of bodily perception and embodied engagement with art, as I argue here, acknowledges that the interaction between the material and affective qualities of art and a multisensorial being whose memories, class, gender, ethnicity, desires, repulsions, volitions, affects, pleasures, ideas, beliefs, associations, imagination, unconscious as well as contextual conditions such as their culture and personal history all work together to give rise to a complex experiential event.⁴⁹ In other words, in this discussion I want to push Merleau-Ponty's generalising descriptions of embodiment further to also reflect on the ways in which all of these aspects of bodily participation in an art 'event' are important components, if not the very foundation, for analysis.

5.6 Experiential encounters articulated

Buigkrag (Figure 21) is a land art work⁵⁰ produced in 2012 by Johannesburg-based artist, Hannelie Coetze, during her residency at the Nirox Estate in the Magaliesberg region, just to the west of Johannesburg, South Africa, in the area popularly known as 'The Cradle of Humankind'.⁵¹ Inspired by the many existing dolomite formations that protrude from the earth in that area, the artist built up

⁴⁹ In *Songs of experience*, Jay (2005) devotes an entire book to the tricky problem of dealing with 'experience' as I am attempting to do here. I realise that an attempt to put words to the experiential, may potentially lead to a quick descent down a slippery slope precisely because there is little consensus on the meaning of 'experience'. Jay's aim in that text is, therefore, to unpack the various 'songs' that have been 'composed' by certain theorists regarding the meaning of the concept and how it can be theorised. Jay (2005: 3) also notes that, in the closing decades of the twentieth century, "[...] poststructuralist analysts of discourses and apparatuses of power" expressly set out to debunk "[...] 'experience' (or even more 'lived experience') as a simplistic ground of immediacy that fails to register the always already mediated nature of cultural relations and the instability of the subject who is supposedly the bearer of experiences". Despite the uncertain ground on which I am treading, I do think that a careful and critical application of phenomenology provides a means by which to give substance to this investigation. I therefore follow Van de Vall (2003: 6) for whom phenomenology is useful precisely because this paradigm describes "concrete and specific experiential situations".

⁵⁰ Cf. Jeffrey Kastner & Brian Wallis' (2010) useful contextualisation of the emergence and development of land and environmental art in the 1960s mainly in the US, and its continuing development world-wide.

⁵¹ A catalogue, which includes video recordings documenting the production of the works, can be viewed at <<http://www.hanneliecoetze.com/2012-works-in-stone-catalogue>>.

the stone sculptures in the open air on a hillside. Stones were gathered from the surrounding site and piled up to achieve precariously balanced stone piles, some taller than the artist. When viewed from a distance, and in relation to the two electricity pylons that stand on the hill, the stone piles lean strangely toward the pylons, which, for the artist, is a comment on society's dependence on electricity (Coetzee 2012).



Figure 21: Hannelie Coetzee, *Buigkrag (The strength it takes to bend something as far as it can go)* 2012

I will show that this land art work, in its extended and immersive environment, invites the embodied participation and engagement of the people who encounter it, not only beyond the sense of sight, but also beyond the five senses. In aligning myself with sensory studies, at least in part, my point of departure is that what is often not acknowledged by semiotic, iconographic and ideological driven accounts of art is the embodiment of the viewer and his/her encounter with the particular presence of art in a specific situation or context. In other words, the corporeality of the one who looks at and experiences art in a reciprocal relation to it is often overlooked. In addition, far from being able to transcend the physical body in order to contemplate the work's intended

meaning, a person's perception is both from inside the body and inside the world and must be considered according to the notion of aesthetic experience as embodied and engaged in a reciprocal relation to art.

In this close investigation of *Buigkrag* (Figure 21) I rely greatly on a phenomenological approach to multisensory experience as formulated by Merleau-Ponty combined with evidence of the functioning of the brain provided by neuroscience in order to, hopefully, give some academic weight to articulating my own encounter of this installation.⁵² My main aim is to apply the notion that a complex synthesis between all the senses *and beyond* takes place in the body, to a specific experience of a piece of land art.

In other words, in this investigation, I want to make it clear that it is not possible to consider only the intermingling of the alleged 'five' senses in the experience of the pieces. Recognising that a viewer of art is an embodied perceiver must go further than merely understanding the intersensory or synaesthetic nature of experience. An investigation into a person's embodied and participatory or engaged experience of this work must also acknowledge the fluidity of bodily/mental modes of perception. These modes, as has become evident through the argument above, includes not only multisensory experience but also the intellect, beliefs, attitudes and preconceptions based on our personal history and sensory experience in a specific culture, our memories, emotions, feelings, and affects which are all embodied and culturally mediated phenomena imbricated in our encounters with art. In other words, embodiment refers to the human person as a unified body-mind entity and to the integrated experience of art as a whole-body activity.⁵³

⁵² A group of students from the University of Pretoria and I accompanied Coetzee on a Walkabout on 4 August 2012. The information supplied in this discussion regarding the artist's intentions with the work was collected at that and a previous visit to the site with another group. My analysis also incorporates the intersubjective experiences of the installation as I observed people's reactions and responses to the works in their expanding environment.

⁵³ I want to make it clear that although I draw on my experience of the work, this discussion is not personal and subjective in the modern understanding of these concepts. My approach is grounded in an understanding of the intersubjective intertwining of a subject and an object, things and persons, mind and body, places and being in the world. In other words, although I describe my own experience, I do not subscribe to the notion of a subject of experience who is

Land art is, of course, experienced outdoors where what we see is immediately affected by our multisensory experience of the site – including sounds, smells, the touch of the air on our bodies, and the land art work itself, which we might also be able to touch, as we were in this case. In other words, the experience of land art is undeniably not only visual, but also auditory, haptic and olfactory, amongst other modes of experience both conscious and unconscious. Since these sensory modalities operate in close connection with each other as well as simultaneously, following the arguments posed by sensory scholarship, it is impossible to disentangle their contributions from our experience of art. This means that, in our perceptual and aesthetic experience, as Berleant (1991: 93) maintains, the sense of sight “[...] loses its privileged role as a sensory channel, since the participatory environment exerts an appeal that far exceeds the visual”.

A close investigation of *Buigkrag* in its location at Nirox must take into account not only the multisensorial nature but also the embodied participation of a responsive and co-operative person – perhaps even ‘partner’ – in this case myself, in the imaginative construction of meaning through my interaction with the work. Following Thomas Csordas’ (1994: 269) contention that bodily experience makes up the “existential ground of culture”, as a researcher I used my body as a research tool to both participate in and observe other people’s experiences of *Buigkrag*. This means that I acknowledge the “contingent nature of situated experience” (Joy & Sherry 2003: 261) as I construct a narrative based on the particular character of my own and observations of my students’ experiences of the work. I am fully aware that the anecdotal nature of the account that is to follow would no doubt be met with scepticism from socio-cultural researchers working within the paradigm of new art history, social art history, postcolonialism and feminism. It is, however, precisely the close examination of my experience of the work that is used here to suggest that when art historians look beyond the visual and beyond spectatorship, a rich field of knowledge about our engagement with art can be produced. Therefore I take

the master and centre of all meaning. Instead, here I attempt a self-reflexive account of one encounter amongst many possibilities.

up the challenge posed by Di Bello & Koureas (2010: 12) who argue that “[...] art reviews and first-hand accounts of installations rarely focus on their multi-sensoriality”. My aim is to show that an exploration of Coetzee’s installation would be impoverished without acknowledging the embodied participation of a responsive appreciator in the imaginative construction of meaning in her experience of the work. In taking this approach, wherein my own ‘first-hand’ involvement and experience as researcher is used, I follow Sarah Pink’s (2011: 605) advice that the role of the researcher should be carefully interrogated with special attention given to “[...] her or his role, situatedness, and subjectivity in the research encounters and the production of knowledge”.⁵⁴

It is necessary to embark on such an unconventional analysis in order to move beyond the abstract and to address a – my – specific encounter with *Buigkrag*. This means that I apply a phenomenological approach to a specific and immediate experience by regarding my encounter with *Buigkrag* as a material encounter that demanded affective and, by extension, emotional responses. Therefore, the intricate balance between the orientation of the psychic space and the physical space and its objects is investigated.⁵⁵ This approach allows the opportunity to explore the multifarious ways in which the contextualised identities that encounter art are affected by what is sensorially and affectively experienced, or, put differently, the immediate mediated experience.

It was tiring and thirsty work reaching Coetzee’s installation. At the end of a Highveld winter, the grass is dry, the earth is dusty and the sun hot, all adding to the demanding uphill climb to the work. The particular smell of the dry grass, the rustling sound it makes blown by the wind, the irritating feeling of dust in my

⁵⁴ Pink (2011), a visual anthropologist, outlines a multisensory methodology that may be employed in ethnographical research where interviews, participant observations and the methods of visual ethnography are concerned. Once again, just as art historians, film theorists and cultural geographers, whose work is informed by phenomenology, draw closely on Merleau-Ponty, Pink’s description of a methodology is also influenced by this philosopher’s conception of embodiment as partly informed by multisensory experience.

⁵⁵ The psychic and physical space I refer to here is a combination of the felt aesthetic atmosphere or ambience of the space as well as the personal and individual subjective feelings that are brought to that space by someone which could include their beliefs, attitudes and memories all of which infuse the meanings and associations that are made in a particular situation.

throat, the cool wind blowing on my hot body, are feelings that conjure up good memories of many winters spent hiking in the South African Drakensberg in Kwa-Zulu Natal. At the same time, decidedly unpleasant thoughts of two awful compulsory trips to Veldskool are always close at hand when I walk in this kind of environment.

On Merleau-Ponty's terms, spaces are constituted by people, who bring their own memories, beliefs and attitudes with them, all of which are mediated through the body. This means that when we look we bring to the experience a complex amalgam of "[...]" remembered experiences (whether personal or evolutionary) and the symbolic values we have attached to these [...]" (Broadhurst 2012: 232). In other words, what we perceive is coloured by our memories. But, at the same time, what we see provides material for "recombinant, 'new' imagery" (Broadhurst 2012: 232) which is stored in memory. Combining imagery creatively in this way, is an ability afforded human beings by the imagination.⁵⁶

It is quite common for a particular smell to vividly evoke a memory of a past event – a phenomenon often referred to as the experience of *déjà vu*. According to Tim Jacob (2011: 200), the extent to which smells can evoke emotion and memories is far greater than the other senses. Generally known as "autobiographical memory" or "the Proust effect", smell is a powerful stimulus for recalling events and forging associations (Jacobs 2011: 200).⁵⁷ For Marks (2011: 241, 242), since smell evokes such complex personal affects, "[...] it seems to be the least translatable and most personal of all the senses", extending deep within the subconscious to the extent that one could speak of

⁵⁶ In the same way, you as the reader have used your imagination to forge an impression of this work. For, you have seen the work through the media of photographs and perhaps the catalogue with videos on the artist's website. To some extent, you have encountered the work through my verbal recounting of my experience. But your encounter is no less embodied than mine or my students who physically experienced the work. It is just via a different medium. Both encounters are embodied, immersive and interactive in their own particular ways.

⁵⁷ Jacob (2011: 200) explains that the term, "Proust's effect" stems from Marcel Proust's description in *Swan's Way* (1913) of the memories of his Aunt Leonie's house in Combray that were evoked by the taste ("he didn't actually refer to smell!") of a *petit madeleine* dipped in his tea.

the existence of an “olfactory imaginary”. From neuroscience we learn that, owing to the direct link, or wiring, in the brain between olfaction and the neural centres for emotion and memory, smell has the capacity to elicit memory and cement associations, particularly when intense emotions are experienced (Marks 2011: 242). Even if that emotionally intense event has been forgotten, an association between the event and the odour has been forged and is lodged in a “sensuous unconscious” ready to be “brought to consciousness” (Marks 2011: 242). Even though, (or perhaps precisely because) smell is considered the “most elusive of the senses” (Di Bello & Bacci 2010: 10), it holds immense powers over the imagination. Clearly, my olfactory imagination was already at work shaping my experience of what was to come.

It was evident from the conversations that surrounded me that, after the steep climb, great was all our relief when we finally reached the work. Rounding the last corner, but still some distance away, my first glimpse of the work left me confused as to whether or not I was seeing aloes rising up from the ground or something else. Getting closer, I was able to make out piles of stones – like cairns – memorials of some kind. A burial site perhaps? The association of the image with a burial site was compounded by the stillness of the surrounding veld. The structures also reminded me of the ‘Giant’s Playground’ outside Keetmanshoop in Namibia, a natural geological formation, performing the same precarious balancing act that I now saw before me. At this point, the artist gave us an indication of her intention with the piece, which adds to, but does not exhaust, the meaning of the work. For its possible meanings are generated as much by the embodied knowledge of the participants in their reciprocal, playful and imaginative interaction with the piece, as the intention of the artist.



Figure 22: Hannelie Coetzee, *Buigkrag* (*The strength it takes to bend something as far as it can go*) (2012)

Coetzee's title, *Buigkrag*, refers to the strength it takes to bend something as far as it can go. The stark contrast of the tall stone piles leaning toward the two electricity pylons on the hill, gave rise to a complex dialogue, perhaps tension even, between the industrial and the natural/aesthetic (Figure 22). The experience of land art is a far cry from the experience of art in a museum in which our participation is strictly controlled by means of camera surveillance and guards as well as maps and a layout that guide our movements. In contrast, we were able to freely move around these stone piles and touch them.⁵⁸ According to Csordas (1994: 5), our embodiment includes "[...] our sense of being in a body and oriented in space" or proprioception. This means that our bodily presence in space does not only refer to our presence within ourselves, but also points to an extension of our presence into the space around us. Thus, the space of actions, moods and perceptions is included in the concept of embodiment. In other words, the mobile point of view of a person walking through a landscape to see land art impacts on their experience of the

⁵⁸ In *Sculpture and enlivened space: aesthetics and history* David Martin (1981) argues that sculptures enliven the spaces in which they are displayed since the space around it is both part of the work and part of our own space. Sculpture, thus, makes us aware that we share space with it by sending out forces, as it were, to which we respond: "We invariably perceive the forces of a sculpture as if they were pressing on our bodies" (Martin 1981: 62). In this way, "[...] our body sensations are part of the unity of the aesthetic experience" (Martin 1981: 134). Martin's notion of the forces of the sculpture pressing down on us quite aptly describes not only our embodied experience but also the title of the work *Buigkrag*.

work (Figure 23). Moreover, Merleau-Ponty (2002 [1945]: 272) argues that movement operates at the base of the unity of sensory experience. Merleau-Ponty's attention to "[...] the sense of physical involvement that sculptures or paintings arouse" (Freedberg 2007: 198) is no doubt helpful in weaving together ideas regarding the ways in which viewers are somatically involved in aesthetic experience. A person's mobile interaction with the unfolding environment or expanding field through muscular effort and movement (kinaesthesia) is a meaningful part of our experience of land art.



Figure 23: Hannelie Coetzee, *Buigkrag (The strength it takes to bend something as far as it can go)* (2012)

Stones, (and these piles in particular), lend themselves to mobile and tactile exploration. Coetzee encouraged us to reconstruct the structures that had fallen over in the wind. Rosalyn Driscoll (2011: 111) argues that “[c]ontact, movement, and gesture generate a cascade of cues for one’s memory that may be different than those generated by sight, enriching the associations and meanings of an artwork”. Equally, for Marks (2011: 248), physical gestures can potentially call up “intensely embodied emotional memories”. Physically touching the roughly

edged stones and adjusting our bodies in relation to them brought us to a new insight into the precariousness of the balancing acts they performed (Figure 24).



Figure 24: Hannelie Coetzee, *Buigkrag* (*The strength it takes to bend something as far as it can go*) (2012)

As participants interacting with Coetzee's stone piles, we were encouraged to both see and feel them at the same time that we smelt the grass and dry sand in which they were contained; we felt and heard the wind, other people speaking, laughing as well as the artist talking. In this way, *Buigkrag* "foster[ed]

the ability to forge intersensory connections" (Howes 2011: 174) in our experience. Sounds, smells, textures and sights worked in collaboration to amplify our particular mobile experience of the piece/s.

It is not only the personal but also the social embeddedness of the multisensory experience to which attention must be brought. The individual and particular responses of an embodied subject embedded in a particular cultural, social and political context, (which are affected by his/her emotions, associations, memories and imagination) that are brought forth or triggered by cues provided by the qualities of the installation, including its form, space, texture, temperature, mass, surrounding smell and so forth are part of the analysis of a person's encounter with a work of art (Driscoll 2011: 111). This is because our experience of the environment, whether natural or constructed, is layered with "a history of cultural activity" (Berleant 1991: 77). As Merleau-Ponty (2002 [1945]: 421) puts it:

[...] the social world [...] [is] a permanent field or dimension of existence: I may well turn away from it, but not cease to be situated relatively to it. Our relationship to the social is, like our relationship to the world, deeper than any express perception or any judgement. It is as false to place ourselves in society as an object among other objects, as it is to place society within ourselves as an object of thought, as in both cases the mistake lies in treating the social as an object. We must return to the social with which we are in contact by the mere fact of existing, and which we carry about inseparably with us before any objectification.

In other words, as a Western urban dweller, my particular way of experiencing the landscape is always already informed by culturally constructed ideas about nature. "The cultural world [...]", affirms Merleau-Ponty (2002 [1945]: 405) "[...] is always present". Therefore, it would be both unwise and unproductive to avoid acknowledging the lessons learnt from poststructuralist accounts of the formation of subjectivity and identity, as some proponents of affect, multisensoriality and presence may argue.

Following the poststructuralist critique of agency, subjectivity and perception, Mitchell (2002: 14), for instance, has argued that “[...] landscape is already artifice in the moment of its beholding”. In Mitchell’s estimation, landscape is a text: it is part of cultural signifying systems through which sense is made of the world. This means that cultural meanings and values are already coded into the various components of the landscape thus shaping my multisensorial and embodied interactions with this land art work. For, sensory experiences are not only personally but also culturally specific. Stones, for instance, connote permanence, support and stability. For some, silence may connote rest, relaxation, a revival of spirit, and so forth. Furthermore, in some ways, landscape functions as an instrument of cultural power which has been implicit to the making of cultural identities in South Africa.⁵⁹ Landscape as a cultural medium “naturalises a cultural and social construction” by “representing an artificial world as if it were ‘natural’ and a given” (Mitchell 2002: 2).

A further point regarding the encounter between *Buigkrag* and the ways in which a person views and/or imaginatively encounters it can be made. While a few people may have managed to see *Buigkrag* where it was installed in the veld in August 2012, more people have probably seen it via photographs or the video available on the artist’s website. Land art is often recorded, filmed and photographed and mostly experienced virtually. The work now exists as, between and across all of these media including in the memories of the people who encountered the work first-hand. Each is deficient in its inability to fully represent the moment I saw it. Even my memory is rather sketchy. In reality, it no longer exists as the original we saw, the natural elements have seen to that; it is now in a state of collapse. Even so, it does still exist as the sculpture (in some or other degraded form), the video, the photographs, the conversations about it and what has been written about it.

⁵⁹ The travelling photographic exhibition entitled *Umhlabo: 1913-2013* exhibited at Wits Art Museum (WAM) in September 2013 brought together various representations and conceptions of the distribution and redistribution of South Africa’s land. A Nguni term denoting ‘the land’, *Umhlabo* gave voice to the various ways in which people have negotiated both the inhumane formal and informal restrictions on land ownership in this country since 1913.

5.7 Conclusion

I have attempted to show that scholarly negotiations of the visual field have, until recently, often avoided explorations of the affective, multisensorial embodied viewer in relation to what s/he sees. Sensory scholars, however, propose that it is no longer feasible for either art history or visual culture studies to limit their enquiries to the *visual* field alone, for this field is also informed by the senses of touch, hearing, taste and smell working in combination with a person's memories, beliefs, attitudes, associations, contextual conditions, affects, imagination and so forth. Phenomenology has been used in sensory investigations as a means to dismantle and dissolve 'Cartesianism' as the dominant strategy for negotiating the relationship between an embodied spectator and art.

In striving to achieve ideal aesthetic disinterest, a certain strand of art history may have been complicit in dismissing not only sensory but also more broadly embodied experience as a valid mode of enquiry into aesthetic encounters. A re-conception of aesthetic experience as embodied (in the fully integrated sense as argued in this chapter) and participatory is necessary. Sensory scholarship, which addresses the multisensorial nature of embodied experience, has cast a wide net across academic disciplines, and as has been shown in this chapter, similar kinds of investigations are not limited to art history. Scholars in diverse fields are delving beyond the social dimension of cultural production into the non-discursive and non-representational approach which emphasises the experiential nature of lived experience.

To conceive of aesthetic experience as embodied and engaged must, however, proceed from an understanding of embodiment as encompassing a fluidity of bodily/mental modes of perception. These modes, I have suggested, include not only the senses and their interrelation or interaction in experience, the intellect, our beliefs, attitudes and preconceptions based on our particular personal history and multisensory experience in a specific culture, but also our

memories, emotions, feelings and our imagination all as embodied phenomena. In other words, embodiment refers to the human person as a unified body-mind entity.

The task of accounting for or describing a person's multisensorial and affective experiences of art, as I have mainly done in the analysis of *Buigkrag*, at the expense of delving into the meanings that are produced in and through an engagement with an artwork, is a tricky one. Van de Vall (2003: 12) maintains that: "We enter an installation with the expectation of being affected and of treating our feelings as being part of the work's meaning". She argues, however, that "[t]his attitude is [...] not enough: the work has to provide us with a *mise-en scène* and an imagery that is rich and fascinating enough to instigate feelings we can reflect upon" (Van de Vall 2003: 12). In other words, for Van de Vall, reflecting on the feelings that are generated by a particular work of art, event or situation, is paramount to analysing that encounter in a more enriched and complex manner than phenomenological description alone allows.

In Chapter 6, I tackle this matter head on in a close analysis of a person's bodily experience of a video work as well as the meanings that may be generated by this encounter. In this endeavour, which recognises aesthetic experience as embodied and engaged I am attempting to avoid succumbing to the safe haven of "explanatory heaven", as Massumi (1995: 87) refers to the way in which images and events are often narrativised in some spheres of cultural research. Instead, the discussion aims to show how a close examination of an experiential encounter can bring a work's potential meanings into being, or into play, without in any way finally or definitively fixing these meanings.

CHAPTER 6

TACTILE VISION

*The hands want to see, the eyes want to caress.*¹

In the previous chapter I explored some of the ways in which the notion of an *embodied* subject who encounters art may be understood and investigated. As an extension of the definitions of embodiment that were examined, I also suggested that there are at least two interrelated ways in which an embodied participant and her/his experience of an artwork can usefully be approached. On the one hand, I argued that aesthetic experience is an embodied activity or process. On the other, aesthetic experience is a participatory activity taking place between a person and art. In other words, in Chapter 5 I explored what it means that aesthetic experience is embodied and engaged by applying this approach in a close investigation of a land art work.

My aim in Chapter 6 is to continue the investigation of aesthetic experience as embodied and engaged in a close analysis of the ways in which a two-dimensional work – in this case, a video work – engages a person beyond the level of (what has traditionally been presumed to be passive) spectatorship only. In this endeavour, I closely examine a person's encounter with a video work produced by the Spanish born artist, Casilda Sanchez entitled *As inside as the eye can see* (2010).² In particular I investigate the empathic relationship occurring between the images on-screen and an embodied viewer.³ My aim is to show that even though a person may not be required to physically interact

¹ Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (qtd Pallasmaa 2005: 14).

² The video can be viewed at <<http://www.casildasanchez.net>>.

³ When the terms 'viewer' or 'spectator' are used in this chapter, they should be understood in their broadest sense. In other words, a viewer or spectator is considered here to be a fully embodied being or mind-body whole who participates with and responds to art as a multisensorial and appreciative recipient or experiencer. Used here, the terms also recognise that the person who experiences art is a mobile participant, whether that movement is obvious or not. 'Viewer' and 'spectator' are used here merely for the reason that the terms are linguistically useful and economical.

with a work of art, for instance by means of actual touch, taste or smell, s/he is nevertheless engaged in somatic *activity* when experiencing this work.

One of the limitations of the mainly descriptive phenomenological account of my own experience of *Buigkrag*, as it was discussed in Chapter 5, is the absence of an investigation into the complex meanings that emerge from one's encounter with art. To my mind, it is not enough that an encounter with art is merely *described*. In order to deepen and 'thicken', so to speak, the analysis of the meeting of viewer and work the encounter must be understood in a critically reflexive manner which takes into account the multifarious meaningful experiences that flow out of the dialogical engagement taking place. Following Van de Vall's (2003a: 12) contention that an encounter with art should bring about a reflection on our responses to the work, in this chapter I move beyond a mere description of the phenomenological aesthetic encounter that takes place between a responsive person who is fully attuned to Sanchez's *As inside as the eye can see*. In other words, in a critical reflection on that encounter, I also suggest some of the possible meanings that may unfold when one reflects on an experience of a particular work in a specific situation. In this way, the analysis takes into account the first-hand experience not only of a single researcher but also of a larger audience whose interactions and experiences become part of the conversation. In other words, this chapter investigates the ways in which larger audiences experience the video work under discussion by drawing on theories of vision to understand their experiences. The discussion of these theories on vision, I want to argue, arise specifically from the encounter between viewers and the work in the specific environment in which they meet. I begin this discussion by briefly describing the video work.

6.1 In the blink of an eye

As inside as the eye can see (Figure 25) forms part of Sanchez's greater body of work dealing with the theme of intimacy, looking (in particular, the voyeuristic

gaze, according to the artist)⁴ and touch. The video, which plays for seven minutes, begins with a blank (white) screen. After a few seconds, what appear to be fine hairs (depicted in extreme close-up) hesitantly enter the left-hand side of the screen and move slowly and jerkily toward the right. Once an eyeball enters the screen we realise that these are eyelashes. Before the eyeball and eyelid, to which these eyelashes are attached, comes into full view, another set of hairs has already entered from the right-hand side. A few seconds later, two huge eyes look hesitantly at each other whilst slowly blinking and gently moving closer together. Although we do not see much of the bodies of which these eyes are part, it does not take much effort to imagine that the shiny and moist skin of the eyeballs and eyelids belong to two separate, living, breathing bodies.

The eyelid of the person on the right is closed for approximately ten seconds, during which time the person on the left looks fixedly at the closed eye(lid) opposite it. When the eyelid of the person on the right slowly opens, the eyelid of the person on the left closes for approximately fourteen seconds – what seems to the viewer to be a relatively long time – whilst the eye on the right looks intently at the closed eye. After one minute and sixteen seconds – during which time each eyelid slowly, hesitantly and jerkily opens and closes – the two people's eyes, still shown in extreme close-up, are so close to each other that their respective eyelashes are touching (Figure 25).

⁴ Although the intentions of the artist have, for the most part, been evicted from recent art historical analyses by deconstructionist critics, when one encounters artworks in galleries or online, one often reads the statements that have been written by the authors of the works. These statements already give a particular direction to the way in which we experience the work. Therefore, throughout this study, to a greater or lesser extent, I have included what the authors have said about their work, for this has certainly, amongst others of course, coloured and given shape to my own full-bodied and responsive encounters with the works.

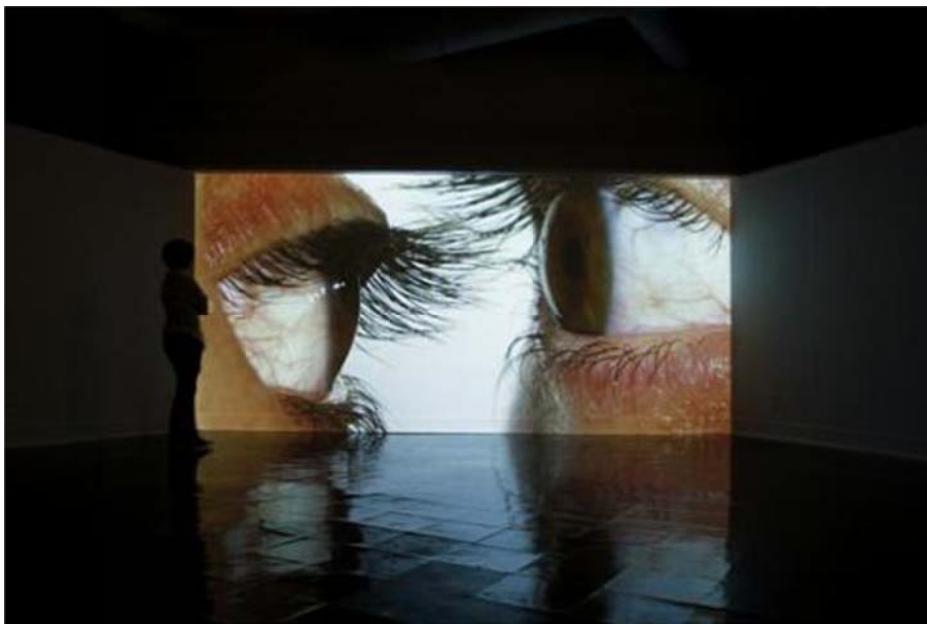


Figure 25: Casilda Sanchez, *As inside as the eye can see* (2010)

The two people remain this close together for another five and a half minutes during which time their eyelashes stroke each other. As each person's eyelid gently opens and closes during this time, their eyelashes also stroke each other's eyeballs and eyelids. A few times during this period the eyes blink as if they have been hurt. A few seconds before the end of the video, the people move away from each other and we are left looking at a white screen again.

Whilst Wade (2011: 19) finds that the visual medium overall denies the viewer an actual sensuous experience, I want to show that this view can hardly be entertained in the case of this particular video. Although purely visual (since the video does not incorporate sound), by drawing on empathy theory amongst others, I propose that an embodied viewer's encounter with the image far exceeds the sense of sight only and is, more aptly, a sensuous bodily experience.

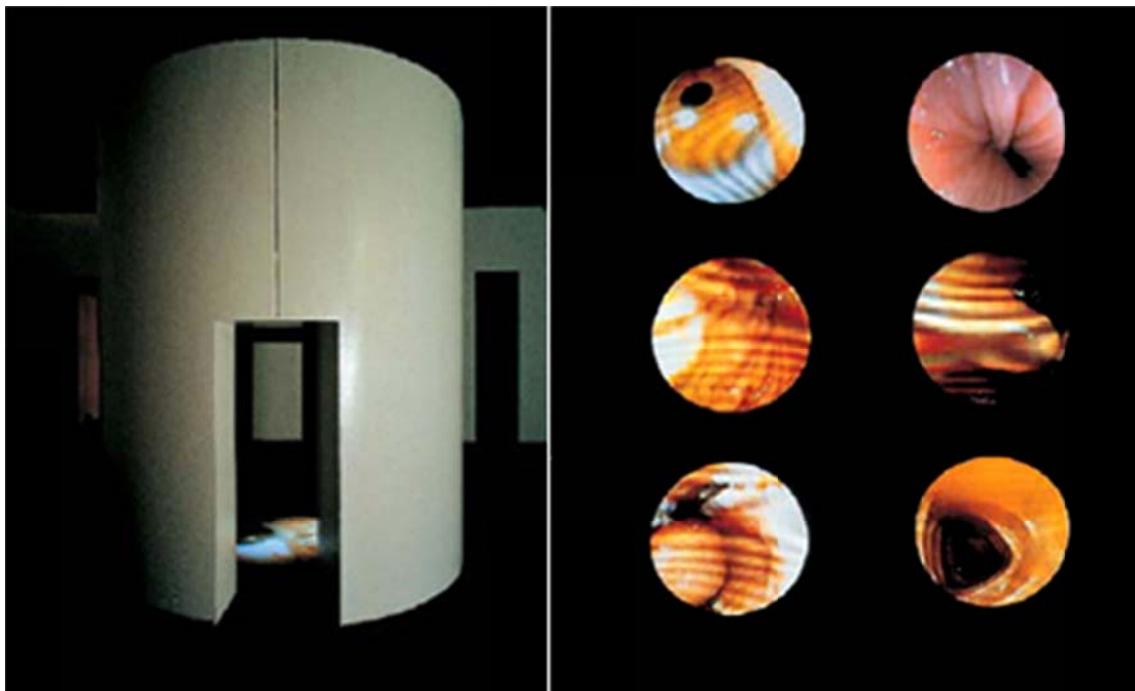


Figure 26: Mona Hatoum, *Corps étranger* (1994)

Before I embark on a critical investigation of the embodied experiences that are produced and activated in, around and through an encounter with *As inside as the eye can see*, I investigate a useful way in which to account for a person's engaged and embodied aesthetic experiences with the help of Van de Vall's (2003a: 4) critical exploration of Mona Hatoum's installation, *Corps étranger* (1994) (Figure 26).⁵ Van de Vall's point of departure is that other readings of this work have been just that – 'readings'. Critical research on *Corps étranger* from both the perspectives of art history – or more specifically psychoanalysis – and visual culture studies, Van de Vall (2003a: 4) finds that these readings have neglected the ways in which the installation might "[...] make one experience something new with regard to one's feeling of embodiment". In her opinion, these analyses, which focus primarily or only on the meanings of the installation, are inadequate to fully investigating its critical potential in terms of how it actively engages a spectator. For, they have failed to take into account

⁵ The visual similarities between Sanchez's greater body of work and Hatoum's *Corps étranger* are unmistakable. In video works such as *Sight* (2009) and *Ojos que no ven* (Eyes that do not see) (2009), extreme close-ups of an eyeball, on the one hand, and the area between the two eyes (specifically the point on the bottom of the forehead and the top of the nose) on the other are shown. The works can be viewed at <<http://www.casildasanchez.net>>.

the expanding environment in which the spectator encounters the installation. Instead, Van de Vall asserts that a person's sensuous and affective experiences of art must be noticed and taken seriously as a meaningful dimension of the critical potential of art. It is this line of reasoning that I want to pursue in my own argument surrounding a person's embodied engagement with Sanchez's video which gives rise to meaningful interactions with it. For this reason, I briefly sketch Van de Vall's main arguments next.

6.2 Up close and personal

Fundamental to Van de Vall's (2003a: 5) position is the premise that art possesses "a kind of *relative autonomy*" and that it has the capacity to generate meaning/s. As a cultural practice "deeply involved in contemporary life" she argues that art "[...] needs its own momentum [...] to be critical by means of its experiential appeal" (Van de Vall 2003a: 5). Van de Vall (2003a: 5) considers aesthetic experience to be grounded in an idea of play that, she argues, is "[...] affective, imaginative and cognitive and that has the capacity to transform the structure of perception".⁶ In other words, new experiences may potentially be generated "in the play of the aesthetic" (Van de Vall 2003a: 5). Furthermore, in this aesthetic situation, conflicts surrounding dialectical positions are not necessarily resolved – such as the conflict between understanding a person's experiential encounter with a work versus its possible meanings in a particular visual culture. In this way, art is relevant in that it enables us to learn to "play with contradictions and paradoxes" (Van de Vall 2003a: 5).

In Van de Vall's analysis of *Corps étranger* she argues that, in the confined space in which a spectator views the projected images of the interior of the artist's body, it becomes impossible to distance yourself from the images projected on the floor, which one might also inadvertently step on. Instead "[t]he boundaries between one's own body and that of the other dissolve, making one

⁶ Van de Vall draws on Isobel Armstrong's (2000) notion of the radical aesthetic.

more aware of the position of one's body against that of the other and against oneself" (Van de Vall 2003a: 6). In this way, normative viewing practices in relation to artworks, whereby we usually stand at a distance from them, are disrupted and even transformed in the playful interaction between an observer/participant and the extended environment of the installation.

In addition, Van de Vall (2003a: 6) turns to phenomenology to assist in describing the experiential encounters generated by the work arguing that phenomenology provides a useful vocabulary to describe the "sensuous, affective and perceptual contents and [...] structures" of specific and concrete experiential situations. Van de Vall (2003a: 9, 10) maintains that in the "awkward intimacy" that is produced (or more aptly enforced) in the cramped space of the room in which the images of the interior of Hatoum's body are displayed, viewers cannot forget that they have "entered the zone of another's privacy". On the other hand, the images we see of that body invade our own corporeality, in that the images are imprinted in our memories and the sounds of breathing and a heart beating enter our ears. Empathically, she argues, we are drawn into an identification with the body we see at the same that we are sensuously fascinated by it: "[i]t becomes attractive without losing its strangeness or dangerousness, seductive in its repugnance" (Van de Vall 2003a: 10). In this way, the work allows its recipients to enter into an experiential relation not only to the projected images but also to the interior of their own bodies as well as to critically reflect on the visualisation of the body in clinical practice.

In a similar way, one's experience of *As inside as the eye can see* is undoubtedly affected by the extremely large size of the video projection in the darkened room, causing one to feel dwarfed by the gigantic, looming eyes on screen (Figure 25). The affective appeal of the hairy, scratchy eyelashes touching/caressing/hurting each other is intensified by the extraordinary size of

the massive close-up.⁷ As is the case with one's experience of *Corps étranger*, in Sanchez's video the colossal eyes on screen also invade our bodily boundaries as we feel strangely drawn into the video, a response likely produced by the extreme close-up, rendered in high-definition and on gigantic scale. For, as Annie Van den Oever (2011: 16) has pointed out regarding its use in early cinema, a close-up grips a viewer; often we cannot look away as the image both disturbs and fascinates. It is as if the image draws us in, we are ensnared by it at the same time that we may not want to look at it.

The uncomfortable relationship between an image and a viewer which results in feelings of fascination, anxiety or discomfort is demonstrated with little difficulty when considering Georges Bataille's use of shocking montages in the French Surrealist magazine, *Documents* which he edited between 1929 and 1930. In order to argue that images can palpate, penetrate or devour their viewers, Didi-Huberman ([s.a.]) draws on J.-A. Boiffard's illustration entitled *Papier colant et mouches* (1930) which appeared in Bataille's article 'L'esprit moderne et le jeu des transpositions' (Figure 27). The fly, argues Didi-Huberman ([s.a.]), "[...] was there to stick to us: appearing too close, almost making our flesh prey to the image".

⁷ I encountered this work in a studio at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (SAIC) where the projected image measured approximately 2m x 4m, similar to the relative size suggested by the photograph available on Sanchez's website and depicted here (Figure 25).



Figure 27: J.-A. Boiffard, *Papier colant et mouches* (1930)

Enlarged fly feet – as big as the reader’s fingers holding the paper – accompanied Bataille’s last article (dealing with representation) in the eighth and final issue of *Documents* in 1930. Didi-Huberman ([s.a.]) suggests that Bataille realised that “[...] for the image to truly *touch* us, they must no longer be the soothing physic that beauty deceitfully promises”. Following Didi-Huberman’s argument, perhaps then it is precisely because Sanchez’s image does not soothe, that it grips and ‘touches’ us.

Although the extreme close-up in Sanchez’s work may not disgust the viewer in the same way that Boiffard’s flies do, we are certainly given intimate details of the moist and hairy skins of the bodies of the people shown on-screen in high-definition. Our attention is thus drawn to the distinct materiality of their bodies,

which are shiny, constantly moving and on which, owing to close proximity to them, we even notice fine hairs. In this way, the image demands our bodily perception: our eyes move around the eyeballs, eyelashes, skin and white background, and in so doing, our distance from the faces on the screen collapses, or was perhaps from the start already denied. We may blink uncontrollably or hold our breath as the eyelashes scrape the eyeballs or as we anticipate what will happen next.

To further complicate the possibility that the image may touch a viewer, the effect of seeing the eyelashes touching an unblinking⁸ eyeball should be considered more closely. Besides it being quite an awkward position to be in, this action, we imagine, would result in a less than pleasant experience, likely to be extremely irritating and uncomfortable. In other words, it does not suggest intimacy but intense pain and discomfort instead. As viewers of the eyelashes rubbing on the eyeballs we may empathically or imaginatively also experience an unpleasant, even painful sensation somatically, deep within our bodies, for we have merged with that which we see on-screen. Many of the audiences to which I have shown the work have responded in this way, with some people not being able to look at the screen for more than a few seconds before having to look away.

As we are drawn toward the work, we also imaginatively become aware of an interesting paradox in operation. Whilst we see the distinct materiality of each body in detail, the two eyes looking at each other so closely must surely only see blurry shapes. We imagine that they must by now have become ‘blind’ to the details of each other’s physical bodies which are probably now completely indistinct to them whilst still appearing in high-definition to us. Simply put, whilst

⁸ Eyelids serve a specific purpose by reflexively closing when the eyeball is threatened, for instance when it is exposed to a blinding flash of light, a sudden loud noise or movement or an object that comes too close. Humans “normally” blink every five seconds which clears and moistens the eye (Lester 2000: 15). Each of the eyelashes is connected to the eyelid by such highly-sensitive nerve cells that the eyelid will immediately close prompted by even the tiniest speck of dust (Lester 2000: 15). In a curious way, the closing eyelids seen on-screen make us aware of our own blinking eyes in reaction to what we see.

neither one can see the other clearly, for they are too close together, we can still see *them* – and in great detail.

6.3 Close encounters

In order to investigate why the image works on us in this way, I now turn to empathy theory which provides the groundwork for some of the arguments taking shape in sensory studies as already suggested in Chapter 4. The multisensorial and embodied connection between spectators and what they see in two-dimensional works of visual art, such as paintings and photographs⁹ specifically is investigated by Esrock, who along with other literary scholars is interested in a reader's mental imaging.¹⁰ Esrock stresses the involvement of the imagination in a person's perception of art, which turns works into performances and images into events. I investigate Esrock's approach here in order to understand why some viewers flinch when they look at *As inside as the eye can see*.

In an article entitled 'Embodying art: the spectator and the inner body' Esrock (2010) turns to scientific research to provide empirical evidence for her theories on spectators' bodily experiences of art.¹¹ It would seem that Esrock's estimation of the ways in which spectators respond to art somatically is an

⁹ Although the ways in which the whole body of a viewer participates in a physical encounter with art that expressly sets out to engage senses other than sight as well as a viewer's physical bodily movement, may be recognised relatively unproblematically in the case of installations and performance works, the point I am trying to make here is that physical involvement on the part of a spectator also occurs in her/his encounter with paintings and photographs. In other words, I am arguing that an aesthetics of embodiment and engagement is not only suited to multimodal images, installations or performances. For, viewers are always and undeniably embodied participants in the encounter with art and two-dimensional artworks, such as paintings, photographs, videos or films can – and should – also be analysed from the perspective of the embodied and engaged viewer.

¹⁰Cf. Esrock's *The reader's eye: visual imaging as reader response* (1994). Other noteworthy scholarship on a similar trajectory includes Christopher Collins' *The poetics of the mind's eye* (1991) and *Reading the written image: verbal play interpretation, and the roots of iconophobia* (1991).

¹¹ In this article Esrock (2010) analyses two paintings by Adolph Menzel: *Red Courtyard and House* (1844) and *Balcony Room* (1845). Developing Fried's interpretations of these paintings in his text *Menzel's realism: art and embodiment in nineteenth-century Berlin* (2002), Esrock extends the ways in which viewer's empathic responses to these works can be understood.

example of what O’Sullivan (2001: 131) refers to as research that is “[...] attuned to the aesthetics of affect”.¹² What emerges from both this remark by O’Sullivan as well as Esrock’s (2010: 238) treatise to the readers of her article, “[...] for whom [her] reflections will seem like counting angels on the head of a pin [...]” to nevertheless “[...] try to follow these descriptions”, is that one has to *become* attuned or responsive to this way of experiencing an artwork.¹³ Equally, not all viewers would be responsive in the same way. It is not so much that this way of experiencing art must be cultivated or consciously willed, but rather that it must be recognised or acknowledged as taking place whether one is conscious of it or not. In other words, whether acknowledged or not, affective, empathic responses to art take place within a person’s body.

Esrock explores spectators’ embodied experiences of works of art through the concept of empathy.¹⁴ Her contemporary approach to art therefore parallels a version of empathy theory that developed in the late nineteenth century particularly in Germany when it was still closely associated with philosophy and experimental psychology.¹⁵ Although by the mid-twentieth century, empathy theory was largely rejected by art historians, Esrock (2010: 220) is interested in demonstrating that embodied experiences of art “[...] are not simply vague, romantic turns of phrase”. It is her aim to bring to light “[...] a way of using our bodies that can occur when we look at artworks” produced in different media and at different times (Esrock 2010: 221).

Esrock extends the concept of empathy in her analyses of a viewer’s bodily projections onto paintings. For Esrock (2010: 223) empathy is an embodied

¹² See my earlier discussion of affect in Chapter 5, section 5.5.

¹³ In his discussion of the ways in which spectators become engaged in landscape paintings, Berleant (1991: 73) notes that “[...] the mode of the viewer’s bodily perception, [as well as her/his] multi-sensory and kinaesthetic” orientation determines their experience of immersion in an artwork. This means that it is not only the particular pictorial devices and techniques employed by the artist but also a viewer’s mode of perception that produces an engaged aesthetic experience. In other words, the arguments presented by both Sullivan and Esrock appear to be in agreement with Berleant (1991: 73, 74) that experiencing a work of art in this way can only occur if “[...] we are but prepared to attempt it”.

¹⁴ See my earlier introduction to the concept of empathy in Chapter 4, in section 4.2.3.

¹⁵ Empathy theory was soon transformed into a theoretical method by the art historians Wölfflin and August Schmarsow.

process that refers to “[...] a particular kind of embodied operation that involves a projection of some aspect of one’s body or self into objects and others in the world”.¹⁶ This projection of the self is accomplished imaginatively as spectators, who, although they might want to, may not touch the actual artwork, and therefore visually explore the work imaginatively through the sense of touch. In this instance, argues Esrock (2010: 227), “[...] an unconscious sensorimotor image might appear to consciousness – the feel of the ladder, the movement of reaching into the painting [...]” and so forth.

In an earlier article, ‘Touching art: intimacy, embodiment and the somatosensory system’ Esrock (2001: 234) had already suggested that bodily boundaries between a person and what s/he sees can be overcome imaginatively through a process of “somatic reinterpretation”. Reminiscent of Richard Wollheim’s (1923-2003) (1987: 44, 46, 47, 129, 160-64) contention that a spectator can become involved in a painting imaginatively, “somatic reinterpretation” requires that a spectator imagine becoming temporarily intimately immersed in a work of art.¹⁷ This requires an acknowledgement of the complex involvement of the body’s imaginative capabilities in experiencing art. Whilst this somatic merging may occur unconsciously, it can also be achieved by consciously recognising how the somatosensory system is affected by what is seen. For example, in her lectures, Esrock instructs her audience to move their eyes up and down the leaves in Paul Strand’s photograph entitled *Leaves II* (1929) (Figure 28).

¹⁶ Other kinds of embodied processes would, for instance, include cognition and language (Lakoff & Johnson 1999).

¹⁷ Cf. Wollheim’s *Painting as an art* (1987) in which he explains that by means of what he calls a process of “seeing-in”, the spectator has direct access to what is depicted in a painting. According to Wollheim, immersion in the painting may occur if there is a figure present or if one imagines being present as a figure in the painting.



Figure 28: Paul Strand, *Leaves II* (1929)

Thereafter, participants must imagine “[...] a corresponding line moving though their bodies” (Esrock 2001: 237). In this way, what is seen can be related to felt bodily experiences, in that the line might be experienced as thick or as palpable owing to what Esrock (2001: 238) refers to as the “background feeling of the somatosensory system”.¹⁸ She describes the way in which this background feeling functions as follows:

On the one hand, when oriented to its subjective pole, it would possess associations of the self to which it belongs. On the other hand, in its objective orientation, the background feeling would acquire the object of the eye scan. As an imagined touch directed towards an external object, it would become a palpable feeling of that object. Perceptible qualities of the object – its texture, weight, balance, emotional tone, and colour saturation, could become

¹⁸ Later, Esrock (2010: 228) provides another term for this “background feeling”: *interoception* which refers to our “sensing of the internal milieu” or our sensing of “the inner bodily state”.

identified with the palpable quality of the line echoing within the body (Esrock 2001: 238).

In this way, a viewer may imaginatively feel the object deep within his/her own body.

Although not explicitly referring to affects, I would suggest that Esrock's notion of a 'background feeling' of the somatosensory system operates at the level of affect. Equally, the overall experience of the photograph, brought forth by the 'background feeling' of the body and a person's imagining of their tactile relationship with what they see, hinges quite clearly on a notion of aesthetic embodiment and aesthetic engagement. In other words, Esrock's notion of a somatic relationship occurring between a viewer and the artwork s/he encounters provides a useful way in which to deepen an investigation of that encounter.

In Esrock's negotiation of the merging of a viewer and what is viewed, it is also clear that, as with many scholars more directly associated with the sensory turn, a phenomenological approach, based in Merleau-Ponty's ideas on the embodiment of perception and a person's tactile engagement in the world, are close at hand.¹⁹ The following extract demonstrates that, in Esrock's (2001: 236) understanding, vision and touch are always already fused with each other in the moment of looking, thereby resembling Merleau-Ponty's notions of bodies immersed in the flesh of the world:

Oriented to the objective world, touch assumes the external object provided for it by vision and thus mentally touches the visually apprehended object. But, touch also orients to the subjective pole and, thus, conveys the sensation of being

¹⁹ However, Esrock (2010: 218) also distances herself from phenomenology noting that she undertakes "close descriptions rather than *phenomenological* descriptions" owing to the fact that she does not pursue "[...] the traditional phenomenological task of identifying the invariant structures of experience". Although Merleau-Ponty has been criticised for his limited account of alterity (most notably by Levinas and Irigaray, for example) on my reading he does not fully subscribe to the kind of 'traditional' phenomenological protocols that Esrock may be referring to here that are perhaps better lodged against a Husserlian notion of subjectivity. I regard Merleau-Ponty, therefore, as foundational to her approach, rather than in opposition to it.

touched. In this case, the thing that does the (mental) touching is the external object of vision. One's body feels touched by vision's object. Thus, in its bipolar capacities, touch refers to the self that is touched, as well as the touched object outside the body. The combination of these two polarities bridges the physical distance between the visually perceived object and the viewer, bringing the palpability of the object seen into the subjective, bodily boundaries of the subject. Thus, in both cases inner and outer realities merge deep inside the body – not merely at the top layers of skin, where surface touch operates. One finds the object within one's self or one finds that one is within the object.

Drawing on a Merleau-Pontian understanding of the relationship between a viewer and what s/he sees and by means of a “*close description*” (Esrock 2010: 220), or more precisely, empathic description of an embodied experience of art, it would seem viable to examine a painting or a photograph, which does not involve direct physical contact or participation from the viewer, as described above, from the perspective of embodied engagement. Esrock’s conception of vision as a kind of touch explains why people react as they do to viewing Sanchez’s video. All the varieties of reactions, including feeling drawn to, touched or irritated by, and/or awkwardly intimate with the image on-screen, derive from a person’s unique somatosensory system which is affected by what is seen. Thus, the physical body is undeniably an *active* participant in the empathic, imaginative and cognitive experience of art.

Some of the criticisms that have been lodged against phenomenology’s putative subjectivism and humanist foundation can clearly also be expected to arise in relation to empathy theory.²⁰ According to Berleant (1991: 17), in order to substantively account for a person’s empathetic experience of art, such a theory must move beyond the notion of a person’s subjective cognitive response. In his reading of Lipps’ account of empathy, Berleant (1991: 16) argues that “[...] there is no passive identity or purely visual assimilation, nor does it involve a private sensation or pleasure in an object”. When a person ‘feels’ themselves into an aesthetic object/event, it is not only our attention that is engaged, but also “[...] kinaesthetic sensations, such as the muscle tensions that are so insistent a part

²⁰ See my earlier discussion of the limitations of phenomenology in Chapter 5, section 5.2.

of dance appreciation" (Berleant 1991: 17). In other words, the empathetic relationship between a viewer and art is a visceral engagement that includes a person's movement and active participation.²¹

These kinaesthetic sensations (including visceral movement and muscle tension) are concretely explained by means of mirror neuron system theory. This field of research shows that when watching someone executing an action, the same neural circuitry is affected in the viewer as in the one being observed, that is, the one performing the action. Freedberg & Gallese (2007) link different empathetic experiences of visual art directly to neural mechanisms.²² Empathetic responses to art, they argue, are generated by embodied simulation. The authors employ recent research into mirror neurons to account for the general feeling of empathetic engagement or "bodily resonance" with artworks experienced by "most spectators" (Freedberg & Gallese 2007: 197). For example, viewers of Michelangelo's *Prisoners* (c. 1513) often recount the "felt activation" of their own muscles "[...] that appear to be activated within the sculpture itself" (Freedberg & Gallese 2007: 197). Similarly, scenes from Goya's *Disasters of war* (1810-1820) have apparently evoked corresponding feelings of pain in viewers' own bodies as would be felt in the lacerated body parts represented in the etchings. Other responses noted by viewers of these works include feelings of unbalance. Freedberg & Gallese (2007: 197) note that "[...] physical empathy easily transmutes into a feeling of empathy for the emotional consequences of the ways in which the body is damaged or mutilated [...] [e]ven when the image contains no overt emotional component".

Freedberg & Gallese (2007: 199) contend that a viewer's empathetic response to visual art operates "pre-rationally" and has "[...] a precise and definable

²¹ For Dewey (1934) there is a perceptual unity or synthesis between the viewer and what is seen. In his view, the aesthetic always involves "*an experience*", in which a total organic involvement occurs.

²² Freedberg & Gallese (2007: 197) challenge "[...] the primacy of cognition in responses to art", arguing instead that embodied phenomena and corporeal sensations are a crucial, and often neglected, aspect of people's aesthetic responses to art (Freedberg & Gallese 2007: 197). But, surely both approaches can usefully be employed in analyses of art?

material basis in the brain" apparently somewhere in the pre-motor and parietal cortices.²³ However interesting scientific research into a person's neurological response may be this is only one way in which to understand bodily reactions to art. It would be a mistake to overlook the combined roles of the imagination and cognition which work in concert with the neurological system to provide us with personal and individual experiences and which, as I have argued previously, cannot be mapped.

Whether our empathic responses take place physiologically somewhere in the brain (Freedberg & Gallese 2007: 199) or imaginatively (Esrock 2010: 227), following empathy theory means that we can feel as if we are ourselves touching, tasting, smelling and/or hearing what is represented in an artwork and in this way "penetrat[e] the picture" (Esrock 2010: 227). Or, following Didi-Huberman ([s.a.]), perhaps it is the picture that has 'penetrated' us? If understood from the viewpoint of the sensorimotor mirroring system as imitative experience, in Esrock's (2010: 228) estimation "[...] representations of a natural force like wind against the body are sensorily evocative". In other words, people's pained reactions to seeing the eyelashes scraping the eyeballs rendered on gigantic scale in *As inside as the eye can see*, perfectly demonstrates their affective and empathetic connection with what they see as argued in different ways by Berleant (1991), Esrock (2001 & 2010), Freedberg & Gallese (2007) Massumi (1995) and O'Sullivan (2001). In this way, our encounter with the work demonstrates that vision is not a distancing sense at all (an assumption I explored in Chapter 3) and that the eye can also be thought of as an organ of touch.

²³ The popularity of such research on people's responses to art was recently made glaringly obvious. In July 2014 a Swedish art gallery held an art auction at which bids were made not with cash but with emotions. Hooked up to heart-rate monitors and machines that measured how much each participant was sweating, their emotional response to each work on auction was measured. The bidder with the highest emotional response won the work. A video is available at <<http://arttimes.co.za/swedish-gallery-holds-first-art-auction-based-emotions>>.

6.4 Keep in touch

Although considering vision in tactile terms is by no means a new concept, recent research on film has provided material that can usefully be applied to the video under investigation here.²⁴ For instance, the film theorist, Marks (1999) has coined the term “haptic visuality” to describe what she proposes is “[...] a kind of looking that lingers on the surface of the image rather than delving into depth and is more concerned with texture than with deep space” (Barker 2009: 35). The term ‘haptic’ is drawn from the Greek *haptikos*, meaning ‘capable of touching’ or the German *haptein*, meaning to seize or grasp (Gandelman 1991: 5).²⁵ In film, a haptic experience can be produced in at least two possible ways. On the one hand, the effect of the film itself – including the composition of its frames, camera techniques and filmic devices, the integration of sound/s and the soundtrack for instance – may produce this experience.²⁶ On the other, it may be produced via the “viewer’s predisposition” (Marks 2008: 399) to see haptically.²⁷ This predisposition may, in turn, result from the viewer’s “individual or cultural learning” (Marks 2008: 399). In other words, the extent to which a film

²⁴ For example, in art history Riegl described two fundamental categories of looking at art: the optic and the haptic. Optical looking requires scanning objects according to their outline while haptic looking focuses on surfaces. A haptic person, therefore, is someone that draws primarily on cutaneous sense data and tactile experience. In this formulation, the gaze can be haptic just as much as it can be optic. Cf. the excellent examination of Riegl’s ideas in Iversen (1993) and Iversen & Melville (2010). Although Riegl was not the first to describe these two categories of seeing – for the idea that seeing is a form of touching can be found in the earlier work of Descartes and Berkeley – he was the first to apply these concepts to looking at works of art.

²⁵ Similarly, Van de Vall (2008: 5) draws attention to the Dutch word ‘tasten’ which, although not fully translatable into English, could mean ‘to grope’ as in the “searching movement” of one’s hands when one’s eyes are closed. ‘Tastzin’ refer to the sense of touch. ‘Tastend denken’, she argues, “might describe a kind of thinking that is modelled upon the sense of touch” (Van de Vall 2008: 5). This kind of thinking, which is “[...] fragmentary and uncertain about its direction”, may be necessary in light of the many conflicted and opposing cultural values that have led to so much tension and strife across the globe (Van de Vall 2008: 1-5).

²⁶ In this case, images themselves can be considered as optic and/or haptic. According to Marks (2008: 399), in contrast to optical images, haptic images allow for an intersubjective relationship between spectator and image. The intersubjective relationship between viewers and a film was theorised in the early days of cinema, when the embodied response of the viewer to film was of more interest to theorists such as Benjamin, Bela Balász and Vertov than analyses of the film’s linguistic signification (Marks 2008: 399). In these early theories, the viewer’s bodily involvement with, or immersion in, both the material substance of the film and the objects seen on screen was acknowledged to a greater extent than in the later theories of the twentieth century which emphasised film’s narrative structure.

²⁷ Marks (2008: 399) suggests that a haptic experience of a film is easily produced when someone with impaired eyesight removes his or her spectacles.

is experienced haptically or optically has just as much to do with the nature of the film as with the viewer's inclination to see it in this way. The latter part of this statement helps to clarify why not all viewers experience the rubbing of the eyelashes in Sanchez's video as painful,²⁸ and also provides a more nuanced perspective on the extent to which Freedberg & Gallese's (2007) neurological tests are useful in adequately understanding viewers' responses to art.

Marks (2008: 400) maintains that the textural qualities of the film, achieved through such processes as changes in focus, the graininess of the picture and the visual effect produced through over- or underexposure, all lead to various degrees of optical or haptic sensations. Accordingly, it is precisely when the viewer is not able to distinguish the forms on screen clearly that a haptic relationship to a film is encouraged (Marks 2008: 400). Therefore, it is the vagueness – the indeterminate, imprecise and indefinite character of the image – that produces a haptic effect. Marks (2008: 401) also remarks that the tactile close-up, (she uses the example of a close-up of skin and hair in *Sniff* (1996, Ming-Yuen S. Ma)) is a particularly evocative device.²⁹ While the eyes in Sanchez's video are certainly not indeterminate or imprecise, the point is that images that overwhelm or confound vision, such as the close-up of two bodies, which focuses only on their eyes, eyelashes and eyelids invites the viewer to perceive in a different way (Marks 2008: 402).³⁰

²⁸ For instance, I did not initially have a sensation of pain when looking at the video. Instead, I was drawn to the sense of intimacy I imagined occurring between the two people. It was only after some people I showed the work to had drawn my attention to their own pained/painful experience that I no longer look at the video in the same way.

²⁹ Marks is particularly interested in the different potentialities of film and video for evoking the haptic experience. She shows that, while there are many ways in which the graininess of films (in particular 8mm) can be manipulated in order to create visual texture, video provides an even richer ground to achieve haptic effects. "Control of the image [...] " she argues "[...] is much more open to negotiation in video, while in film the qualities of the image are chemical effects that cannot be significantly changed after the film has been produced" (Marks 2008: 402). The point Marks (2008: 403) is trying to make here is that, contrary to Marshall McLuhan's contention that video is a "cool" and distancing medium, "[...] video's tactile qualities make it a warm medium".

³⁰ Camera movement, amongst others, can also be effective in producing sensuous effects thereby also leading to "[...] a more embodied and multi-sensory relationship to the image" (Marks 2008: 400). According to Marks (2008: 400), examples of films that produce multisensory relationships with their viewers through the manipulation of the camera's movements, the use of montage and the creative use of sounds include *The Piano* (1993, Jane Campion) and *Like water for chocolate* (1993, Alfonso Aráu).

Furthermore, if we are not able to immediately determine what we are seeing, we are encouraged to engage with the image by means of memory.³¹ “Haptic images” argues Marks (2008: 403) “refuse visual plenitude”. Furthermore, she argues that these kinds of images “give the impression of seeing for the first time” (Marks 2008: 404). Since one does not know at first what the image is – just as we do not know what the forms moving into view from either side of the screen at the beginning of the recording are – our initial experience of *As inside as the eye can see* is a process of trying to make sense of what we are seeing. Precisely because the images on screen – which focus only on a specific part of the bodies – cannot easily be read, as viewers we also struggle to anticipate what will happen next. In this sense, the indeterminacy of the images seems to fit with Marks’ description of haptic images. In short, both the images on screen and our visual perception of them are, to some extent at least, of an undeniably haptic nature.³²

The notion of haptic visuality may facilitate a useful way in which to explain a viewer’s feeling ‘in touch’ with (or perhaps it would be more apt to say, overwhelmed by) what is seen in Sanchez’ video. In fact, far from being excluded, distanced and detached from the bodies on-screen (as supposed by the argument that posits vision in terms of distance and detachment), it is tempting to suggest that the viewer’s eyes wander over the surface of the video projection, visually caressing and touching the images on screen as the eyes they see appear to caress and touch each other. Could it not then be possible to suggest that the viewer is drawn, not only into the image, but also into the intimate exchange they see before them?

³¹ Marks’ research has revealed that this device is often used in intercultural and ethnographic films and videos. She mentions a lengthy list of films in which this device effectively “[...] counter[s] viewer’s expectations of informative or exotic visual spectacle” (Marks 2008: 403).

³² In her analysis of the tactile interrelation between a film and its spectator, Barker (2009: 35) argues that haptic visuality is “[...] an erotic form of communication between film and viewer”. She states that, as spectators of film, “[...] we feel ourselves being touched in the act of touching” (Barker 2009: 35). But it is not the case that we lose ourselves in the act of looking, since we are not “absorbed or erased” (Barker 2009: 36) by it. Instead, she argues that “[...] we lose our sense of our separateness from the film, but we don’t lose our sense of ourselves”.

Why then does the artist suppose that vision must be overcome? For, according to Sanchez, in order to reach intimacy people must no longer see. In her artist's statement, Sanchez ([s.a.]) argues that even though each person wants to see the other, their eagerness to:

enter [...] in his/her space and try [...] to understand, or even share, the other person's intimacy through the gaze, turns out to be an effort in vain because without distance we cannot see. We find ourselves again in the paradox: so close but unable to see more than a blurred image.

As I have already pointed out, when the two people are close enough for their eyelashes to touch they are in effect looking at each other from a distance that denies coherent or distinct vision. At this proximity, it is impossible for either one to clearly make out what they are seeing; they are probably seeing only blurred colours and shapes. The artist comes to the conclusion that "[...] eyesight may not necessarily be the best sense to comprehend and explore intimacy; think of the power of touch, smell, taste or hearing" (Sanchez [s.a.]).³³ As a result of her position on the limitations of vision in close and intimate encounters, the bodies move toward each other in a way that takes them beyond vision. The artist appears to be commenting on the failure of vision to enable us to 'see' intimately inside the other. The artist explains that she is interested in the limited potential of human relationships to reach deep intimacy via the sense of sight.³⁴

There are two issues raised by the artist in these statements about her work that warrant greater exploration. The first is the assumption that coming to know and understand another person through the sense of sight requires distance, but for the artist distance paradoxically results in alienation and separation from what is seen, as seeing another person draws us back to an awareness of ourselves. Understood in this way vision is therefore apparently not the most

³³ While watching Sanchez's video, even before reading her statement, we may have already imagined that the gazing bodies are lovers looking at each other tentatively and gently at first.

³⁴ Although the video does not contain sound, what the two people are hearing and smelling is likely also imaginatively experienced by viewers.

helpful sense in enabling intimate relationships. The second assumption leads from the first: since vision does not (apparently) give access to an intimate relationship between two people, touch may be the more successful sense in this endeavour.³⁵ With these statements Sanchez reveals her alignment with conceptions of vision not only as the so-called ‘distance-sense’ which I discussed in Chapter 3,³⁶ but more importantly her alignment with both theorists and artists who have denigrated vision as I pointed out in Chapter 1. In her critique of sight and in her endeavour to replace vision with touch, I would regard Sanchez as working within the tradition of the so-called “eye-artists” (Gandelman 1991: 151) whose suspicion of sight was unmistakeable.

Ultimately, it seems that for Sanchez, in order to reach an intimate relationship with another person apparently the eyes must no longer see, but touch instead, with the gazes overcoming the gap or distance between the bodies by also relinquishing vision. Only when sight is overcome, with the bodies no longer relating to each other through the sense of sight but through the tactile rubbing of the eyelashes, can intimacy be achieved. Thus, according to the video, loving, intimate, non-hierarchical, non-dominating relationships are apparently not accomplished through vision but perhaps through touch. Before offering some suggestions for the reasons Sanchez may find it necessary to overcome vision in order to reach intimacy, I want to explain why this discussion is not a ‘reading’ into the meaning of the work, but rather an investigation that arises or flows from a person’s experiential encounter with it. Although I have thus far attempted to account for a viewer’s embodied experience of the work by employing empathy theory in this discussion, this description is still lacking in terms of a *critical* understanding of the work’s potential.

³⁵ There are presumably many other ways in which to analyse Sanchez’s works. For example, are subjects that are physically so close together necessarily in an intimate exchange? How can intimacy be defined? The extreme close-up could also be approached from the perspective of the grotesque. I have naturally restricted my reading of this work here for the purposes of constructing my argument regarding vision as alienation versus vision as connection.

³⁶ See specifically section 3.3.1.

6.5 In close quarters

My intention with moving beyond the mere description of the empathic and embodied encounter between a viewer and a work of art is to explore the ways in which the dynamic encounter itself generates meanings. In other words, I argue that a viewer's ambivalent feelings and reactions to the video – our feeling intrigued, fascinated, ashamed, uncomfortable, disturbed, wanting to look away, wanting to see more, and so forth – that are evoked by the empathic experience of the work, all have to do with the exchange of looks between ourselves and what we see and how we immediately and affectively react to that encounter. Furthermore, these feelings emerge or arise precisely in relation to what we are looking at – two people looking at and touching each other on a huge scale. In other words, I argue that critical reflection is not circumvented or negated when analysing a person's embodied engagement with art but is crucial to enriching that analysis.

If a viewer's full-bodied encounter with *As inside as the eye can see* is taken into account, such a critical reflection on the themes of vision and of touch may potentially be reached. For, the larger than life eyes touching each other, invade our space, perhaps even engulfing us. In the manner suggested by Esrock, in some respects the image touches us, as we may imaginatively and empathically touch what we see. This affective and imaginative encounter gives rise to feelings which, if reflected on, enrich our critical investigation of the work's potential meanings which are produced by and depend on the whole bodied and sensorially engaged person in relation to the image.

In order to embark on this argument, I return to Van de Vall (2003a: 10) who argues that the experiential encounter must not only to be recognised but also be acknowledged as meaningful. In her opinion, such an experience can only become critical when "[...] its appreciation is in some way or another self-

conscious" (Van de Vall 2003a: 10).³⁷ In other words, a person must not only recognise that something is taking place with one's "feelings and perceptions" but also that what is happening is significant (Van de Vall 2003a: 10). "One should not only have experiences [...]" she argues, "[...] but experience them as experiences". In this way, the aesthetic experience, considered as both mediated and immediate becomes self-reflexive or related to the self. I have already touched on this topic in Chapter 5, but want to flesh it out a little further here in terms of Van de Vall's position on the matter. While appreciating art is a mediated experience – for art is a cultural practice – it is simultaneously also immediate. Thus, Van de Vall (2003a: 11) understands the aesthetic experience of an individual spectator to be simultaneously mediated and immediate: "[w]hat is immediately felt is at the same time mediated, because the feeling is performed in a certain way and this performance is staged" (Van de Vall 2003a: 11). The materiality of the images, the ways in which the work is structured, the environment in which the work is displayed, the integration of sounds and so forth, all contribute to the staging of the performance and the event with which an embodied sensual being engages.

Berleant understands the relationship between the immediate and the mediated in a similar way. He suggests that while there is no possibility of something called 'pure perception', there is something that can be called direct perception, that is, perception that is "apprehended immediately and unreflectively" and that

³⁷ Drawing on Jean-François Lyotard's notion of the *tautagogical* in *Lessons on the analytic of the sublime* (1994) – which refers to a sensitive mode of reflective thinking – Van de Vall finds a way in which to understand aesthetic experience as critical and reflexive without relegating such experience to a mode of disinterested perception. The *tautagogical* constitutes a mode of thinking that is aware of its "[...] being affected by its own activity" (Van de Vall 2003a: 11). In being affected in this way, thought therefore *feels* itself thinking. In other words, thinking relates to itself through feeling, which is not a form of thinking. "Whereas Kant's, 'Ich denke' is a thinking that thinks itself in its activity, the *tautagogical* is a thinking that feels itself in its activity" (Van de Vall 2003a: 11). In contrast to Kant's 'Ich denke' which requires a representation to mediate thought, the *tautagogical* "[...] might involve a form of mediation, but not necessarily a mediating concept or image or idea intervening in between the sensing and the sensed". Furthermore, "a mental or optical distance" is not a requirement of this mode of reflexivity in order for it to be discriminating (Van de Vall 2003a: 11). It is more the case that the sensing and the sensed coincide. In Van de Vall's (2003a: 11) opinion, feeling and thinking can be thought to operate differently if one applies the concept of the *tautagogical* in the act of thinking to aesthetic experience. For now it is a matter of "[...] feeling that thinks itself, or is at least aware of itself as it occurs" (Van de Vall 2003a: 11). 'Aesthetic reflexivity' arises when this awareness occurs or "is mobilised" (Van de Vall 2003a: 11) in the experience of art.

shapes “the aesthetic character of experience” (Berleant 1991: 92). This means that our “past perception and expectation” join together in the “conscious present” of participatory engagement with art (Berleant 1991: 97). Furthermore, “[s]ensory imagination continually supplements our direct sensory awareness” (Berleant 1991: 97). In the following section I want to critically reflect on some of the feelings relating to vision and touch that emerge in relation to the video work by also including the ideas which motivated the artist.

6.6 Look at me (looking at you)

Looking at human faces – as both a viewer of *As inside as the eye can see*, as well as the two faces in the video are doing – is in itself an extremely evocative and complex activity, quite unlike looking at objects such as leaves, for instance (as in Esrock’s example referred to above). As Van de Vall (2008: 50) notes “[n]ot only do faces attract our attention more strongly than everything else does, but in our visual worlds there are no items that we see with so much alertness, discrimination and responsiveness”. The empathic response we have to (the parts of) the faces in Sanchez’s work may therefore be greater than were we looking at any other objects. Furthermore, the interaction between the two faces in the video suggests something about the complexity of the exchange that takes place not only when two people look at each other, but when a viewer looks at an image of a face (and eyes in particular). The ways in which the eyelids close, as was described in section 6.1 above, reflects our tendency to look away when we realise that we have been seen looking at another person. In other words, we tend to avoid the other person’s gaze. Looking into another person’s eyes can be a highly intimate exchange and, in everyday encounters, if the mutual gazes last more than a second or two the exchange becomes awkward, perhaps because we feel ‘touched’ by the gaze of another person. As a result of their apparent touching of our very core, we quickly avert our gaze.

On a semiotic level, one should not overlook the multiple meanings that are produced by two faces or two eyes gazing intently at one another. For this image is not necessarily a loving one and could just as easily signify domination and aggression. For instance, the image recalls opponents confronting each other in a ‘faceoff’, as seen in the representation of dramatic displays of (usually male) aggression in film and television. Such images are also often seen in the political arena with the political expression of power being visualised in the eyeball-to-eyeball confrontation between political leaders.³⁸ But this kind of dominating gaze is not apparent, to me at least, in the relationship between the two people we are seeing. Instead, their desire to see closely into each other, in a non-threatening way, is almost palpable.

Clearly, looking in general as well as at another human being more specifically can be a troublesome affair. In the next section I explore more closely some of the ways in which looking – what the viewer of Sanchez’s work both actively does and what s/he sees – has been understood in some areas of Western philosophy with notions of visual distance and visual connection being two important positions in this discussion. The aim is to understand and critically reflect on precisely why we feel uncomfortable or awkward looking at two faces looking at each other. In other words, I reflect on the experiential encounter from which meanings unfold in this work.

My argument in the next part of the chapter is that, contrary to the ‘blindness’ proposed by the artist as a necessary component of intimate relationships, vision, if understood somewhat differently to the artist’s apparent conception of it, can lead to close relationships. In order to make this argument, I first explore the theoretical positions of the two notable French scholars of vision Sartre and

³⁸ This brings to mind the much publicised ‘faceoff’ between John F. Kennedy and Nikita Khrushchev during the Cuban Missile Crisis in the 1960s, or the more recent ‘faceoff’ between Barak Obama and Vladimir Putin during the Ukraine crisis in 2014. The exchange taking place between the two bodies in the video is therefore undeniably complex. The eyes, of course, emit all sorts of emotional information as they look at one another. In an argument dealing with the power of looking, Jay (1993: 10) puts it like this: “[...] the eye is not only, as the familiar clichés would have it, a ‘window on the world’, but also a ‘mirror of the soul’. Even the dilation of the pupil can unintentionally betray an inner state, subtly conveying interest or aversion to the beholder”.

Lacan both of whom regard vision to be primarily alienating and hostile.³⁹ In other words, in their respective accounts of the formation of self-consciousness, both philosophers understand vision in negative terms. Accordingly, vision is thus regarded as a necessary evil.⁴⁰ For both Sartre and Lacan sight distances and alienates the subject from what s/he sees in the world, thereby constructing an unbridgeable gap, between the subject and the other.⁴¹ In this way, it would seem that Sanchez follows their position on vision by presupposing that vision objectifies and must ultimately be overcome to truly understand another person.

However, in following Merleau-Ponty's understanding of vision as a sense that connects rather than alienates, vision can be conceptualised differently. I investigate his account of the chiasmic structure of perception in relation to Irigaray's notion of vision as leading to loving connection, as opposed to Sartre and Lacan's respective accounts of vision as alienating. In this way, I understand the relationship between the bodies on the screen somewhat differently to that which the artist seems to be suggesting regarding their inability to 'see inside' or connect intimately with one another through vision. For, both Merleau-Ponty and Irigaray's accounts of vision, consider eyesight not as 'diseased', something that must be overcome, but rather as productive of equal and non-dominating relationships. Their respective arguments make a more nuanced understanding of vision in human relationships possible. What is important is that it is precisely because the viewer is drawn deeply into the work – visually – and may feel connected with the images on screen that the various

³⁹ Although I do not explore Sigmund Freud's position on sight in this chapter, his antivisual attitude is, of course, also relevant to this discussion. For example, in *The interpretation of dreams* (1965 [1900]: 317-318) he wrote: "During the night before my father's funeral, I had a dream of a printed notice, placard or poster – rather like the notices forbidding one to smoke in railway waiting rooms – on which appeared either 'You are requested to close the eyes', or 'you are requested to close an eye'". In his later works, Freud further develops his anti-ocular position by showing that the castration threat and penis envy are based in vision. It is in looking at the other sex that the oedipal situation is both initiated and resolved (Oliver 2001a: 58).

⁴⁰ Cf. Sartre's account of 'the look' in *Being and Nothingness* (1956) and Lacan's account of the formation of the subject under the gaze in *The four fundamental concepts of psychoanalysis* (1981). Their theoretical positions on the role of vision in the development of one's sense of self are explored further in this chapter.

⁴¹ Kelly Oliver (2001b:5) maintains that many contemporary "conceptions of identity and subjectivity" in both critical theory and poststructuralist theory continue to reflect this Hegelian notion of recognition, according to which we are subjects in a warring relation to objects and other people.

meanings of vision as it have been understood by Sartre, Lacan, Merleau-Ponty and Irigaray are all at work in our multilevel and embodied experiential encounter with *As inside as the eye can see*. The point is that, if reflected on, our experiences of art are meaningful and significant components in the analysis of art.

6.6.1 Jean-Paul Sartre: on vision and hostility

The fact that Sartre references ‘the look’ an estimated 7000 times in his writings leads Pallasmaa (2005: 20) to conclude that the philosopher’s ‘ocularphobia’ was undoubtedly intense. The short excursion I make here into Sartre’s complex ideas on the look will no doubt fall far short of the task of entirely clarifying the various nuances of his theoretical position and the intellectual trajectory of his philosophy. However, this brief summary of Sartre’s particular ideas that relate to *As inside as the eye can see* must suffice in order to show that Sanchez’s conception of vision as alienating and objectifying may be grounded in his negative notion of vision. For Sartre, self-consciousness, or subjectivity, is achieved through a struggle with another person based on our visual apprehension of them and, ultimately, the realisation of nothingness at our core.⁴² The objectifying look of the other which gives rise to the struggle between people is described by Sartre as “[...] the ‘medusa glance’ [which] ‘petrifies’ everything that it comes in contact with” (Kearney 1994: 63).

In *Being and nothingness* Sartre (1956 [1943]: 252-302) employs the example of a man in an empty park to demonstrate the ways in which he comes to understand himself in relation to another person who later enters the scene. Sartre (1956 [1943]: 254) describes a situation in which at first he is alone in a park, with no other person in sight. With the grass and benches in the park

⁴² Perhaps it is the ability of the gaze to convey interest or aversion that compelled Sartre’s interest in the hostile gaze of the other which moves the subject to ask: ‘how do you see me?’ For, if the eye in Sanchez’s work no longer sees the other clearly it would seem that the artist’s intention in moving the eyes so close together is to render the hostile gaze powerless. Now, the answer to the subject’s question ‘how do you see me?’ would be ‘I do not see you at all’.

opening up around him, he imagines that he is the centre of his visual field. From his position in the centre of this scene, the lines of his sight converge on him, and as Norman Bryson (1988: 88) puts it, he thinks of himself as “[...] master of its properties, sovereign surveyor of the scene”. Sartre (1956 [1943]: 254) then notices a man, who, along with the lawn and benches is at first nothing more than an object in Sartre’s visual field. At this stage he still believes himself to be the centre of his universe. But, as he realises that instead of being the absolute centre of the field he is looking at, he is an object in the other man’s visual field, he also realises that he – the ‘watcher’ – has indeed become the ‘watched’. As Bryson (1988: 89) explains, “[n]ow all the lines of force which had converged on the centre of the watcher’s lived horizon turn, reverse, and reconverge on the space of the intruder”. In other words, the viewer has become a “spectacle to another’s sight” (Bryson 1988: 89).⁴³

Sartre (1956 [1943]: 475) concludes that in our struggle for identity – or self-consciousness – each person is trying to “enslave the Other”. Kelly Oliver (2001a: 58) explains Sartre’s position in the following way:

I am imprisoned by the look of the other, yet through the look of the other I am aware of myself as a subject. The look of the Other turns me back on myself so that I can see the way in which I always escape myself; I see my possibilities. The look of the Other confronts me with the nothingness at the core of my being when I see myself as an object for the Other and realize that who I am is constituted in that look, and at the same time I refuse to be reduced to that look.

⁴³ Bryson (1988: 89-91) also uses the example of a Renaissance painting, Raphael’s *Marriage of the virgin* (*Sposalizio della Madonna*) (1504), to explain this reversal in terms of linear perspective. In one sense the architectural lines travel from the building toward the viewer who overlooks the scene from a privileged position. In another sense, however, the vanishing point, which can be regarded as “the negative counterpoint to the viewing position” (Bryson 1988: 89), is a kind of black hole that draws the viewer in, at the same time that it destroys the autonomy/mastery of the subject over the scene. “The self-possession of the viewing subject [...]” argues Bryson (1988: 91) “[...] has built into it, therefore, the principle of its own abolition: annihilation of the subject as centre is a condition of the very moment of the look”.

In other words, for Sartre, the progression, toward subjectivity is a struggle with the other whom I see looking at me. The look of the other is hostile and alienating for it sees me not as I see myself. Based in his extreme existentialist individualism, Sartre understands interpersonal encounters to be marked by conflict. When another person sees me, I am apparently reduced to an object in that person's perceptual field. In other words, for Sartre, interpersonal relations are reduced to mere perceptual encounters without taking into account the many other objective functions through which personal subjectivity is mediated.

Kim Atkins (2005: 89) explains that according to Sartre, the look of another person "[...] induces in me an acute awareness that I am something other than the centre of the whole world; I am an object in a world in which the Other's consciousness is the centre". In this conflictual account of intersubjective relations, the subject continually experiences the other person as hostile, rendering all relationships with others hostile encounters. As Marjorie Grene (1959: 24) has pointed out, in Sartre's analysis there is no trace of "original togetherness" (neither that of the maternal relationship nor a common humanity),⁴⁴ which is fundamental to later feminist accounts of the formation of self-consciousness such as that encountered in the work of Irigaray.⁴⁵ By contrast, Sartre's subject is unable to escape the "solitary inwardness" (Grene 1959: 24) to which it always must return. In Sanchez's comments on her video work she hints at a Sartrean notion of the hostile gaze. When I try to intimately see the other, I inevitably realize that s/he is seeing me thereby exposing me as a mere object. This is the reason I look away or close my eyes. Eventually the artist assumes that sight does not provide access to intimate connection between people and must, therefore, be overcome.

⁴⁴ The notion of a common humanity is expressed by the term *Mitsein* as used by Heidegger, amongst others.

⁴⁵ Cf. Irigaray's account of the *in uterine* relationship between mother and child in the chapter entitled 'The bodily encounter with the mother' in Margaret Whitford's, *The Irigaray reader* (1991). Irigaray (1991: 34-46) argues that the connection between the mother and child through the umbilical cord, and then later via the breast, has been overlooked in psychoanalytical theories which only regard the womb as a phallic threat.

6.6.2 Jacques Lacan: on vision, distance and alienation

The hostile relationship between self and others is also fore-grounded in Lacan's psychoanalysis but in a slightly different way to Sartre's account. According to Jay (1993: 330), Lacan was the foremost figure to lead the "critique of the visual constitution of subjectivity". Even when feminist critiques of his work, such as those lodged by Irigaray, focused on its gendered bias, the importance ascribed by Lacan to sight in the development toward self-consciousness was never completely rejected (Jay 1993: 331).⁴⁶ For Lacan (1977: 4) vision is central to the formation of identity because as human beings, apparently born prematurely, we are constantly reliant on visual images in the development of our motor co-ordination.

Vision and distance occupy central positions in Jacques Lacan's understanding of subject formation. According to Lacan, in ego formation, the mirror stage is the "threshold of the visible world" (Oliver 2001a: 58).⁴⁷ The mirror image acts for Lacan as the threshold between the outside world and the inner, psychic world. In other words, seeing the mirror image moves the infant's vision in the 'eye' to vision in the mind: "[...] from physical to psychic, from material to immaterial, from sensible to mental, from body to mind" (Oliver 2001a: 59) thereby facilitating the progression from 'eye' to 'I'. The visible image of the self in the mirror initiates an invisible psychic image, or *imago*, that leads to the establishment of self-consciousness (Oliver 2001a: 59). According to Lacan's formulation, there is always an inevitable gap between the subject and his/her reflected image since what the infant recognises about her/himself in the mirror amounts to 'misrecognition' of the wholeness that is suggested in the reflection.

Oliver (2001a: 59) critiques the Lacanian notion of the gap which is supposedly necessary for the construction of the infant's sense of him/herself in the mirror stage. For Oliver (2001a: 59) what gives rise to the progression from the

⁴⁶ Cf. Kaja Silverman's (1996, 2000 & 2009) critical engagement with Lacan.

⁴⁷ In Lacan's formulation, the child does not distinguish between the self and the world in any meaningful way before the mirror stage.

sensible image to the mental *imago* in Lacan's early formulation is a gap, or an empty space, “[...] between the body of the infant and its mirror image that opens up the space of visions or the inner world”. The gap between the infant and its image can never be overcome or bridged, according to Lacan, and is necessary in the development of the infant's sense of agency. For, apparently this sense of agency develops in relation to the mirror image “[...] which sets up the ideal ego” (Lacan 1977: 2; Oliver 2001a: 59). As a result of this “[...] discrepancy between the ideal and reality” the subject is forever left with “[...] an inevitable sense of alienation and frustration” (Oliver 2001a: 59). Oliver (2001a: 59) concludes that Lacan's imagining of a split between the self and the mirror leads to a split between the inner (psychic, mental) and outer (physical, sensible) worlds. In this way, although Lacan's theory attempts to “[...] reconnect with the mirror stage as threshold” (Oliver 2001a: 59), what is actually achieved is that a gap or an abyss is constructed between the subject and the object of his/her vision which, it is assumed, produces a sense of alienation.

In Lacan's later work, *The four fundamental concepts of psychoanalysis* (1981 [1973]), he reformulates his earlier notion of the mirror image as the basis upon which the infant experiences self-consciousness through alienation. In the chapter entitled, ‘The split between the eye and the gaze’ Lacan (1981 [1973]: 67) argues that subjectivity is determined socially by the gaze of the other. Reiterating Sartre's account of the objects in the world as manifestations of eyes looking at us, Lacan proposes the pre-existence of the gaze.⁴⁸ This gaze, which Lacan (1981 [1973]: 72) “[...] prefer[s] to call the seer's 'shoot' (*pousse*)”, is something “prior to [the] eye”, meaning that our “given-to-be-seen” (Lacan 1981 [1973]: 74) pre-exists our own seeing.⁴⁹ Thus, the role of the eye in

⁴⁸ However, Lacan (1981 [1973]: 84) points out that his concept of the gaze, although similar to Sartre's is also not quite the same. Whilst for Sartre (2005 [1943]: 96) the gaze of the other catches me in the act of looking, thereby reducing me to a feeling of shame, turning me into an object, for Lacan the gaze is not the look of another person, but instead pre-exists the subject's own seeing. Oliver (2001a: 61) explains that in Lacan's formulation “[...] the gaze belongs neither to the subject nor to the other, but to the field of the Other”, which means that the gaze functions in the realm of the Symbolic or Meaning (Lacan 1981 [1973]: 84).

⁴⁹ Whereas Sartre had used the example of an actual man in a park to explain the idea of the seer being seen, Lacan (1981 [1973]) uses the example of an impersonal sardine can floating out in the ocean. In his anecdote, a fisherman asks Lacan (1981 [1973]: 95) “You see that can?

subject formation is less crucial, for Lacan, than the role of the gaze, which crosses the real eye in the scopic field.⁵⁰

Although his previous contention (that vision results in alienation, hostility and aggression) remains intact in *The four fundamental concepts of psychoanalysis*, in this reworked argument on the gaze, Lacan acknowledges and further develops Merleau-Ponty's *The visible and the invisible* (1968 [1964]) which had been published shortly before Lacan wrote his text. In commenting on the pre-existence of a gaze, Lacan (1981 [1973]: 72) states that "I see only from one point, but in my existence I am looked at from all sides". In other words, the subject is always aware of her/his visibility, for "the world is all-seeing" (Lacan 1981 [1973]: 75). In this way, and in this later formulation, Lacan privileges the Symbolic in his notion of how the subject achieves self-recognition, not via the specular image of the Imaginary, but via the gaze of the world for "[...] we are beings who are looked at, in the spectacle of the world" (Lacan 1981 [1973]: 75).

Further than this, Lacan (1981 [1973]: 106) contends that within the scopic field we are in fact pictures. This is because the gaze is outside of this field and we are looked at like images. For Lacan (1981 [1973]: 106) then:

[w]hat determines me, at the most profound level, in the visible, is the gaze that is outside. It is through the gaze that I enter light and it is from the gaze that I receive its effects. Hence it comes about

"Do you see it? Well it doesn't see you!" Lacan is disturbed by this statement because he recognises that even inanimate objects always look back at the viewer. This is because, as Bryson (1988: 91) explains, the sardine can is a Signifier caught up in "[...] a network of meanings, in the same way that flotsam is caught in the net of a fisherman". We see, therefore, through the filters of socially and culturally constructed vision, what Lacan (1981 [1973]: 74) refers of as a *scotoma*, or a stain.

⁵⁰ One of the alternatives to geometrical perspective – the anamorphic image – also figures prominently in Lacan's approach to the gaze. Lacan interprets the anamorphic skull floating in the foreground of Hans Holbein's *The ambassadors* (1533) first as a phallic image, then as a skull and then as a trap for the gaze in which the observer sees her/himself seeing her/himself. In other words, the viewer realises that what s/he sees comes to her/him through a screen or a network of signifiers constructed in the social milieu. Cf. Daniel Collin's (1992) excellent interpretation of the implications of Lacan's inversion or reversal of classical geometrical perspectivalism for the de-centering of the self in experiences of art.

that the gaze is the instrument through which light is embodied and through which ... I am *photo-graphed*".⁵¹

In his theorisation of vision, Lacan also decentres Descartes' rational and objective subject, by showing that seeing is a socially constructed activity whereby "an entire sum of discourses" (Bryson 1988: 91) inhabit the space between the subject and the world. For Lacan, vision is never unmediated, but takes place through a "[...] screen of signs, a screen consisting of all the multiple discourses on vision built into the social arena" (Bryson 1998: 92).⁵² Regarded in this way, the subject looks at the object from somewhere, therefore at a distance from it, or as Bryson (1988: 100) puts it, "[t]he object [...] appears to the subject [...] at the end of a viewfinder". In this sense then, looking has come to be positioned as a form of power (as in Foucault 1970 & 1977b). As a result of Lacan's account of vision and the resulting assumptions about the alienating relationship between subjects and objects, the 'dilemma' of the gaze has become a crucial topic of investigation in visual culture studies.⁵³

According to Sartre and Lacan's philosophical and psychoanalytical perspectives, the formation of subjectivity, or how we conceive of ourselves, hinges, in large part at least, on our sight of the other across the space that allegedly separates us. But their limiting accounts of subjectivity in relation to the operation of looking, which may be echoed in *As inside as the eye can see*, is not the only way in which vision can be understood. As my earlier discussion of empathy theory in terms of how one may viscerally 'see' the video, human vision can surely also be understood as a way in which people connect with

⁵¹ The use of a photographic camera in this mechanical metaphor of vision suggests that the legacy of a picture theory of perception is still alive in Lacan and provides a base for his use (even if inverted) of perspective geometry.

⁵² Bryson (1988: 87) argues that although both Lacan and Sartre attempt to decentre the subject, in their respective accounts of *le regard*, "the Gaze" ultimately the subject remains at the centre of the visual field. In this respect Bryson (1988: 88) maintains that the Japanese philosopher, Kitarō Nishida and his student Keiji Nishitani after him extend Sartre and Lacan's ideas and more effectively displace the subject in the "expanded" field of śūnyatā or "blankness".

⁵³ As Mirzoeff (2009: 45) argues, the visual encounter with the other " [...] and its transformative effect on the self is the visual moment that matters to visual culture". More precisely, what follows from that encounter is, for Mirzoeff (2009: 45) at least, the very "substance of the field".

what they see. In Oliver's (2001a: 59) critique of both Sartre and Lacan's accounts of our sense of ourselves, she questions their assumption that vision "inaugurates an abyss" thereby necessarily resulting in "distance and separation". In other words, Oliver contends that in their particular notions of vision these theorists presuppose and perpetuate the assumption that vision distances and alienates. "This particular conception of vision [...]" she argues "[...] imagines space as essentially empty and objects (or subjects) in space as points separated by the distance between them" (Oliver 2001a: 57). Furthermore, for Oliver (2001a: 57), it is not so much that "[...] the *centrality* of vision gives rise to problematic conceptions of subjectivity [...]" as the fact that "[...] a particular conception of vision is problematic when it is presupposed by theories of subjectivity".⁵⁴ To my mind Sanchez perpetuates the notion that seeing another person results in alienation by presupposing that the looks exchanged by the people depicted on screen are hostile and distancing.

In the video work, when the eyes have reached the point at which they are touching, it could be suggested that they have overcome Sartre and Lacan's hostile and alienating gaze, as well as the ability to objectively contemplate each other. They are now 'blind' to each other, and in so doing, both become subjects in what may be regarded as a non-hierarchical relationship.⁵⁵ At this

⁵⁴ Oliver (2001b: 4) maintains that "some contemporary theories of subjectivity" most notably those put forward by Judith Butler and Derrida, for instance, understand the formation of subjectivity as "[...] a process of subordination and enslavement". According to their account of subjectivity, argues Oliver (2001b: 4), the "[...] oppression and domination at the heart of subjectivity" is manifested and repeated in social oppression and domination. Based in a neo-Hegelian position, in this sense subjectivity is regarded as a process of recognition whereby we come to understand ourselves in our sameness or difference from others. In contrast to the idea of subjectivity constructed through a warring, antagonistic relationship between myself and others or objects, Oliver (2001b: 5) maintains that subjectivity is intersubjective and dialogic, but "not necessarily antagonistic". Her point is that if subjectivity is understood as dialogic, "[...] in the rich sense of dialogue as response-ability" (Oliver 2001b: 5) then it need not be understood as based on antagonism. Furthermore, our sight of another person, and our awareness of their seeing us, is only one part of the dynamic process toward self-consciousness. For, we may be aware of being seen without actually seeing the one under whose gaze we are subjugated.

⁵⁵ There is probably no way to be sure whether or not their relationship is non-hierarchical at this point. To my mind the two bodies seem to be sharing a loving and non-hostile encounter in which neither eye dominates the other. However, if observed carefully, the eye on the right is always higher up than the eye on the left. From the perspective of a semiotic analysis, the elevated eye may suggest superiority. But this is not made clear and is up to the spectator to decide. Spectators who have commented on the work often also enquire as to the gender of the

proximity the power of the objectifying look may be refused. I would suggest that we could interpret this overcoming of vision and distance as necessary, to the artist at least, in establishing close, intimate, equal relationships between people. In other words, overcoming vision is, according to Sanchez, crucial to relationships that undermine the power of the alienating gaze. In my reading, the work suggests that equal relationships – or intimate understanding – cannot occur between people via the sense of sight which must be overcome.

This reading of the work is fortified by the fact that when the eyes are in that immensely intimate state, both subjects' eyes are often closed. At this point the spectator imagines there to be an erotic exchange occurring between the subjects. Following vision's alienating properties, in the mode of Sartre and Lacan, as inside as the physical eye can see is apparently not very deep at all. Therefore, it could be deduced that the artist is commenting on the insufficiency of sight in establishing or developing close human relationships. In this way, the artist might be attempting to subvert or challenge the hegemony of the eye in people's encounters with each other. The work could be read therefore as yet another example of the 'denigration' of vision described earlier. I propose that the assumption that seeing is in itself an obstacle to intimacy should be questioned. Or, put somewhat differently, surely we need not deny our 'seeing' selves in order to communicate with and have a close (and intimate) understanding of another person?

Presumably for Sanchez a solution to this predicament – of not being able to intimately 'see' or understand another person when we visually see them – is resolved on a metaphorical level through touch. For, at this point, instead of seeing one another, the two subjects are now (blindly) touching each other, via their entire bodies being in skin-to-skin proximity. We literally see the eyelashes touching, but we know that at this proximity it is more likely that their awareness of each other is through the 'other' senses: touch, smell and hearing. The suggestion made in the work is that the skin may be a more effective sense

two bodies. The artist, of course, does not let us know either way. For this reason, I assume that the two bodies relate to each other equally.

organ than the eye in facilitating close relationships. What seems to have occurred here is that the denigration of vision has led to the valorisation of touch.

6.7 Close your eyes

As has been pointed out in the preceding chapters, in the emerging discourse related to the sensory turn, sight has been denigrated by theorists who contend that vision has been privileged in Western philosophy, art history, the concept of aesthetics and in Western culture in general (cf. Bacci & Melcher 2011; Berleant 1991, 2003a, 2003b & 2013; Boshoff 2007; Diaconu 2006; Di Bello & Koureas 2010; Dumbadze 2010; Duncum 2005 & 2005; Halsall 2004, Howes 2005, James 2004; Jay 1993; Jones 2006; Lavin 1996; Levin 1993; Osborne 2005; Phillips 2005). Ocularcentrism, as Jay (1993) terms this tendency, privileges vision over the other senses thereby effectively modelling “[...] conceptions of knowledge and rationality after it” (Van de Vall 2005: 37).

In this section I want to explore the suggestion that touch may be the more effective sense than sight in enabling close experiences and intimate relationships between people. The South African artist, writer and academic, Willem Boshoff (1997: 40) holds the sense of touch in higher regard than the sense of sight, arguing that “[...] touch provides for a more intimate sensory experience than sight”. Presumably, this argument is rooted in the notion that distance is required for clear sight which also produces a (alienating) gap between a subject and an other. For Boshoff (1997: 40) argues that “[...] touch eliminates distance whereas sight enforces it, touch is committed to an immediate encounter whereas sight is illusionary and superficial”.

In a similar way, Pallasmaa (2005: 10) argues that while vision has been the dominant sense in understanding human experience, the modality of touch has been suppressed. For Pallasmaa (2005: 46) this situation is problematic

precisely because “[...] touch is the sense of nearness, intimacy and affection”. Whereas “[...] the eye is the organ of distance and separation [...]” lived experience, he argues, “[...] is moulded by hapticity and peripheral unfocused vision” (Pallasmaa 2005: 46). Furthermore, Pallasmaa contends that touch is the sense that holds all the others together, since it is through the skin tissues that the eyes, the nose, the tongue and the ear are instrumentalised. “Our contact with the world [...]” he argues “[...] takes place at the boundary lines of the self through specialised parts of our enveloping membrane” (Pallasmaa 2005: 46).⁵⁶ Both Boshoff and Pallasmaa’s arguments reflect Levinas’ position on touch which he regards to be the sense that does not presuppose subjects dominating objects as is the case with the accounts of vision discussed earlier.⁵⁷ For Levinas the sense of touch is distinct from the sense of sight which he regards as a limiting sense and which, he suggests, ought to be replaced by touch.

6.7.1 Emmanuel Levinas: touching the other

Although Levinas’ position on vision and touch would usefully expand the argument I am making here, this is not the place to do so. My reason for very briefly delving into some of his ideas is only to give support to my contention that the philosophical and artistic denigration of vision has led to, what I find to be, an unnecessary valorisation of touch. Thus, my discussion of a few of Levinas’ key ideas here is necessarily concise.

Jewish hostility towards graven images – iconoclasm – had a substantial impact on the denigration of vision that arose in French academic circles in the later

⁵⁶ Similarly the anthropologist, Ashley Montagu (1986: 3) argues that the skin “[...] is the oldest and the most sensitive of our organs, our first medium of communication, and our most efficient protector [...]. Even the transparent cornea of the eye is overlain by a layer of modified skin [...]. Touch is the parent of our eyes, ears, nose, and mouth. It is the sense that became differentiated into the others, a fact that seems to be recognised in the age-old evaluation of touch as ‘mother of the senses’”.

⁵⁷ Influenced by Husserl and Heidegger (whose positions he both extended and rejected) Levinas developed an ethical critique of totalising philosophies (Hand 1989: v) based on his call to recognise one’s infinite responsibility to others.

decades of the twentieth century.⁵⁸ Being Jewish may indeed have had a great impact on Levinas' "special preoccupation with visual issues" (Jay 1993: 550).⁵⁹ For in his writing, which consistently dealt with ethics, Levinas linked ethics with the "[...] Hebraic taboo on visual representation and contrasted it again and again to the Hellenic fetish of sight, intelligible form, and luminosity" (Jay 1993: 555). According to Levinas (1969: 130), vision is the root of the problem in society in that "[t]he 'turning' of the constituted into a condition is accomplished as soon as I open my eyes: I but open my eyes and already enjoy the spectacle". Thus, for Levinas the eyes must be kept shut in order to deeply care for another person. In this way, the violent "[...] avidity of the gaze can be thwarted" (Levinas 1969: 50) and its objectifying potential overcome.

Levinas' views on the objectifying potential of vision may place his writing in the camp of those twentieth-century French theorists whom Jay (1993) has argued denigrated vision. And Jay has indeed included Levinas in his text. Hagi Kenaan (2013), however, maintains that despite his apparent suspicion of the visual, Levinas' grappling with the human face allows him to delve into the ethical dimension of the visual. In his enigmatic statement, 'ethics is an optics' which recurs throughout his writing Levinas connects the ethical and the optical. In this way, the face of the other inspires an obligation in me rather than alienating me. As Van de Vall (2008: 56) explains, "[...] it is the face – that is, something eminently visual – that expresses a transcendence that we cannot grasp". A face, in other words, may therefore both evoke and deny vision.

⁵⁸ In literature, it should be noted, Maurice Blanchot had already in 1932 denounced the clarity sought after in French prose (Jay 1993: 552).

⁵⁹ The relationship between Levinas' theories on vision and his own Jewish roots are noteworthy. As Jay (1993: 550) has noted, one of the conditions for the emergence of the powerful anti-ocular attitude of notable scholars in France in the 1970s and 1980s may have much to do with a wide-spread fascination with Judaism and in particular its iconoclasm occurring in intellectual circles at the same time. He points out that "[...] a new appreciation for the legacy of Judaism" emerged in the aftermath of the 1968 events as Jewish scholars rediscovered "the virtues of their heritage" (Jay 1993: 547). Noteworthy examples include Derrida, the poet Edmond Jabés, the psychoanalyst André Green and the secretary to Sartre, Pierre Victor. The Jewish roots of psychoanalysis were also championed at this time and made "a source of interest and pride" (Jay 1993: 548).

If pursued further, Levinas' account of the sight of another person's face would no doubt contribute to the way in which we could understand the visual exchange unfolding between the people in Sanchez's video. For Levinas (1989 [1946]: 83) suggests that our vulnerability shows through the skin covering our faces:

The proximity of the other is the face's meaning, and it means from the very start in a way that goes beyond those plastic forms which forever try to cover the face like a mask of their presence to perception. But always the face shows through these forms. Prior to any particular expression and beneath all particular expressions, which cover over and protect with an immediately adopted face or countenance, there is the nakedness and destitution of the expression as such, that is to say, extreme exposure, defencelessness, vulnerability itself.⁶⁰

In contrast to sight, which, according to the negative views of Sartre and Lacan, fosters objectification, alienation, domination and distance between people, Levinas approves of touch, which allows for "a more benign interaction" (Jay 1993: 557) to develop. Touch is a proximal sense that not only requires a more intimate relation to the world but apparently also allows people to understand each other as "neighbour[s]" (Jay 1993: 557). For Levinas, "[...] touch is more fundamental than the theoretical contemplation of a world of objects through the eyes" (Jay 1993: 558). But Levinas considers a particular kind of touch – the caress – paramount to ethical relationships.⁶¹ The caress, he argues, "[...] is a mode of a subject's being, where the subject who is in contact with another goes beyond this contact" (Levinas 1989 [1946]: 51). The caress is something beyond touch; it does not know what it seeks. But it is precisely this "[...] 'not knowing', this fundamental disorder" that is crucial (Levinas 1989 [1946]: 51). Levinas compares the caress to a game in which something is always slipping away, escaping us and yet at the same time facilitating the "opening [of] new

⁶⁰ In her excellent reflection not only on the power of looking at portraits, but also on the ethical implication of looking at faces, Van de Vall (2008: 57) draws on Levinas' philosophical ideas on vision which reminds one that looking at faces "[...]" differs profoundly from any other visual encounter".

⁶¹ Here the term ethics refers to a broad social and personal responsibility to others.

perspectives onto the ungraspable” (Levinas 1989: 51). Similar to Van de Vall’s (2008: 5) notion of “tasten” or “tastzin” which can be described as an uncertain searching movement, the caress Levinas refers to does not seek to possess, know or grasp the other, for these practices are synonymous with power.⁶²

Overall, according to Levinas, touch is the sense that provides access to a more intimate way of interaction and communication than that allowed by vision. Equally, Pallasmaa (2005: 13) would have us lose all optical focus in order to “[...] liberate the eye from its historical patriarchal domination”. To think of vision in this way is to understand vision as complicit in the formation of hierarchical relationships. But must we subscribe to the notion that vision is an alienating and dominating sense? Is it useful to denigrate vision in this way? For, most of us, at least, are seeing beings. Should we try to negate our eyesight? Do we need to overcome sight in order to relate to other people in ways that move beyond (visual) domination and/or submission? Or, alternatively, is it possible to understand vision in another way?

Oliver (2001a) does not disagree with the denigration of vision as it has been chronicled by Jay. She does, however, contend that what Jay overlooks in his account is that this denigration presupposes a particular notion of vision as an alienating and hostile sense “[...] that separates us from the world” (Oliver 2001a: 56). Therefore, argues Oliver (2001a: 57), the denigration evident in the accounts of particular philosophers is “[...] not of vision per se, but [of] a very particular notion of vision”. In their respective theories on vision, Sartre and Lacan “[...] effectively perpetuate alienating notions of vision by presupposing it in their criticisms” (Oliver 2001a: 57). Vision, however, can be (and has been) understood differently and in a more positive light.

⁶² Cf. footnote 25 above. Feminists such as Simone de Beauvoir initially found Levinas’ gendered account of the caress as problematic in so far as it reduced women to passive objects. But in the 1980s a more nuanced reading of his account found favour with Catherine Chalier and Irigaray in their theorisation of a feminist ethics (Jay 1993: 559).

6.8 Touching vision

In their respective arguments, Merleau-Ponty and Irigaray do not oppose vision but instead weave vision and touch together thereby providing an alternative understanding of sight as the sense that facilitates engagement between subjects. In this respect, a view which may also be present in Levinas' conception of an ethical optics,⁶³ Merleau-Ponty and Luce Irigaray's respective alternative models of vision and the relation between vision and touch allow me to suggest that a certain kind of vision may be at work in our encounter with *As inside as the eye can see* which produces intimacy and involvement. In different ways both their philosophies of vision understand subjects to be continually engaging in dialogue in a perceptual field.

6.8.1 Maurice Merleau-Ponty: on seeing as touching

Whilst the critiques of vision mentioned previously – including those offered by the 'eye-artists' associated with Dada, Surrealism and Russian constructivism, as well as the philosophy of Sartre, the psychoanalytic procedures of Lacan and in some respects, the ethically directed writings of Levinas – regard vision in negative terms, this is not the only way in which vision has been understood philosophically speaking. I have already delved into Merleau-Ponty's conception of embodied perception and engaged experience, through which he counters the notion of disembodied consciousness evident in the rationalist strain of Western philosophy as well as transcendental theories of subjectivity (Vasseleu 1998: 21). In Chapter 5 I discussed Merleau-Ponty's notion of reversibility by way of which he understands a perceiving subject to be simultaneously a perceived object. In other words, enveloped as we are in the world, we are at once perceiving and being perceived. For Merleau-Ponty, in this chiasmic relationship not only are our bodies simultaneously seeing and being seen, but also touching and being touched, active and passive, observer and observed,

⁶³ Cf. Van de Vall's application of Levinas' ideas in her engagement with Rembrandt van Rijn's *Self-portrait with the two circles* (c.1665-1669).

subject and object.⁶⁴ In this seeing/touching relationship one body does not master or dominate the other. What is more, the visible is as much reversible as the tactile (Merleau-Ponty 1968 [1964]: 134). If Merleau-Ponty's account of reversibility is considered in terms of the way in which the two people relate to one another in *As inside as the eye can see*, vision can more fruitfully be understood from the perspective of vision's interlacing, or intertwining with the world including objects and people.

In his account of reversibility, Merleau-Ponty (1968 [1964]: 134) ultimately fuses vision and touch, arguing that “[...] since the same body sees and touches, visible and tangible belong to the same world”. According to this vision-touch system, argues Oliver (2001a:70) “[...] the world is visible because it is tactile” and so “vision is dependent on tactility”. An important foundation for this system is recognition of the palpation of the eye on the “fabric of the world” (Merleau-Ponty 1968 [1964]: 132). For Merleau-Ponty (1968 [1964]: 133), the look “[...] envelops, palpates [and] espouses the visible things”. In other words, vision is “[...] the opening upon a tactile world” (Merleau-Ponty 1968 [1964]: 133).

Thinking of vision in this way is only possible if the world is recognised as tissue, *chair* or flesh which, according to Merleau-Ponty's formulation means that the world is fully tactile. However, this flesh is not matter, and it is neither material substance nor spiritual being. Merleau-Ponty (1968 [1964]: 139) prefers us to think about this flesh as an “element” in the sense of water, air, earth and fire, or as “[...] the concrete emblem of a general manner of being” (Merleau-Ponty 1968 [1964]: 147). Thus, our vision touches the flesh of the world and is therefore part of this world, not somehow looking in from the outside, as in the ‘Cartesian’ model. Describing vision in terms of corporeality, or “[...] in terms of thickness, corpuscles, tissues, grains, waves, channels, circuits, currents, embryos, and pregnancy [...] ”, Merleau-Ponty regards vision as “[...] the very corporeality out of which sensation, thought, and language are born” (Oliver 2001a:70). “Every visible [...]” he argues “[...] is cut out in the

⁶⁴ See my earlier discussion of the intertwining of subject and world in Chapter 5, section 5.2.2.

tangible, every tactile being somehow promised to visibility" (Merleau-Ponty 1968 [1964]: 134). This means that "[...] there is encroachment, infringement, not only between the touched and the touching, but also between the tangible and the visible, which is encrusted in it, as, conversely, the tangible itself is not a nothingness of visibility, is not without visual existence" (Merleau-Ponty 1968 [1964]: 134). In other words, vision both operates in a way similar to touch and interchangeably with touch.

According to Vasseleu (1998: 26), flesh is the "[...] prototypical structure of all subject-object relations" in Merleau-Ponty's conception of perception. Vision therefore occurs in the tactile flesh of the world. Although the tactile/visible world and the tactile/visible seer are like two maps meeting, they "do not merge into one" and "are not superposable" (Merleau-Ponty 1968 [1964]: 134). Thus, our vision within the fleshy world does not mean that we dissolve into the visible or merge with it. Rather, we are at the same time part of and separated from it, "[...] by all the thickness of the look and of the body" (Merleau-Ponty 1968 [1964]: 135). Merleau-Ponty 1968 [1964]: 135) develops this idea further arguing that:

this distance is not the contrary of this proximity, it is deeply consonant with it, it is synonymous with it. It is that the thickness of flesh between the seer and the thing is constitutive for the thing of its visibility as for the seer of his corporeity; it is not an obstacle between them, it is their means of communication.

This "[...] space without hiding places [...] is the in-itself par excellence" (Merleau-Ponty 1993 [1961]: 134). In other words, the space around me is at the same time part of my body. "Orientation, polarity, envelopment" in space exist in relation to my body (Merleau-Ponty 1993 [1961]: 134).⁶⁵

⁶⁵ Following Merleau-Ponty's conceptions of the close relation between vision and touch as well as his nuanced version of vision's tactility and palpation, it might even be useful to re-evaluate the contention that when Sanchez's two faces are too close together to see anything they are blind. Perhaps it is at this moment that the two people, seeing blurrily, similar to one's sight in peripheral vision, are indeed caressing the depths of the other. In this sense, vision has not

I propose therefore that, following Merleau-Ponty's notion of vision's fleshy immersion in the flesh of the world provides the means by which to counter the idea that vision is alienating and hostile, as in Sartre and Lacan's accounts. If vision is understood as embodied and tactile then vision surrounds us as it does the two bodies in Sanchez's video. For, we (and they) are not spectators looking into/onto the bodies of the people opposite us, but are intimately part of them, touching each other visually.

On Vasseleu's (1998: 35) reading of Merleau-Ponty, reversibility is coincident with a notion of a "pre-discursive intercorporeal participation" between people or, simply put the possibility of a "human communion". In one of his working notes dealing with the chiasm, Merleau-Ponty (1968 [1964]: 215) remarks that in the looks exchanged between two people "[...] there is not only a me-other rivalry, but a co-functioning. We function as one unique body". Contrary to Sartre's conception of the other's gaze reducing me to a mere object, at the core of which is my nothingness, Merleau-Ponty considers the two gazes to "[...] co-function as two identical organs of one unique body" (Vasseleu 1998: 35). In this sense, I am not reduced or alienated by the look of the other, whose looking at me is also constitutive of my looking at them. In contrast to Sartre, Merleau-Ponty (2002 [1945]: 420) argues that the other's gaze can only transform me into an object if "[...] both of us withdraw into the core of our thinking nature, if we both make ourselves into an inhuman gaze, if each of us feels his actions to be not taken up and understood as if they were an insect's". If, however, we both acknowledge the other's existence, a mutual dependence and a co-operation between two people looking at each other can arise. Importantly, in Merleau-Ponty's philosophy, while their vision envelops each other, they do not dissolve into other. Each is left in her/his place, each seemingly emanating from the visible with which and in which s/he participates (Merleau-Ponty 1968 [1964]: 130-131. In this sense, distance and proximity become complexly and simultaneously interwoven, in the same way as the visible and the tactile.

been overcome at all, but is contributing to the deeply intimate and reciprocal exchange taking place between the two people.

At this point I want to move from Merleau-Ponty's notion of tactile vision to Irigaray's account of visual touch. This shift in direction is useful because Irigaray both critiques what she considers to be Merleau-Ponty's reductive notion of personhood – specifically in terms of his non-gendered conception of (inter)subjectivity – and also builds on his account of the tactility of vision.

6.8.2 Luce Irigaray: on vision as connection

In *An ethics of sexual difference* (1993a) Irigaray is critical of Merleau-Ponty's notion of reversibility and intersubjectivity. Both Levinas and Irigaray have found Merleau-Ponty's reductive notion of alterity to be problematic. According to their critiques, in his formulation of flesh Merleau-Ponty ignores different subject positions informed by socio-cultural and historical contexts thereby homogenising difference. In other words, even though Merleau-Ponty posits a radically non-dualistic ontology, he does not make allowance for radically different modes of existence and for the irremediable difference of the other.

For Levinas, Merleau-Ponty excludes the ethical alterity of the other. His notion of the intersubjective reversibility of one hand touching the hand of another – as in a handshake – does not adequately account for the ethical relation between these two people who, in Levinas' (1998 [1974]) opinion, are not simply objects in the world, but "Otherwise than being". Levinas, therefore, contends that Merleau-Ponty's account of the relations between people cannot really give us insight into the affective movements or dimensions of another person since he collapses others into the self, both of whom are allegedly part of one unique body.⁶⁶

Although his position on alterity is perhaps not as radical as Levinas would hope for, Merleau-Ponty (2002 [1945]: 411) nevertheless appears to affirm difference by suggesting that:

⁶⁶ Cf. Jack Reynold's (2002) critical engagement with Merleau-Ponty's conception of alterity, and the claim that his is a philosophy of sameness.

[...] we have learned in individual perception not to conceive our perspective views as independent of each other; we know that they slip into each other and are brought together finally in the thing. In the same way we must learn to find the communication between one consciousness and another in one and the same world. In reality, the other is not shut up inside my perspective of the world, because this perspective itself has no definite limits, because it slips spontaneously into the other's, and because both are brought together in the one single world in which we all participate as anonymous subjects of perception.

In other words, although we do participate in an “interworld”, in which we are influenced by another and may try to understand the experience of another, we cannot fully comprehend the other’s point of view, for “[...] our situations cannot be superimposed on each other” (Merleau-Ponty 2002 [1945]: 415). Surely this means that Merleau-Ponty does indeed recognise the differences between people and their ever-changing points of view as we and they live through and experience the world?

Irigaray finds fault with Merleau-Ponty’s alleged reduction of vision to touch in his vision-touch system. Instead, Irigaray (1993a: 162) contends that the visible and the tactile are not the same and “[...] do not obey the same laws or rhythms of the flesh”. Accordingly, Irigaray maintains that vision and touch are not reducible to each other and the visible and the tangible cannot be situated in a chiasmus as Merleau-Ponty proposes. Although the visible may “need the tangible”, for Irigaray (1993a: 162) “this need is not reciprocal”.

However, despite her critique of Merleau-Ponty’s formulation, the affinities between Irigaray and Merleau-Ponty’s respective theses on vision are also obvious. On her reading of Irigaray, Oliver (2001a: 77) maintains that Irigaray’s theory on touch echoes rather than contradicts Merleau-Ponty’s and that her attack on the latter’s reduction of vision to touch may be overwrought. After all,

Merleau-Ponty does not reduce vision and touch to each other, but rather argues that they are interrelated, “[...] work[ing] together to produce sensations and perceptions” (Oliver 2001a: 77). Furthermore, in ‘Eye and mind’ Merleau-Ponty (1993 [1961]: 131) criticises Descartes’ modelling of vision after the sense of touch.⁶⁷ Therefore, it is doubtful that Merleau-Ponty entirely equates vision and touch or reduces the former to the latter. Certainly, he does not do so in the ‘Cartesian’ sense.

Like Merleau-Ponty, Irigaray’s theory of vision is founded on touch. She understands vision and touch not as two separate senses, and also not in hierarchical relationship to each other, but rather regards vision to be dependent on touch. In her suggestion that vision is founded on touch, Irigaray refuses the binary opposition between vision and touch constructed in the traditional understanding of vision as objective and touch as subjective sense (Vasseleu 1998: 12).⁶⁸ According to Vasseleu (1998: 12), in her exploration of the texture of light Irigaray’s formulation overcomes “[...] the distance and space for reflection and insight that [is presumed to] come [...] with vision through the mediation of light [...] as the sense of sight passes to the sense of touch”.

Light is an important element that makes vision possible. For Irigaray, the texture of light touches the eye, thereby implicating touching in seeing. Via this conception of a non-hierarchical relationship between vision and touch, “[...] it is possible to draw from Irigaray’s work a conception of vision that is open to or affected by the touch of light” (Vasseleu 1998: 12). In other words, if touch is implicated in vision, it is no longer possible to conceive of a supposedly autonomous and independent subject distanced from that which s/he sees – the object. If vision is at once also touching – or, more specifically, being touched –

⁶⁷ More specifically, Merleau-Ponty (1993 [1961]: 131) criticises the way in which in *Optics* Descartes finds a similarity between visual perception and the way in which a blind man discovers the world by means of feeling it with his cane. Arguing that the blind see with their hands, Descartes “[...] eliminates action at a distance and relieves us of that ubiquity which is the whole problem of perception” (Merleau-Ponty 1993 [1961]: 131).

⁶⁸ Refer to my previous argument in Chapter 3, section 3.3 regarding the notion of sight as the ‘ideal’ distance sense in contrast to the senses of taste, touch and smell considered to be proximal senses.

we are immediately connected to that which we see which is at the same time touching us. As Oliver (2001a: 66) explains, in Irigaray's formulation we see (and touch) others, just as we see (and touch) the spaces between us:

[...] the texture of vision is the result of an interweaving of elements both distinct and intimately connected in their sensuous contact. The texture of light is what is between us and other people in the world. We are both connected and made distinct by the texture of light that wraps us in the luxury and excesses of the world.

In this way, Irigaray's philosophy on vision rejects the notion (assumed by Sartre and Lacan as shown above) that the gaze is entirely hostile and alienating and rather suggests that the look can be a loving caress. This 'loving look' does not distinguish between subject and object in hierarchical or alienating fashion. And, importantly, it recognises the invisible in the visible and not as separate parts of the other. In this way, the 'look of love' brings subjects together not despite their difference, but owing to their difference. Moreover, Irigaray counters what she regards to be Merleau-Ponty's reduction of alterity to sameness. For, in her ontology of vision, Irigaray recognises the differences between people who meet and encounter each other.

In *I love to you: sketch of a possible felicity in history* (1996), Irigaray (1996: 104) maintains that it is the "[...] negative that enables me to go towards you". But this 'negative' should not be understood as having *negative* connotations. Instead, "[...] it is the negative in the sense of the phrases 'I cannot know you,' 'I cannot be you,' 'I will never master you,' that allows for relationships beyond domination, beyond recognition" (Oliver 2001: 64). This kind of non-objectifying relationship can be understood only through acknowledging that the space between Sanchez's bodies is not only full (of air and light) and touching (the subjects), but also necessary. Irigaray (1996: 149) explains that space brings bodies together as well as distances them: "I see you, I hear you, I perceive

you, I listen to you, I watch you, I am moved by you, astonished by you, I leave to breathe outside [...].

According to Irigaray (1996:104) what we do not see – in other words, the invisible – attracts us to one another:

I recognize you supposes that I cannot see right through you. You will never be entirely visible to me, but thanks to that, I respect you as different from me. What I do not see of you draws me toward you [...]. I go towards that which I shall not see but which attracts me.

Irigaray's loving look is, therefore, an alternative to the objectifying look constructed in former accounts of self-recognition, primarily cemented in the conflictual nature of a Hegelian master-slave dialectic of recognition. Understood as "a dynamic moving towards another" (Oliver 2001a: 71) this loving look can be applied to my reading of the looks exchanged, not only between Sanchez's two people, but also between ourselves as active participants in the exchange of looks taking place on-screen.

I propose that it is more useful to think about the two people in *As inside as the eye can see* seeing – and simultaneously not seeing – each other than to think in terms of touch needing to replace vision in order to allow a close, intimate relationship between them to emerge. After all, the kind of touching that is shown to us in the work – the touch of an eyelash on an eyeball – is not a pleasant experience, as I have already argued. This kind of touch is irritating and may partly be the reason they move away from each other. Would it not be more fruitful to allow the bodies to see (into) each other, without touching in this painful way? By this account, the bodies do not leave each other because they have encountered a painful interaction, but rather leave to breathe outside, in Irigaray's terms.

There is another way in which Irigaray's concept of seeing is useful in rethinking the relationship between the people in the video, who are now understood as different and equal. In *Forgetting of air in Martin Heidegger* (1999) Irigaray takes Heidegger to task for not acknowledging the necessity of air between subjects that makes being possible through nourishing and sustaining us. For Irigaray, the space between and around subjects is not empty because it is filled with air. Simply put, air is "[...] that which brings us together and separates us" (Irigaray 1996:148):

What unites us and leaves a space for us between us. In which we love each other but which also belongs to the earth. Air [is] the place to await one another in life, whether outside or inside. In which to breathe and contemplate what unites and divides us, what connects us to the universe and makes our solitude and our exchanges possible. [The element] of our own identity and our alliance.

Further than this, air is not 'nothing'. For Irigaray, air is 'full' because it is a material element. Thus, the abyss from within which the subject achieves self-recognition, in Hegelian terms, is not empty. So too, in the Lacanian formulation of the alienating gap that is part of vision, air has been forgotten. Rather, in Irigaray's conception of vision, it is precisely because the space within which bodies exist is full, that connection between them, rather than alienation, is possible.

This re-conception of vision as connection can usefully be applied to *As inside as the eye can see*. For now, the bodies moving away from each other and which focuses our attention on the white screen which alludes to the distance that has once more been reinstated between them need not be understood as necessarily implying their separation or alienation from each other. The movement of the bodies away from each other – thereby also allowing each to see the other clearly – need not lead to their return to the realm of the purported hostile gaze. To understand the gap between them in this way would be to

forget air in Irigaray's terms. According to Oliver (2001a: 68) remembering air, in Irigaray's understanding, means a conception of air as generative of "[...] life but without hierarchy, genealogy, domination, or ownership". Instead, vision understood as connection through the air that binds subjects to subjects and subjects to objects, as not reducing one to the other, as non-hierarchical and as acknowledging the invisible in the visible – that 'negative', or that which I cannot know of the other person – can surely then give rise to intimate relationships between fully sighted embodied human beings. In short, Irigaray's account of vision as the means of connection between people in spaces/places that are filled with all our differences, already suggests an ethical, responsive and responsible relation between subjects and objects.

Similarly, the alleged gap between a viewer and the images on screen simply does not exist. For, the space between a spectator and an image or work of art is full of air, in Irigaray's terms, and therefore, viewers are connected with the bodies on-screen, affected by them and meaningfully participating in both their material and immaterial and affective presence. This conception of vision does not propose either that touch ought to replace vision or that vision must be reduced to touch. Instead, it is a way in which to, once again, think about vision as connection and as the human experience of art as a dialogical engagement with material objects and images.

6.9 Conclusion

In this chapter I have tried to extend the phenomenologically-driven close description of a person's encounter with a video work by delving into some of the possible meanings that may unfold when the experience itself is analysed in a critically reflexive manner. In other words, by drawing attention to a full-bodied responder's experience of claustrophobia, irritation, disgust, connection, intimacy, shame, anxiety, comfort/discomfort, or simply being moved or feeling unsettled by the video not only led to an examination of their empathic

relationship with the images on screen, but also into an investigation of the various, perhaps paradoxical, modes of vision and visual touch occurring in that encounter. I have also argued that an embodied viewer's encounter with the video far exceeds the sense of sight only and is, more aptly, a sensuous bodily experience.

What became clear from this discussion is that, just as there are varieties of touching – for instance, gentle caresses or aggressive, painful touches – there are also varieties of seeing – such as clear and focussed or blurry and indistinct. One need neither reject nor valorise vision and touch, nor contrast them with each other. For, although vision and touch – in their various modes – are intimately entwined, they are, at the same time, also irreducible to each other. Through a reading of Irigaray and Merleau-Ponty sight can be thought of, not as the sense to be denigrated for its potential to give rise to alienation, domination, control and power, but rather as the sense by means of which we engage in the world meaningfully and ethically. In other words, it is neither necessary to overcome sight nor bridge a supposed gap between subjects and subjects/objects and the world. If vision is understood as a kind of touching that may enable ethical dialogue between subjects and their world then there is no need to become blind in order to access the world and others in a non-dominating way. Being-in-the-world through seeing and touching – through vision that touches and through touch that sees – means that sighted beings, if consciously aware of their responsibility in relation to others in this way, can understand themselves as perceiving and sensing beings participating in a dialogue with the world and with others.

If vision is acknowledged not as a distancing, alienating, hostile and objectifying sense, but rather as tactile, then surely modern visuality is not necessarily objectifying, distancing or controlling as anti-ocularcentric discourses presume it to be. Through an account of vision as engagement, it becomes possible to reimagine the nature of relationships between people. This means that the looks exchanged between people can be imagined as participatory, empathetic and

compassionate. And, if it is possible to re-imagine the relationships between people in this way, then surely it is also possible to understand the relationship between people and images – including art, film and environments – as bodily involved through the tactility of vision, a topic I explore further in Chapter 7.

CHAPTER 7

WRITTEN IN THE STARS: FULL BODIED ENGAGEMENT IN THE CELESTIAL REALM

[M]eaning is a demand to which I respond with my body.¹

In Chapter 6 I argued that our experiential encounter with a work of art, which can also be understood as an event or performance, gives rise to the unfolding of infinite meanings that are produced through a critical reflection on those experiences. In other words, by reflecting on the dialogical engagement between a responsive viewer and the material and affective qualities of the video work in its expanding and immersive environment, I investigated various ways in which our experiential encounter is both staged and creatively produced via our creative and playful interaction with Sanchez's *As inside as the eye can see*. I focussed in particular on two themes that may emerge in the encounter, namely, vision and touch.

In Chapter 7 I embark on a close description and critical reflection on a person's participative interaction with an installation which staged one's movements through, in and around both its various components as well as the environment in which it was exhibited. Once again, it is the relationship between vision and touch that emerges as a key theme in this encounter. The particular aim of this chapter is to further elaborate on the way in which a critical reflection on an encounter with a specific installation can be approached. To this end, I draw predominantly on French philosopher, Dufrenne's (1973 [1953]) notion of a 'phenomenology of aesthetic experience' as put forward in his book by the same name. In this text, Dufrenne examines aesthetic experience as an affective encounter, or a perceptual unity, that occurs between what he refers to as an 'aesthetic object' and a 'perceiving subject'. It is, thus, precisely his conception of the reciprocal relationship between subject and object that are

¹ Dufrenne (1973 [1953]: 336).

helpful in advancing a critical reflection on their dialogical engagement. In the following section the works are described only in order to ‘set the scene’ for the reader who did not experience them *in situ* and not to suggest anything else about them – such as their potential meanings – at this point.

7.1 Setting the scene

On entering Berco Wilsenach’s exhibition *Die blinde astronoom (The blind astronomer)* (2013), I immediately felt compelled to describe the works as ‘out of this world’.² Indeed, it would have been difficult not to describe the massive and intensely spectacular installation one first encountered, entitled *In die sterre geskryf II (Written in the stars II)* (2009) (Figure 29), in this way. For, the illuminated glass panels, mysteriously lit from within, contrasted with the large dark rooms in which they were exhibited. The result was that seven blue-green glass panels, each mapping a stellar constellation seemed to float surreally in the pitch-black room, their home in the Museum of African Design (MOAD) in Johannesburg, South Africa, in March 2013.

² For the purposes of clarity *Die blinde astronoom* exhibition (2013) was the culmination of a four-year project Wilsenach undertook with the support of the South African wine-making company, Spier. *In die sterre geskryf II* (2009) was exhibited at the Pretoria Art Museum, Pretoria, South Africa in 2009, at the Anton van Wouw House, Brooklyn, South Africa in 2012, and at *Circa on Jellicoe*, Rosebank, South Africa in 2013. The entire exhibition was exhibited at MOAD, Johannesburg, South Africa in March 2013 which is the exhibition that is investigated in this chapter. Some of the works from this exhibition were later exhibited in the Johannes Stegman Gallery in Bloemfontein, South Africa in July 2013.

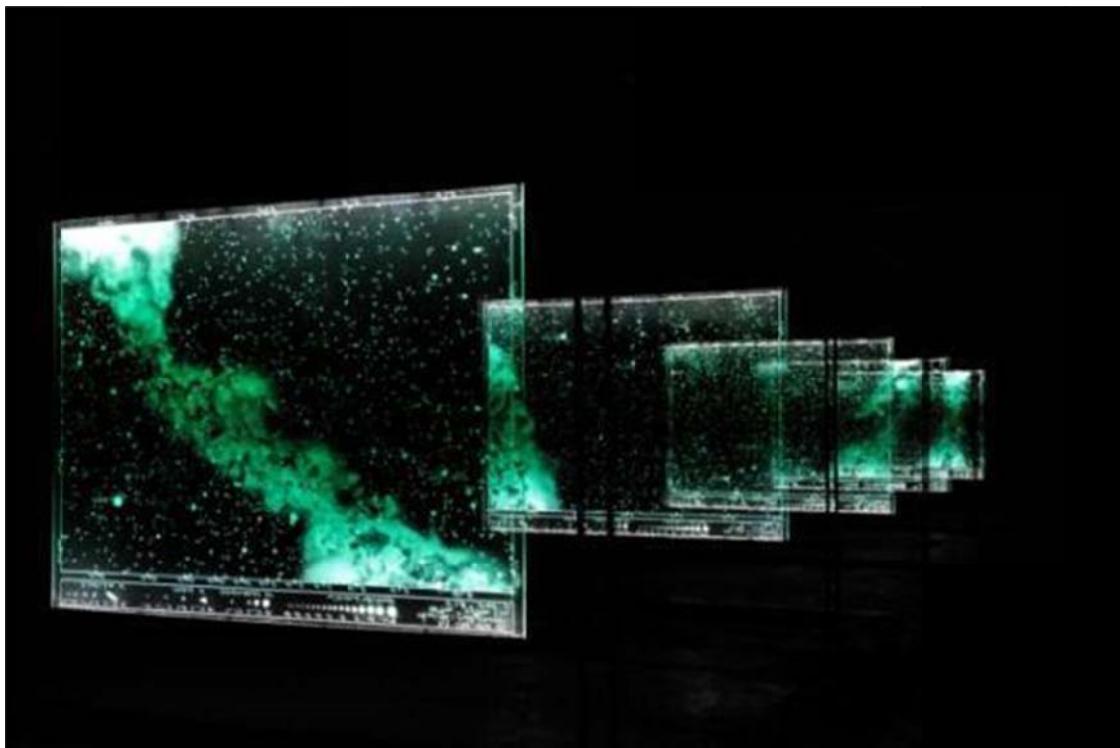


Figure 29: Berco Wilsenach, *In die sterre geskryf II* (*Written in the stars II*)
(2009)

A stellar map had been meticulously sandblasted onto each of the seven panels thereby rendering the universe both visible and tangible via circles and ellipses. The meanings of the symbols used on the map were made available to blind people in Afrikaans Braille, appearing (or more precisely emerging) in relief in a legend at the bottom. In other words, their meanings were not apparent to the sighted ‘viewer’. The blue-green glow that viewers observed emanating from the glass panels was produced by light emitting diode (LED) lights attached to the top and bottom of the frames. The sandblasted areas of glass trapped the light thereby producing the blue-green effect. The massive glass panels – each measuring 1,8m x 2,4m – were placed one behind the other which, when viewed from a point in the centre of the first panel, created the effect of deep receding ‘space’ (Figure 30).

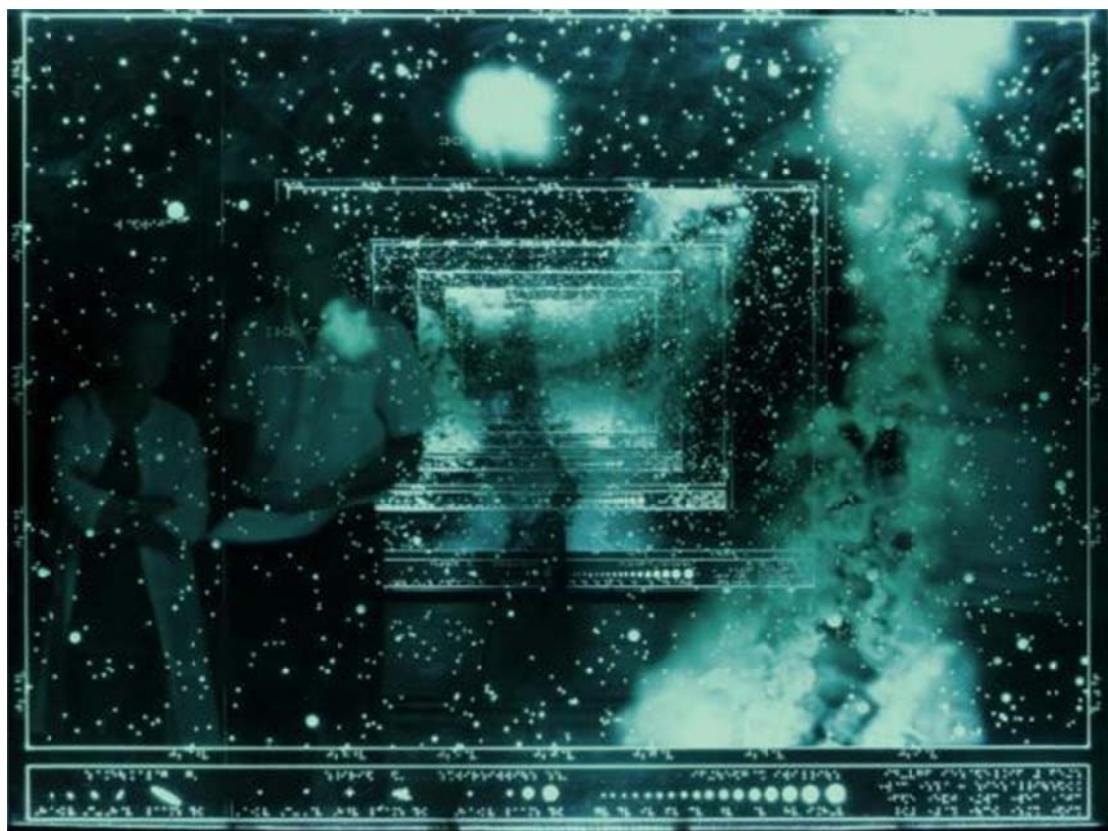


Figure 30: Berco Wilsenach, *In die sterre geskryf II* (*Written in the stars II*) (2010), Frontal view.

The second room housed one work on paper in the form of an over-sized book and two works in stone. The book, quite massive in relation to the human body, entitled *Sterre-atlas vir die blinde astronoom* (*Star chart for the blind astronomer*) (2013) (Figure 31), was teasingly illuminated by a single light in the otherwise dark room. Once again the information given in the book was only accessible to a blind person who could read Afrikaans Braille. The sighted viewer could touch but not clearly see the 88 constellations that were embossed onto its black pages (Figure 32).



Figure 31: Berco Wilsenach, *Sterre-atlas vir die blinde astronoom* (*Star chart for the blind astronomer*) (2013)

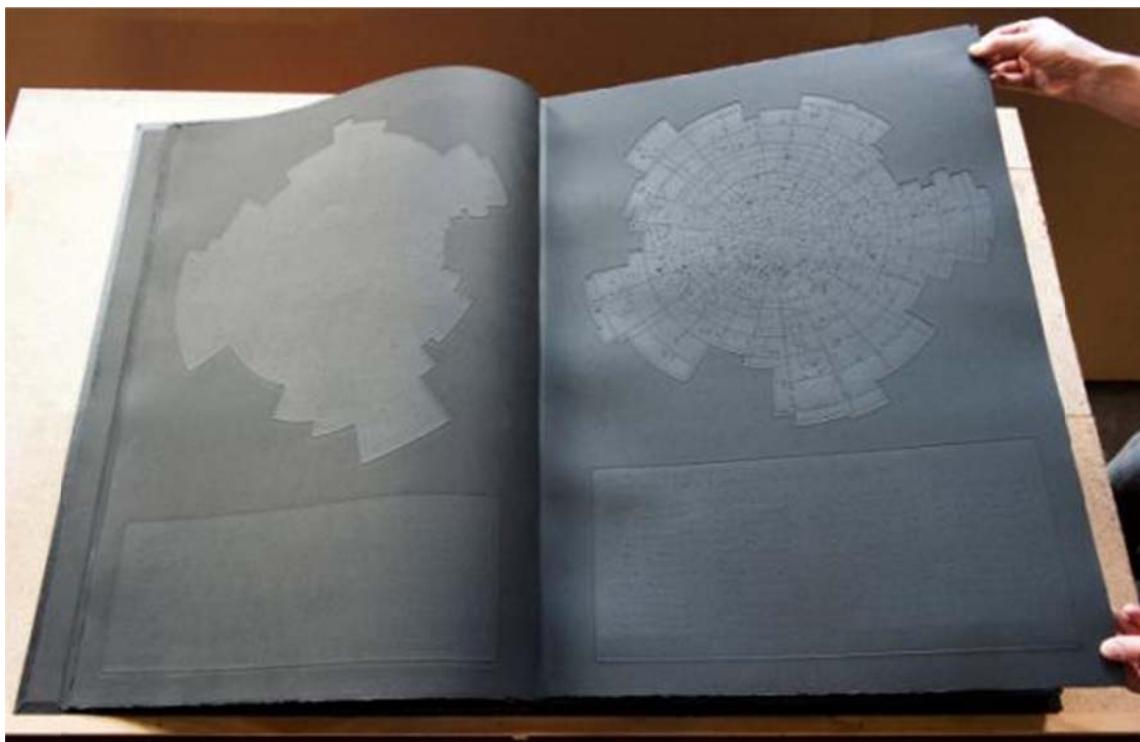


Figure 32: Berco Wilsenach, Close-up of *Sterre-atlas vir die blinde astronoom* (*Star chart for the blind astronomer*) (2013)

The other two works exhibited in this room, entitled *Sky survey* (Figure 33) and *Set in stone* (Figure 34) respectively, invited us to complete four huge stone puzzles. Comprising 103 movable pieces and mapping 88 constellations in total, *Sky survey* was made from sandstone cut according to a contemporary star chart representing the northern and southern hemispheres respectively, with the constellations precisely cut into the surface of the stone.



Figure 33: Berco Wilsenach, *Sky survey* (2013)

In contrast to the smooth finish of the stone in *Sky survey*, *Set in stone*, based on eighteenth century star maps, is texturally quite different. The rough edges and surface, punctuated with glass beads – representing stars – was produced by first chipping into and then baking sandstone. These pieces of the puzzle were neatly stored in two massive wooden chests of drawers (measuring 1,7m high) each with technical labels, which had little meaning for uninformed viewers (Figure 34 & Figure 35). Each piece could be taken out of the drawers and its position could be determined in the puzzle on the table, even though we could not understand its verbal description (Figure 36).



Figure 34: Berco Wilsenach, Close-up of *Set in stone* (2013)



Figure 35: Berco Wilsenach, Close-up of *Set in stone* (2013)



Figure 36: Berco Wilsenach, Close-up of *Set in stone* (2013)

The third room housed two installations in glass. *Night-time manoeuvres* (2013) (Figure 37) comprised two tables in which constellations representing the northern and southern hemispheres respectively were mapped on moving glass panels. Once again the constellations were sandblasted onto the glass, explained in Afrikaans Braille, and we felt compelled to touch them. The panels

could be shifted from side to side resulting in a layered effect which, when illuminated, produced the impression of depth.



Figure 37: Berco Wilsenach, *Night-time manoeuvres and Stereographic shift* (2013)

In the two circular glass panels suspended from the roof that make up *Stereographic shift* (2013) (Figure 37) the earth, seen from the North Pole on the one hand and from the South Pole on the other, is made flat. The anamorphic perspective that is produced in this way is a convention used in stellar maps. Here, however, the earth and not the night skies was represented with the solid continents given to us as ephemeral, intangible, transparent clouds.

In this exhibition, comprising six installations exhibited in three expansive dark rooms, we were invited to interact with the objects, owing to the fact that, in various ways, they drew us toward them, calling for our attention and inviting us

to respond to them. It is precisely our participation in the event – our feeling immersed in, our responses to, our interaction and our relationship with the installations – that must be further investigated in a critical reflection on that encounter. For, as I have already argued, meanings unfold in the experiential aesthetic event that takes place in a dialogical engagement or exchange between actively engaged participants and the material and affective qualities of art. Paradoxically, in these installations meaning unfolded at the very same time that meaning was intentionally withheld. In an extension of my previous argument in Chapter 6 I show that the affective and material human body, grounded in sensorimotor systems, is the very basis from which our experience of the installation emerged and from which exchange a meaningful event unfolded.

7.2 Corporeal intellection

I have already made it clear that my basic theoretical standpoint is that a person's embodied and engaged experience is the starting point from which investigations of art can productively proceed. In other words, by means of a predominantly phenomenological approach that describes aesthetic situations and encounters I have argued that direct experience does not simply contribute to, but rather has a "primacy" and "authority", to paraphrase Berleant (1970: 118), in investigations of art. Berleant (1970: 10) argues that what is needed is "[...] a careful examination of the nature of aesthetic experience itself" by closely examining the "[...] circumstances under which [...] aesthetic events occur". What is important here is that *direct* and immediate experience (at once also recognised as mediated) as opposed to cognitive or intellectual experience is under the spotlight of such observations.³ The following extract from Berleant's *The aesthetic field: a phenomenology of aesthetic experience* (1970: 119) helps me clarify what is meant by direct aesthetic experience:

³ Cf. my discussion of the immediacy of mediated experience in Chapter 6, section 6.5.

[...] experience, whatever the forms into which it may develop, is initially direct and uncategorized. When it is aesthetic, intuition takes one back before knowledge, before recognition. It makes one aware of the immediacy of experience and of the directness of one's response to it. That is why there is such a strong sensory factor in the experience of art. But when experience is given a cognitive turn, we move beyond the indiscriminate fullness of immediate experience to the selection of those data that will serve as evidence for sound and rational judgement, and on this evidence we construct arguments and perform inferences. Consequently, cognition leaves behind the living directness of sensory perception by using it as a means to conceptual conclusions and effective application. [...]. To force aesthetic experience into a cognitive mold results in mistreating a kind of direct qualitative experience that is characteristically nondiscursive and hence nonrational.

Berleant's emphasis on a person's immediate experience of art (understood as presentational, rather than representational) as opposed to a reflection on the meanings of a work is similar to the claims that have been made by contemporary, mainly (but not only) continental theorists, such as Boehm (1994), Hans-Ulrich Gumbrecht (2004), and Belting (2005) for whom 'meaning' only provides one part of the equation when dealing with images.⁴ As Moxey (2008: 132) notes, for these theorists, "[...] works of art are objects [...] more appropriately *encountered* than interpreted" [my italics, JL]. In other words, according to this interest in the *presence* of images, meaning is not already there waiting to be transcribed through semiotic, iconographic or ideological analysis, but issues from the exchange between people and what they see.

From my point of view, however, one need not favour the presence of art above that which the embodied responder brings to their encounter or meeting. In other words, this analysis of *Die blinde astronoom*, takes both "what comes to meet us" as well as "what we bring to that encounter" (Moxey 2008: 133) into consideration. Further than this, to my mind Berleant (1970: 119) is mistaken when he contends that "[...] when experience is given a cognitive turn, we move

⁴ In the Anglo-American sphere Mitchell (1994, 1996 & 2005a) would also be considered an exponent of this line of thinking.

beyond the indiscriminate fullness of immediate experience to the selection of those data [on which] we construct arguments and perform inferences". For, in this argument Berleant appears to uphold the abstract division between feeling and thinking with the former somehow progressing to the latter. Instead of considering that feeling and thinking might take place simultaneously, Berleant denies the possibility that feeling *is* thinking and that thinking is itself direct and immediate at the same time that feeling is mediated (by the body, the particular ambience of the situation, and so forth). My contention is that our direct responses to art must be reflected upon. But, this kind of reflection is not a semiotic, iconographical or discursive *interpretation* of the installations under discussion. Rather, critical reflection – "cognition" in Berleant's (1970: 119) terms – on an aesthetic encounter produces a richly textured, multilayered investigation of art without subjecting "direct qualitative experience" to a "cognitive mold". Dufrenne's (1973 [1953]: 337) concept of "corporeal intellection" is useful here, for it describes a kind of corporeal knowledge or thinking produced in and through the body.

For this reason, certain aspects from both Berleant and Dufrenne's notions of a phenomenology of aesthetic experience can usefully (but carefully) be co-ordinated or used in tandem to enrich a critical reflection on an encounter with *Die blinde astronoom*. In his concluding remarks to *The aesthetic field*, Berleant (1970: 190, 191) notes that his arguments throughout the text were "[...] a tentative indication of the shape of an aesthetics that emerges from a phenomenology of aesthetic experience" and that its ending should more accurately be considered a beginning. It seems that his thinking at that time was strongly aligned with Dufrenne's own phenomenological approach to aesthetic experience outlined in *The phenomenology of aesthetic experience* (1973 [1953]) published almost two decades before.⁵ Berleant's later text, *Art and engagement* (1991) reveals that, although he does not admit it directly, his

⁵ In *The aesthetic field* Berleant only makes one reference to Dufrenne and this is not to his book *The phenomenology of aesthetic experience*, but rather to a lecture Dufrenne gave at the University of Buffalo in 1960. It should also be noted that Dufrenne's book was only translated into English in 1973 and Berleant may not have read it by the time he wrote *The aesthetic field* in 1970.

interest in an “aesthetics of engagement” or a “participatory aesthetics”, as already discussed in Chapter 5, is strongly inflected by Dufrenne’s earlier text, although, as I have already pointed out, Berleant (1991: 89) separates himself from Dufrenne (amongst other phenomenologists) for his supposed emphasis on the perceiver of art, instead of the interaction and performance between the two.

But in a similar way to Berleant, Dufrenne understood the aesthetic mode of experience as concrete and corporeal (Casey 1973: xvi) as well as direct and immediate. According to Casey (1973: xvi), Dufrenne’s *Phenomenology of aesthetic experience* “[...] represents a return to that fundamental and most concrete level of human experience which the Greeks had called *aisthēsis*” by which sensuous experience is the point of departure for aesthetic experience.⁶ This means that both Dufrenne and Berleant’s attempts to understand aesthetics at the level of feeling and bodily perception are in some ways similar to the empiricist position on the matter of the involvement of direct sensory experience.⁷

The foundational inquiry undertaken by Dufrenne closely considers the meeting or joining of the aesthetic object and the perceiving subject in the in-between realm of aesthetic experience.⁸ It is precisely because Dufrenne (1973 [1953]: 228) articulates aesthetic experience in terms of reciprocity – what he refers to as the “reconciliation” – between an “aesthetic object” and a “perceiving subject” by exploring each unit of that “communion” both separately and together, that his paradigm proves useful, to some extent, for the investigation of Wilsenach’s exhibition undertaken here. Therefore, the theoretical framework of participatory aesthetics embedded in a phenomenological vocabulary, as I have already

⁶ See my earlier discussion of Aristotle’s notion of aesthetics in Chapter 4, section 4.5.2.

⁷ It is important to bear Berleant’s critique of the empiricist tradition in mind according to which the rational mind is still considered to judge sensory impressions thereby maintaining the rationalist dualism between a perceiver and the world.

⁸ In this sense, Dufrenne’s thinking appears closely aligned to Dewey’s (1934) approach to aesthetic experience. For, in *Art as experience*, Dewey (1934) argued that the exchange between a person and an ‘expressive object’ produces a dialectical experience which affects that person’s life. Furthermore, Dewey did not regard art to be a special kind of ‘spiritualised’ object, removed from everyday life, but completely bound up in the contemporary world.

been arguing in Chapters 5 and 6, allows me to explore the event that unfolds in-between Wilsenach's exhibition and the actively engaged recipient and responder at the moment of their meeting.

At the same time, however, I do not consider the frameworks mentioned above exclusively useful to the analysis of this exhibition. In other words, it is not my intention to neatly stitch together Dufrenne's phenomenological perspective on aesthetic experience with Berleant's participatory aesthetics and then to 'read' the artworks through that lens. Rather, in a manner similar to that proposed by Mitchell (1994 & 2005a) I allow the artworks themselves to open up the critical space in which questions can be asked of and in relation to them.⁹ For, I want to understand what these installation pieces – Mitchell's *pictures* in the broadest sense – want from us as actively engaged participants and responders. This means that I move beyond a phenomenological description of a person's encounter with the installations in order to critically reflect on what meanings arise from a person's bodily encounter with them in their expanding environment.

7.3 Mikel Dufrenne: *The phenomenology of aesthetic experience*

Recalling Dewey's (1934) earlier understanding of art as an experience, Dufrenne considers aesthetic experience to flow from the dialectical encounter between a sensuous 'aesthetic object' and our perception of that object. In other words, Dufrenne does not regard a viewer and art to be separate or autonomous entities, but rather suggests that each both calls for and depends on the other. In the same way, despite Berleant's insistence on distancing himself from phenomenologists such as Merleau-Ponty and Dufrenne, both of their ideas regarding the closely intertwined relationship between a self and the

⁹ In other words, my discussion begins from, in Moxey's (2008: 132) words, "[...] that which cannot be read, to that which exceeds the possibilities of a semiotic interpretation, to that which defies understanding on the basis of convention, and to that which we can never define".

world appear to figure strongly as foundational to Berleant's own thoughts on the matter.¹⁰

Three key areas structure Dufrenne's phenomenological approach to aesthetic experience, namely, 1) the so-called 'aesthetic object', 2) the so-called 'perceiving subject' and 3) the reconciliation between the two. In a manner very similar to Merleau-Ponty, Dufrenne's conception of perception is predicated on the physicality or embodied mode of being of a subject in the world. In fact, Dufrenne is openly sympathetic to Merleau-Ponty's ideas, and refers to *Phenomenology of perception* as the foundation of his own theory of aesthetic experience.

What is important for the research conducted here is that, whereas Merleau-Ponty investigates the phenomenology of perception mainly in general terms, Dufrenne's point of interest is the nature of *aesthetic* experience in particular, drawing extensively on a wide variety of examples of fine art. I have already pointed out that phenomenology appears to have been undervalued in socio-cultural and ideologically-driven analyses of art undertaken in the last decades of the twentieth century, at least in the Anglo-American traditions (Crowther 2009: 2; Freedberg 2007: 198). Although Merleau-Ponty and Heidegger have referred to art in their writing, Dufrenne's engagement with aesthetic experience in particular appears to have remained in the shadows of these thinkers. For this reason, a close (but admittedly restricted) analysis of his ideas is helpful for weaving together my own argument surrounding the ways in which the encounter between a responsive and attuned person and a sensuously present work of art may not only be described but also reflected upon.

However, some of the limitations of Dufrenne's thinking must also be pointed out. It is precisely Dufrenne's emphasis on the "point of view" (Casey 1973:

¹⁰ In Chapter 5 I pointed out that Berleant (1991: 89) separates himself from phenomenologists such as Dewey, Merleau-Ponty and Dufrenne all of whom he considers to unnecessarily over-emphasise the body of the perceiver instead of the interaction between a person and art in their accounts of aesthetic experience.

xxiii) of the human subject as the very foundation of his theory of aesthetic experience that Berleant (1991: 89) finds to be its main weakness.¹¹ In his thesis, however, Dufrenne also devotes a considerable amount of attention to the ‘aesthetic object’. In fact, as Hugh Silverman (1975: 463) points out, in the original French version, Dufrenne spends more than twice as many pages on the ‘aesthetic object’ than on the ‘perceiving subject’. According to Casey (1973: xxiii), this may be because an object “[...] is more accessible than aesthetic experience” and is therefore more easily described, at least from the phenomenological position.

Furthermore, Berleant (1991: 18) finds that although phenomenologists such as Dufrenne reject some elements of traditional aesthetics, overall many still assume other key features of that theory, including “[...] its psychologism, its concentration on the spectator, its essential passivity, its acceptance of the autonomy of the art object”. The matter of the autonomy Dufrenne ascribes to the art object, or rather the ‘aesthetic object’ is a tricky one, more easily addressed in the section devoted specifically to that concept below. For now, I will focus only on Berleant’s assumption that Dufrenne treats a spectator as the passive centre of aesthetic experience. In contrast to Berleant’s critique, however, Dufrenne (1973 [1953]: 56) notes that “[...] the witness [of an artwork] is not a pure spectator but an involved one – involved in the work itself”. In other words, far from considering a viewer of art to be a passive spectator, in this statement Dufrenne demonstrates that he does consider such a person to be actively involved in aesthetic experience. It should be remembered that Berleant’s own interest, as pointed out in Chapter 5, lies not in separating the subject from the object but in recognising the experiential engagement between the two such that “[...] every vestige of subjectivity disappears and the irreducible continuity of person and place becomes the fundamental term in grasping the meaning of environment” (Berleant 1991: 89). To some extent at least this does seem to be what Dufrenne is also arguing in his section devoted to the reconciliation of ‘perceiving subject’ and ‘aesthetic object’.

¹¹ It should be noted that Dufrenne’s interest lies less with the artist’s point of view than with that of the spectator who encounters it.

Despite its limitations, Dufrenne's thinking may have found some traction in Berleant's own writing, although it goes unacknowledged. On my reading, Dufrenne's separation of the 'aesthetic object' and 'perceiving subject' are productive ways in which to deepen our understanding of the event of aesthetic experience, for these two concepts are in any case understood to be closely intertwined, perhaps even interdependent throughout his writing. Therefore, Dufrenne's notions of 'aesthetic object', 'perceiving subject' and their reconciliation are closely and independently investigated in the following section, in the same manner undertaken by Dufrenne.

7.3.1 The 'aesthetic object'

According to Dufrenne, the concept 'aesthetic object' is not the same as a work of art, which is only the foundation for the 'aesthetic object'. For Dufrenne, the work of art does not need to be experienced; it simply exists like any other object. An 'aesthetic object' emerges or comes into being once a subject has perceived it or experienced it as aesthetic. In other words, the work of art only becomes an 'aesthetic object' when it is perceived by a human being as such (Casey 1973: xxiv). The work of art is thus merely the foundation from which the 'aesthetic object' emerges.

Dufrenne formulates the aesthetic object in this way because, when a perceiving subject encounters a work of art s/he engages with or relates to it with the result that the work "metamorphos[es]" into an 'aesthetic object' as Casey (1973: xxiv) puts it. Dufrenne (1973 [1953]: lxv) explains this in the following way: "Aesthetic object and work of art are distinct in that aesthetic perception must be joined to the work of art in order for the aesthetic object to appear". In other words, aesthetic experience is a matter of a certain kind of attention we give to, or direct at, an object which is already shaped or governed by the expression of that particular object. The 'aesthetic object', which

Dufrenne (1973 [1953]: 425) describes as a “quasi-subject” (and to which I return later), thus draws our attention – or directs it – in a particular way.

On my reading, Dufrenne does not suggest that art necessarily contains some intrinsic and universal aesthetic value before it is perceived in an aesthetic way. In other words, it is only once an object is perceived as aesthetic that it is transformed into an ‘aesthetic object’. The problem is whether the kind of attention we give the work of art is considered to be a universal and disinterested response? For, an essentialist and universalising understanding of aesthetic experience is best avoided. But if regarded as bodily, corporeal and sensory, as I suggest the installations on *Die blinde astronoom* require of us and which Dufrenne to some extent may also allude to, aesthetic experience is conceived of in terms far from the disinterested, disembodied gaze of the modern ‘beholder’ of art.

In this sense, aesthetic experience is understood as ‘corpotheetics’ in Christopher Pinney’s terms. Arguing that conventional aesthetics “anaesthetises” experience, Pinney (2008) proposes that ‘corpotheetics’ might be a more useful way in which to approach and explore a person’s encounters with images. What is important is that Pinney is interested not in art as such but in people’s engagements with different kinds of images and objects. More specifically, he explores the role of images in the practice of popular Hinduism describing how chromolithographs portraying Gods are transformed into powerful deities through a process of “bodily empowerment” (Pinney 2008: 420). The process includes the devotee gazing fixedly at the image – a process which can be described as the “locking in” (Pinney 2008: 420) of vision – combined with a range of bodily performances that are enacted in front of the image. This includes breaking coconuts, lighting incense sticks, folding hands, shaking bells and saying mantras (Pinney 2008: 420). The mutual relationship between devotee and deity – of seeing the deity and being seen by it – is a very important part of this process. In fact, observes Diane Eck (qtd Pinney 2008: 240) this mutuality and “exchange of vision [...] lies at the heart of Hindu

worship". Since it is not only the "disembodied, unidirectional and disinterested vision" of Western practices that is involved in this process, but also vision understood as encompassing a "unified sensorium", the eye is, in the manner of Merleau-Ponty, "[...] best thought of as an organ of tactility, an organ that connects with others" in the practice of sensory, corporeal aesthetics, or "corporetics" (Pinney 2008: 420). The term, 'corporetics', is the opposite of 'aesthetics', which, argues Pinney (2008: 422), "is about the separation of the image and the beholder, and a 'disinterested' evaluation of images" at least in its modern formulation. For Pinney (2008: 422), therefore, corporetics "[...] entails a desire to fuse image and beholder".¹²

Following Pinney's argument, and reflecting on its relevance to the exhibition, I suggest that it was not so much that the beholder desired or wanted to fuse with the object as the object compelled the viewer to fuse with it. The installations drew us toward them and we may have responded or not. Either way, our experience was neither disinterested nor detached but active and participatory. But what is important to point out is that I align my thinking with Van de Vall (2003: 5) who claims "[...] a kind of *relative* autonomy for art [...]" . Van de Vall (2003: 5) regards art to be a "[...] meaning generating practice that at least partially works on its own terms". In other words, without assigning art any universalist or essentialist intrinsic value, we can claim that aesthetic experience is different from the experience we have with other (everyday) objects.

Dufrenne distinguishes between the way in which we experience art and objects in everyday life by referring to the sensuous character of objects. "Brute sensuousness" he argues, is what we encounter in daily life when we see an object which merely signifies, whilst "aesthetic sensuousness" is found in an expressive aesthetic object (Dufrenne 1973 [1953]: 137-138). Dufrenne

¹² Investigating specific image practices in the Indian village of Bhatisuda, Pinney (2008: 222) explains that the process whereby a viewer becomes part of what s/he is viewing is literally evident in the chromolithographs of Hindu deities that are placed in pieces of glass, which, in turn, are silvered to become a mirror. In this way, beholders literally become part of the space of the deity, as they see themselves looking at the god.

explains that when we experience a work of art we do not notice the material from which it is made. Rather, we experience the *character* of that material, such as the colours or the texture of the sculpted stone for example. This is what Dufrenne (1973 [1953]: 11) calls “the sensuous” [*le sensible*]. The material character of the work becomes ‘the sensuous’ when it is perceived aesthetically – or ‘corpothematically’, in Pinney’s terms. And, importantly, an object can only be perceived aesthetically if it is expressive. In other words, the aesthetic object appears from “a coalescence of sensuous elements” (Dufrenne 1973 [1953]: 13). Moreover, a work of art is brought into being “[...] only through its sensuous presence, which allows us to apprehend it as an aesthetic object” (Dufrenne 1973 [1953]: 44). In other words, aesthetic sensuousness is produced when a responsive and attuned person recognises the “irresistible and magnificent presence” (Dufrenne 1973 [1953]: 86) of the expressive ‘aesthetic object’.

An ‘aesthetic object’ is not a meaningless object; its meaning or “sense” [*sens*] is [...] “immanent in the sensuous, being its very organisation” (Dufrenne 1973 [1953]: 12). In other words, the meaning of an ‘aesthetic object’ does not point to a transcendent beyond, but exists entirely in its sensuous presence or immanence. Put somewhat differently, meaning is, therefore, anchored in the sensuous. Neither symbolic nor semantic, this meaning should be understood as an affective meaning. For this reason, Dufrenne appears to be concerned with articulating direct experiences and the potential meanings that unfold when a viewer meets an ‘aesthetic object’. This means that direct experience is the very basis of the investigation of that meeting without succumbing to some “cognitive mold” (Berleant 1970: 119) to assist in identifying or interpreting the meaning of ‘aesthetic objects’. As Casey (1973: xxvi) stresses, for Dufrenne meaning is inexhaustible “always existing in surplus”. Thus, the sensuous “[...] remains the necessary (but not sufficient) basis for the constitution of the aesthetic object” (Casey 1973: xxvi). Furthermore, according to Dufrenne (1973 [1953]: 336), meaning emanates just as much from the sensuous materiality of the object as it does from the body of the ‘perceiving subject’ arguing that “[...] meaning is a demand to which I respond with my body”.

Thinking about the installation works under discussion here can perhaps shed more light on Dufrenne's argument regarding the difference between the work of art and the 'aesthetic object' as well as Dufrenne's account of the immanence of meaning. Following Dufrenne (1973 [1953]: 15), the installation is a performance that occurs between a spectator who lends her/his attention to it and to its sensuous character.¹³ Wilsenach created the various components of the exhibition in his studio and put them together in the chosen location/s where they were 'performed' or presented. At this stage, lighting and setting were manipulated in order to evoke a particular viewing experience or aesthetic experience. But, only once the installation was experienced in its environment by a person who lent it an aesthetic gaze, did it become an aesthetic object on Dufrenne's (1973: 15) terms. After the exhibition, the components were dismantled and stored in the artist's studio, to once more be re-assembled and transformed into 'aesthetic objects' when exhibited in their next setting.

In this way, the sensuous presence of the 'aesthetic objects' mediated our experience of them. In their sensuous immediacy the works awakened the human sensorium as we – actively engaged responders – became physically involved in the installations. This awakening or 'tuning in' to the work took place through our tactile exploration of the glass panels in *In die sterre geskryf*, *Stereographic shift* and *Night-time manoeuvres*, by picking up the cold pieces of stone in *Set in stone*, by opening and closing the drawers of the cabinets and placing the stones in their allocated positions in *Sky survey*, and by turning the pages of *Sterre-atlas vir die blinde astronoom*. In all of our bodily interactions with the installations, and according to Dufrenne's account of the immanence of meaning in the sensuous materiality of the aesthetic object, meanings were already unfolding in those temporal encounters.

¹³ Dufrenne (1973 [1953]: 15) uses the example of the stage performance of an opera to make his point. But he also applies his theory to the plastic arts. "The painting and the statue" he argues "are still only signs waiting to blossom into a performance, the performance which the spectator himself will give by lending this object his attention, by allowing it to manifest the sensuous which slumbers within it as long as no look or gaze [*regard*] comes to awaken it" (Dufrenne 1973 [1953]: 15). In other words, the work of art only becomes an aesthetic object when it is recognised as such by "the proper gaze" (Dufrenne 1973 [1953]: 15).

It was both our kinaesthetic involvement as well as the particular ambience of the environment that enabled this sensory awakening. The large darkened rooms, the deep recesses of which remained unknown to some of us, lent the space a particularly sinister atmosphere. Sharply contrasting with the dark rooms, the lighting that illuminated the works – either from within or without – produced a strangely haunting mood. The darkness may even have instilled fear, or at least uncertainty amongst the participants. It certainly did not aid our effortless movement through the rooms; it may even have deliberately obstructed it. In this sense, darkness appeared to us to be fundamental to our interaction with the exhibition as a whole, as if we were strange imposters in the dark world in which blind people live. And it is precisely owing to our encounter with the dark that I now look more closely at Dufrenne’s useful account of the ‘perceiving subject’.

As has already become clear from the above discussion, the separation of aesthetic object and perceiving subject is arbitrary because the two components of aesthetic experience simply cannot be untangled from their dependence on the other. Once again, this demonstrates the close similarity between Berleant’s “participatory aesthetics” and Dufrenne’s phenomenology of aesthetic experience. In the next section, I pay closer attention to Dufrenne’s description of a person who encounters art only to momentarily disentangle the ‘perceiving subject’ from the ‘aesthetic object’ so as to immediately interweave them again thereafter.

7.3.2 The ‘perceiving subject’

For Dufrenne, the sensuous ‘aesthetic object’, as it was described above, is only completed, or is ‘performed’ (Dufrenne 1973 [1953]: 15) by a so-called ‘perceiving subject’. “The being of a sensuous thing,” he argues “is realised only in perception” (Dufrenne 1973 [1953]: 218). Because the aesthetic object is “[...]

completed only in the consciousness of the spectator" (Dufrenne 1973 [1953]: 204) the 'perceiving subject' is needed to realise the aesthetic object. Moreover, the human subject must become "actively engaged" (Casey 1973: xxviii) with the object. This may even result in the spectator losing her/himself in the work, or, as Dufrenne puts it, become 'bewitched' by it. "We must," he argues "[...] speak of an alienation of the subject in the object and perhaps even a bewitchment by it [...]. In short, the witness is not a pure spectator but an involved one" (Dufrenne 1973 [1953]: 56).¹⁴ An involved participant brings with her/him all their presuppositions with them to the aesthetic encounter or "aesthetic transaction" in Berleant's (1970: 88) terms.

The uncanny ghostliness surrounding *In die sterre geskryf II* and *Stereographic shift* was certainly unmistakeable – perhaps even palpable – with people describing the floating glass panels as awesome and irresistible. In this sense, participants in the visible installations were also immersed in the darkness surrounding them which was brought into stark contrast with the luminescence of the sculptural pieces to which we were drawn like moths to a flame. People who were responsive and actively engaged in the works – that is, open to the experiential possibilities facilitated by the works – did, to a greater or lesser extent, indeed become bewitched by and lost in the works, affected by their "irresistible and magnificent presence" as Dufrenne (1973 [1953]: 86) suggests is possible when encountering 'aesthetic objects'.

One should not forget that visitors to any exhibition are always a mixed bag of participants and it was, of course, no different with *Die blinde astronoom*. Visitors to the exhibition included people who had never seen Wilsenach's previous work and who did not know what to expect; admirers and friends of the artist who already had some idea of the artist's oeuvre; the sponsors – Spier –

¹⁴ Once again, I find in this statement a similarity with Berleant's (1991: 89) own contention that "[...] every vestige of subjectivity disappears and the irreducible continuity of person and place becomes the fundamental term in grasping the meaning of environment". In other words, both Dufrenne and Berleant appear to agree that in the "communion" or "transaction" taking place between a person and an environment and/or 'aesthetic object' the relationship is reciprocal and interdependent.

and their assistants such as the waiters, the photographers and reviewers, sound and lighting technicians; the business manager who may have been counting the attendees; and the researcher who has seen some of the pieces in progress, to name only a few possibilities. Some of those already mentioned above may also have been blind.¹⁵

These participants would all have had different expectations of the exhibition, and one could hardly speak of there being a collective experience among them. Not all aesthetic experiences are participatory in the same way. For, people will no doubt be aware and open to such participation to varying degrees. As Berleant (1991: 93) points out, the “web” of aesthetic experience is multidimensional. Therefore, not all visitors to *Die blinde astronoom* would have been open and responsive in the same way. While some participated in building the puzzles, for instance, others simply looked and moved on. In other words, there are varieties of aesthetic experience that transcend the limits of the so-called ‘appropriate’ aesthetic attitude or proper aesthetic response condoned by modern aesthetics. At the same time, however, each subject’s experience is not an individualised or isolated one. It is produced via the specific texture of the meeting of all these components – which are constitutive of our intersubjectivity – with the sensuous materiality of the aesthetic object in its immersive environment directing the performance. Thus aesthetic experience takes place within a complex web of factors that affect its nature.

Dufrenne (1973 [1953]: 333) sketches out three components or “successive moments” of the ‘perceiving subject’s’ aesthetic attention, which are no doubt useful abstractions, but unfortunately give the idea that these levels operate separately. Dufrenne separates primary, secondary and tertiary levels of experience which I find are more fruitfully understood as operating simultaneously and interdependently. The first is the level of *presence* in which the experience is direct and prereflective. Following Merleau-Ponty’s view in

¹⁵ At a later exhibition held in 2013 in Bloemfontein, South Africa a group of blind people were specifically brought to the exhibition. Unfortunately, during my visits there were no blind people in attendance.

Phenomenology of perception, Dufrenne (1973 [1953]: 337) maintains that the object does not present itself by way of separate images to the various senses after which the transcendent mind of the subject assembles the “scattered images”. Instead, he argues, “[...] the object that I perceive is revealed to my body insofar as my body is myself, a body permeated with soul and capable of experiencing the world” (Dufrenne 1973 [1953]: 337).

Moreover, objects do not exist for my thought only, “but for my [whole] body” (Dufrenne 1973 [1953]: 337). The tentative, searching touch of a blind person could, ironically, be a visible form of the kind of corporeal intellection that Dufrenne is describing here. But the sighted appreciator is also bodily involved in experiencing the installations, by touching the glass panels, the embossed book, assembling the puzzles, moving through the rooms and responding to the ambience of the environment. In other words, participants in the installations perceive through all their bodily senses and therefore via the whole body’s agency (Casey 1973: xxviii) which is in itself a way of knowing or understanding. For Dufrenne (1973 [1953]: 337) the body possesses its own “corporeal intellection”. Dufrenne (1973 [1953]: 337) puts it in the following way: “[...] as living and as mine, the body is itself capable of knowledge, and this fact represents a scandal only for those who consider the objective rather than the animated body”.

At his second level – that of representation and imagination – Dufrenne contends that perception tends to objectify in order to make sense of what we have been given via the senses. Although the imagination is at work at this level, it is not the centre of aesthetic experience for Dufrenne: “[t]he aesthetic object’s appearance is already fully articulate and eloquent” (Casey 1973: xxix) without the help of the responder’s imagination. For Dufrenne (1973 [1953]: 366) “[...] the genuine work of art spares us the expense of an exuberant imagination”. No doubt, his position attempts to avoid the importance accorded the imagination in Romantic and idealist accounts of aesthetic experience

(Casey 1973: xxiv). As pointed out earlier,¹⁶ however, the imagination is already at work on Dufrenne's first level, permeating all experience along with a person's intellect and memory of past experiences, attitudes and beliefs. In other words, in the moment that our bodies touch and move through the installation we are already full-bodied responders in the sense that our ideas and beliefs already infuse those initial experiences. As I argued previously, and following Berleant (1991: 48), our direct sensory experience is "subtly infused" by the meanings and attitudes that have become part of our psyche through a process of acculturation and which contribute to our awareness in a particular situation.

At Dufrenne's third level the 'aesthetic object' becomes accessible through reflection and feeling.¹⁷ For Dufrenne feeling allows "the depth of the perceiving subject" to respond to the "depth of the aesthetic object" (Casey 1973: xxix). The response, however, is not only an emotional one. Rather, it emerges from the experience of the "[...] singular affective quality characterising the expressed world" (Casey 1973: xxix) of the aesthetic object. On Dufrenne's terms, at the height of aesthetic perception, we "[...] connect with the aesthetic object's inherent expressiveness" (Casey 1973: xxix) through feeling. Feeling, and not the imagination, according to Dufrenne, plays a central role in shaping aesthetic experience. He contends that "[...] aesthetic experience culminates in feeling as the reading of expression" (Dufrenne 1973 [1953]: 437). In other words, feeling enables the spectator to 'read' the expression of the 'aesthetic object' and then to resonate with its expression. This is the *affective* aspect of the 'aesthetic

¹⁶ Specifically in Chapter 5, section 5.4.

¹⁷ Dufrenne (1973 [1953]: 441) explains that "[...] feeling is only a certain way of knowing an affective quality as the structure of an object, and it is disinterested in spite of the sort of participation which it presupposes". In other words, even though I may feel that something is tragic, that feeling in itself is not tragic. Or, when I experience the feeling of the desirable, that feeling is not in itself "a species of desire" (Dufrenne 1973 [1953]: 441). For Dufrenne (1973 [1953]: 442) "[...] affectivity is therefore not so much in the perceiving subject as in the perceived object". However, and very importantly, even though "[...] the affective exists in me only as the response to a certain structure in the object", that object is always for a subject and "[...] cannot be reduced to the kind of objectivity which is for no one" (Dufrenne 1973 [1953]: 442). In other words, the affective response in the subject occurs through a reciprocity between 'aesthetic object' and perceiver and is made possible through a 'sympathetic' or responsive opening up of the subject to the object (Dufrenne 1973 [1953]: 442).

object', which is the character of its being expressive and is as such confined to its sensuousness.

Feeling always arises within someone. In other words, feeling is personal, embodied and "[...] the expression of the depth of a human subject" (Casey 1973: xxx). And, since it is through feeling that the depth of the spectator "meets and matches" (Casey 1973: xxxi) the depth of the object, on Dufrenne's terms, a spectator is not an impassive onlooker. According to Casey (1973: xxxi) Dufrenne's theory of aesthetic experience differs from those which either place the artist too close to the artwork or the spectator too far from it. By contrast, it would appear that, although he does not expressly acknowledge such a link, empathy figures strongly in Dufrenne's account of the third level of aesthetic perception as the reciprocal relationship between a person and art. As I argued in Chapter 6, according to Esrock (2001 & 2010), viewers of art can temporarily merge with what they see, imaginatively responding to the event deep within their bodies. There appears to be a similarity therefore between the imaginative merging of viewer and art according to Esrock and Dufrenne's notion that a spectator is 'indirectly' involved in the work, although according to Dufrenne's understanding, this merging takes place "[...] not in person but by the proxy of feeling" (Casey 1973: xxxi). While Dufrenne considers such involvement through feeling to be indirect – and not imaginative – some varieties of empathy theory, as I argued in Chapter 6, would consider even imaginative involvement to be directly experienced in the body of the viewer. Of course, when it comes to *Die blinde astronoom* we were involved in person, that is, if we respond to the call the installations address to us.

7.3.3 Reconciliation of subject and object

According to Dufrenne, the sensuous aspect of the artwork is something shared by a human subject and an 'aesthetic object'. "The sensuous [...]," he argues "[...] is common both to the person who feels and to what is felt" (Dufrenne 1973

[1953]: 48). Feeling is thus the “nodal point” (Casey 1973: xxxi) at which subject and ‘aesthetic object’ merge leading to a “communion” (Dufrenne 1973 [1953]: 228) between spectator and object. In fact, Dufrenne (1973 [1953]: 425) regards the ‘aesthetic object’ to be a “quasi-subject” which achieves its “[...] expressive subjectivity only by the rigor and certainty of its objective being”. In other words, the aesthetic object functions as a kind of subject or consciousness with which we enter into a relationship. The relationship between an appreciative responder and an aesthetic object is a reciprocal one, whose possibility owes itself to the *a priori* dimension of the expressed world of the aesthetic object which is both characterised and constituted by its affective quality. Dufrenne (1973 [1953]: 446) maintains that “[...] an affective quality is an *a priori* when, expressed by the work, it is constitutive of the world of the aesthetic object”. “To be constitutive in this manner [...]” explains Casey (1973: xxxii) “[...] is to possess the status of an *a priori*, a ‘cosmological’ *a priori* serving to order an expressed world”. In using the notion of the affective *a priori* Dufrenne attempts to reconcile the object and subject of aesthetic experience.

Both ‘aesthetic object’ and ‘perceiving subject’ apparently possess such *a priori* affective categories and therefore the subject is able to both ‘apprehend’ and ‘comprehend’ the *a priori* structure of the world expressed by the aesthetic object. This means that the subject can understand the affective quality as a particular “*kind of quality*” (Casey 1973: xxxii) such as tragic, sublime and so forth. The spectator understands these qualities because they are “antecedently possessed and thus ‘virtual’, yet lucidly certain once awakened” (Casey 1973: xxxii). This knowledge or understanding is itself *a priori* and therefore virtual. Casey (1973: xxxii) suggests that precisely because “virtual knowledge is in turn knowledge of the *a priori* in its objective, cosmological embodiments, there is an inner link between the subject and the content of his experience”. Dufrenne (1973 [1953]: 555) emphatically argues that humans and the world are united in being, stating that “[...] the existential and the cosmological are one”. The real is illuminated by art through feeling “[...] which delivers the real’s ‘affective essence’” (Dufrenne 1973 [1953]: 520). And, since it is precisely in the

sensuous that affective qualities are immanent, the affective (feeling) is thus inseparable from the sensuous (perceiving) in aesthetic experience. Dufrenne (1973 [1953]: 542) puts it in the following way:

By allowing us to perceive an exemplary object whose whole reality consists in being sensuous, art invites us and trains us to read expression and to discover the atmosphere which is revealed only to feeling. Art makes us undergo the absolute experience of the affective".

A strange mixture of feelings is certainly evoked while in the presence of the installations. At the same time that one is amazed by the awesome spectacle one also has a curiously sublime experience of the transcendent, feeling overwhelmed, disorientated, fearful, threatened, anxious and confused. But these responses, according to Dufrenne's argument would be the same for all people. For, as I have shown above, the affective *a priori* is foundational to Dufrenne's account of aesthetic experience. "Only as aestheticized [...]" he argues "[...] can an affective quality become an *a priori*. For it is in the aesthetic universe alone that an object, determined and fixed by art, can be constituted by means of an affective quality" (Dufrenne 1973 [1953]: 439). In this argument, Dufrenne reveals his relatively modernist conception of aesthetic experience in that he supposes that the sensuousness of the 'aesthetic object' is something which will be 'met and matched' to paraphrase Casey (1973: xxxi), by a spectator. Although Dufrenne's attempts to understand aesthetic experience as active and involved, his narrow conception of aesthetic experience appears to remain, to some extent, universalist and essentialist.

It is, however, important to bear in mind that in *The notion of the a priori* (2009 [1966]) Dufrenne distances himself from the Kantian *a priori* in that, according to Kant's conception, a person understands experience via the *a priori* which remains entirely outside experience. For Dufrenne, the phenomenological *a priori* is given in experience, and moreover, is immanent in the body. In other words, for Dufrenne (2009 [1966]: 210) the *a priori* is subjective and revealed in the reciprocal relation, or affinity, between subject and world, arguing that "[...]

the world is for the subject, and the subject is for the world". He also criticises Kant and Husserl's conception of the *a priori* as universal and necessary.

According to Dufrenne's view on the perceptual unity between 'aesthetic object' and 'perceiving subject' the former evokes certain feelings in a person owing to its ability to evoke feelings which recall the object as it is in the empirical world. Thus, the constellations which float surreally in the darkened rooms evoke a range of feelings in us – from awestruck to fearful – in similar ways perhaps that the universe we see in the dark of the night would. Furthermore, this playing with fear and/or playing with danger leads the attuned participant to become newly aware of his/her place within the universe. A significant aspect of Dufrenne phenomenology concerns the way in which he distinguishes between this 'feeling' – through which perceptual unity with the work is realised – and emotion.¹⁸ "The emotion of fear [...]" he argues "[...] is not to be confused with the feeling of the horrible. It is, rather, a certain way of reacting in the face of the horrible when the horrible is taken as a characteristic of the world as it appears at the time, that is, a means of struggling within the world of the horrible" (Dufrenne 1973 [1953]: 378). Feeling, according to Dufrenne (1973 [1953]: 378), operates on a cognitive level - "[feeling] is knowledge" or it is "an instrument of knowledge" (Dufrenne 1973 [1953]: 137). If we accept that feeling is knowledge, then it stands to reason that the immediate sensuous perceptual unity between a person and an installation can be reflected on in order to become more critically aware of the meanings that transpire in that "communion" (Dufrenne 1973 [1953]: 228), "performance" (Dufrenne 1973 [1953]: 15, Jauss 1982: 21), "transaction" (Berleant 1970: 88) or "event" (Massumi 1995).

¹⁸ "We do not wish to confuse emotion and feeling, the moving and the expressive" he argues (Dufrenne 1973 [1953]: 136).

7.4 Starry-eyed

Whereas Dufrenne uses the terms ‘aesthetic object’ and ‘perceiving subject’ I shall rather use installation and actively engaged participant or responder as I find these to be less limiting descriptors for the concepts. For, as I have already argued, the active engagement between a person and art includes physical/biological, psychological, affective, imaginative, personal, social and cultural factors. We are not merely ‘perceiving spectators’ of Wilsenach’s exhibition but active participants in every way.

Furthermore, even though Dufrenne has little to say about the nature of the expanding environment in which the installations are experienced I explore the context in which the installations were encountered. For, the ambience of this context or situation infused the meanings that were evoked. Berleant’s (1991: 87 & 2003: 2) notions of “participatory” aesthetics and “aesthetic engagement” are useful concepts that allow for a broader conversation around a person’s embodied and active engagement with *Die blinde astronoom*. For, an actively engaged person meets the installation in the environment of the museum which is not neutral but entirely constitutive of our aesthetic experience. Thus, Berleant (1991: 15) considers the surroundings in which an active participant meets a work to contribute to the “complex patterns of reciprocity” or the “experiential continuity” that emerges. He maintains that “[...] the human body, occupying and moving through space, establishes relationships to its environment which are a function of its physiological activities” (Berleant 1970: 76).¹⁹ Precisely because we are “perceptual-motor being[s]-in-the-world”, our “total bodily perception and response to its environment” contributes

¹⁹ Berleant (1991: 58-59) notes a link between approaches in the psychology of perception, hermeneutics and relativity physics in the way in which the relationship between people and their world has recently been understood. The psychology of perception is increasingly coming to understand people’s perceptions of space not only, or primarily, in visual terms, but also in terms of how vestibular stimuli affect our experience of depth. Vestibular stimuli affect not only one’s sense of balance, but also one’s [...] auditory, tactile, olfactory, gustatory, and especially kinaesthetic sensations of movement and muscle tension” (Berleant 1991: 58). Gestalt theories and the approach of the transactional school to the psychology of perception are earlier examples of streams of thought that acknowledge the contribution of the human in the world we perceive.

significantly to our aesthetic experience (Berleant 1970: 76). This means that, far from being neutral surroundings, the rooms in the museum and our bodily relation to them are part of our imaginative interaction with the installations they housed. Berleant (1970: 47) describes the *aesthetic field* as “the total situation”, or the setting in which “the objects, activities, and experience of art occur”.²⁰

MOAD is a gritty, urban, space whose previous industrial uses had not been erased, or entirely masked.²¹ The exhibition was organised across three rooms, only one of which was entirely blacked out with material.²² The clean space of the first room jarringly contrasted with the spaces in which the other five works were housed which were glaringly industrial, rough and untidy. The graffiti on the walls of the room in which *Night-time manoeuvres* and *Stereographic shift* were displayed clashed with the meticulous and sophisticated finish of the works.

Spatial subjects and spatial objects meet in places simultaneously filled with human experiences. This means that we do not so much live or act in our environment as we are our environment and that the domain of human experience is “[...] the conscious body moving as part of a spatiotemporal environmental medium” (Berleant 1991: 103). In this way, space, “infused with memories and meanings” (Berleant 1991: 95) merges with the personal and affective. We were very aware of the past industrial uses of the building and its current state of what looked to be abandon and dereliction. We felt like

²⁰ The human being, as perceiving body, is an “[...] organic, conscious, social organism, an experiential node that is both the product and the generator of environmental forces” (Berleant 1991: 92). By environmental forces, Berleant (1991: 92) refers not only to “physical objects and conditions” but also to “somatic, cultural, psychological, and historical conditions”. Thus, the concept of space includes the many-layered invisible elements – including our feelings, perceptions, memories and so forth – that contribute to our understanding of a particular space/place and the objects within it. In this space/place the perceiving subject and the works of art are tightly woven.

²¹ Cf. my earlier discussion in Chapter 4, section 4.4.3 of the construction of the modern viewer of art alongside the emergence of modern galleries via what O’Doherty (1986) refers to as the production of the “white cube”.

²² The construction of this ‘black cube’ which housed *In die sterre geskryf II* was quite obviously an attempt to block out not only the rough character of the room which contrasted so strongly with the installations in the other rooms, but also daylight which would interfere with the effect.

intruders: had we come to the wrong place? All of these factors affected our somewhat ambivalent reactions to the exhibition.

Being actively, bodily present to the works on *Die blinde astronoom* means that our movement through its component parts, including the exhibition rooms, combined with our moods and perceptions affected our experience of the works. We were thus bodily present to the works on the exhibition which, in turn, affected us. For instance, moving from the bright daylight of the busy and somewhat decrepit environs outside into the pitch-black exhibition rooms was disorientating. I had to wait a few moments for my eyes to adjust to the darkness, during which time the panels began to shine like jewels. In other words, as my body adapted to the place, the brilliance of the glass pieces increased. In other words, I was immediately affected by the atmosphere of the magnitude of the glass sculptures.

The conscious body of the fully engaged perceiving subject became intertwined with the artworks which engaged us by staging our movements through its spaces. It was quite impossible to walk through each of the three rooms quickly or talk loudly as we did so. We felt compelled – obliged even – to whisper, move slowly, carefully and hesitantly, lest we say, do or feel something inappropriate to the *mise-en-scène* (Van de Vall 2008: 2). The works, therefore, staged an emotional and affective connection between us as actively engaged perceiving subjects and the various components of the works by guiding our movements around them.

As Pallasmaa (2005: 12) notes, in sculpture and installation work a complex process of movement takes place in which the “[...] entire bodily and mental constitution of the maker becomes the site of the work”. Moreover, as both the artist and the perceiving subject move through, in and around the installation, their peripheral vision becomes more dominant than their focussed vision in their experience of the work. Movement therefore activates a particular experiential dimension of the work. Whereas focussed vision is clear and

distinct (based on the viewer's distance from the object), the nature of blurred peripheral vision is that it envelops and enfolds the viewer (Pallasmaa 2005: 13). The dynamic and mobile interaction between the artwork and the audience is demonstrated quite effectively in Figures 33 & 37.

Owing to the nature and texture of the particular aesthetic ambience of the installed glass plates the installation pieces mediated our experience of them (Van de Vall 2003: 7), thereby leading to our perceptual proximity to them, even if initially we may have drawn back from them. The 'aesthetic object', according to Dufrenne (1973 [1953]: 146) is an intentional 'quasi-subject' in its own right:

The aesthetic object bears its meaning within itself and is a world unto itself. We can understand this kind of object only by remaining close to it and constantly coming back to it. Because it illuminates itself in this way, it is like a *for-itself*. Or rather, it is like a *for-itself* of the *in-itself*, that is, a taking up of the *in-itself* into the *for-itself*. The aesthetic object is luminous through its very opacity – not by receiving an alien light by which a world is outlined, but by making its own light spring from itself in the act of expression.

Glowing as they do, the illuminated glass installations on *Die blinde astronoom* go far to demonstrate what Dufrenne means. As 'quasi-subjects' the 'aesthetic objects' – the installations – express their subjectivity in that each is both an '*in-itself*' – a solid inanimate object – as well as a '*for-itself*' – an object for human consciousness, or *for us*.²³ The installations express themselves to us, inviting – demanding – that we take notice of them. This is because their expression 'shines' from within them and in this way, they mediate our interactions with them. It could be suggested that the installations are aware that they are asking conceptual questions and demand that we negotiate the particular conceptual difficulties they express.

Yet another way in which the works mediate our physical and embodied experience is through their ability to make us aware of the other people in the

²³ Here Dufrenne differs from Sartre's conception of the *in-itself* and *for-itself*. According to Sartre (1956 [1943]: 28) the notion of an *in-itself-for-itself* is impossible.

room/s. For, when looking at the works on glass, we cannot avoid seeing the people standing on the other side of the glass (Figure 30).²⁴ An important characteristic of the embodied and engaged subject is that we are not isolated individuals who experience these artworks separately from other people. In other words, our interaction with the other people in the room infused (and gave a particular texture to) our subjective – or rather intersubjective – positions in it.²⁵

For example, in the darkness of the opening night, like the blind, we groped our way from one room to the next, relying on the touch of others to guide us safely up and down invisible steps. Mediating our physical and embodied experience of them, our tactile, kinaesthetic and vestibular sensibilities were activated by the installations. Furthermore, through the transparent glass panels we were always aware of other people in the room/s. We watched closely to see what other people were doing. Were we allowed to touch these strangely fragile looking structures? We asked strangers how to move the sliding pieces of glass and where to place the stone constellations. In this way, our meaning-making experience was enhanced by the closeness of others and was mediated by our interaction with them.²⁶

The meanings that are associated with art arise through our direct experience with it and not from some disinterested or cognitive position from outside. When we engage with an artwork, as Berleant (1991: 194) puts it, “object, perception, and meaning coalesce”. In other words, the meanings we uncover are part of

²⁴ People's fascination with this was evident when they took photos of each other standing behind the panels in *Stereographic shift* as demonstrated in Figure 40.

²⁵ The term 'intersubjectivity' refers to the phenomenological understanding that I am a person who is fully inscribed into a context through the interaction between myself and others. This is the opposite of the Kantian subject who stands objectively, as an individual, removed from the world.

²⁶ Sometimes, the presence of other people was experienced as frustrating. This was the case when their shadowy silhouettes obstructed our view of the entire work. It was also fascinating to note how people engaged with the works on their own terms. I noticed several instances where people photographed each other standing behind the glass panels, with the effect that they seemed immersed in the constellations. I noticed the same narcissism at the 2013 Anish Kapoor exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney, Australia where people photographed themselves reflected in the metal surfaces. People were invited to upload their images to the museum's website, which produced a fascinating exhibition in itself.

the experience of what we see. Aesthetic experience takes place simultaneously at an affective, imaginative and cognitive level. In the next section, I attempt to articulate the layered meanings that were produced in my aesthetic engagement with *Die blinde astronoom* and my close observation of the ways in which other people interacted with the work.

7.5 Stargazing

If a subject is recognised in his/her full complexity as an integral part of perception, then it must be acknowledged that the “very nature of things” (Berleant 1991: 60) is changed by the encounter between a person and art.²⁷ When a person is considered to be an integral part of her/his perception “what is actually there” and “how it is perceived” are affected by how the world is known (Berleant 1991: 60). This means that, precisely because people seek out associations between what they encounter and what they already have stored in memory, meaning emerges through the interaction between people and the installations.

One of the conceptual dilemmas that arose in our experience of the installations, which we recognise as celestial maps, was that merely looking at them did not provide us with much information about the universe. For, via our full-bodied engagement with the six works on the exhibition, we quickly became aware of our ambiguous relation to the visual spectacle. With *In die sterre geskryf II* and *Night-time manoeuvres* sighted visitors saw and touched the mapping system – whose conventions we did not necessarily understand – at the same time that we saw the ‘real’ space of the universe represented. The map and the visual representation of space were therefore conjoined. Or put,

²⁷ In other words, if the entire body of the perceiver is regarded as taking part in experiencing objects the perceiver can be understood as an “actor” (Berleant 1991: 59). This means that the relationship between humans and the world is dynamic and joined. The human world, argues Berleant (1991: 60), is “[...] an inclusive perceptual field in which perceiver and object are conjoined in a dynamic spatiotemporal continuum”. This means far more than recognising that perceivers understand things, from outside, in different ways, with the physical world remaining “untouched” (Berleant 1991: 60).

somewhat differently, the map itself was overlaid on what it represents.²⁸ In order to understand what the maps meant, however, we had to join up with a blind person in the hope of making sense of the unfathomable celestial realm. Or perhaps the installations wanted the sighted to close their eyes and imagine drifting through the dark cosmos, (which is not space at all, but time).²⁹ In this sense, the visually extraordinary installations appeared, paradoxically, to be a critique of vision. For, these are not only maps to be looked at, but also to be touched (Figure 38).



Figure 38: Berco Wilsenach, Close-up of *In die sterre geskryf II* (2009)

Understood in phenomenological terms, space has no definite or precise boundaries. Moreover, for phenomenologists, space is neither “quantitative and

²⁸ It could be suggested that these installation are metapictures according to Mitchell's formulation of the concept. According to Mitchell (1994: 35) metapictures [...] refer to themselves or to other pictures [...] in that they [...] show what a picture is". Mitchell (1994: 57) observes that "[...] any picture that is used to reflect on the nature of pictures is a metapicture". In the sense then that the installations picture other pictures or representations, they are indeed metapictures, referring to something beyond themselves.

²⁹ Stellar space is not 'space' but time - if you look into the stars you are looking into the past. William Hershel was the first to understand space as time and the stars we see as ghosts.

mathematically measurable” nor “universal and homogenous” (Berleant 1991: 94). Instead, space is qualitatively inseparable from the unfolding temporal events that occur in it, and therefore also inseparable from human action. When we look at and touch the installations we are reminded of what we cannot see of the universe. Neither with the naked eye nor with the strongest telescopes are we able to see that mysterious dark matter which has determined the evolution of the universe and which is also fundamental to human existence (Scoville 2008: [s.p.]).³⁰ In other words, we were in effect in the presence of the brilliance of darkness, that which cannot be experienced or even imagined.

In many ways our experience of the installations in their dark surrounds brought us back to an awareness of our own physical and psychic bodies moving through its various components. This is because a space is not something that we enter into, but rather it is something that we are always already immersed in and part of. This phenomenological view treats space as an “intentional object related to the perceiving body” (Berleant 1991: 87). For instance, in opposition to a rationalist ‘Cartesian’ concept of universal and extended space, Heidegger (1971: 155-157) wrote that:

[...] space is not something that faces man. It is neither an external object nor an inner experience [...]. Spaces, and with them space as such – ‘space’ – are always provided for already within the stay of mortals. Spaces open up by the fact that they are let into the dwelling of man.

In other words, and on Heidegger’s terms, space is a mode of existence.

The overall effect of the exhibition was a peculiar mixture of proximity and distance: people felt at once immediately present and strangely removed from the constellations we saw and touched. While listening to people’s conversations about the works it became very clear to me that people found the

³⁰ What we see with a telescope is a mere four percent of what the universe is actually made up of. Scoville (2008: [s.p.]) explains that the most recent advances in astronomy, over the past decade or so, have begun to map that mysterious dark matter or ‘dark energy’ that cannot be seen.

works visually overwhelmingly, confusing and even disturbing. I observed a heated debate that erupted over the perception of depth in the constellations represented in *Night-time manoeuvres*. Apparently these glass panels, which slid over each other and which were at times mysteriously illuminated while at other times completely lost in darkness, made one person feel immersed in the universe, while another felt excluded or distanced. Both responses are, of course, equally valid and serve to illustrate the point that Dufrenne (1973 [1953]: 228) makes regarding feeling emanating from the union or “communion” of the presence of the ‘aesthetic object’ and the ‘perceiving subject’. “It is through our body [...]” he argues, “[...] through its vigilance and experience that we remain in touch with the object. But instead of anticipating action and trying to make the object submit to it, our body submits to the object, allowing itself to be moved by the object” (Dufrenne 1973 [1953]: 228). In other words, both responses emanate from the intertwining of a physical and psychic human body with art. In this case, “[...] the witness, without leaving his [or her] post in physical space, penetrates into the world of the work” (Dufrenne (1973 [1953]: 57). Dufrenne (1973 [1953]: 57) finds that the reciprocity between subject and object can be so close that the subject “penetrates into the work’s signification”. This occurs precisely because the subject “allows him[her]self to be won over and inhabited by the sensuous” (Dufrenne 1973 [1953]: 57). It was therefore, those participants willing to be ‘won over’ by the installations and allow it to lead them toward its multifarious meanings that engaged with it most deeply.

It would appear that at the very moment when the universes we both ‘felt’ and ‘saw’ seemed inaccessible to us, that we could indeed access something of it. For our experiential engagement with the works facilitated and articulated our experiential access to the possibility of multiple meanings. As sensory beings, both vision and touch – in their various modes, and in their ability to both distance and connect – opened up a plethora of experiential possibilities. Thus, the sensory ambiguity of these works was precisely the point at which the installations became experientially dynamic and interesting and relevant both in terms of Merleau-Ponty’s ideas regarding the tactile dimension of seeing the

physical world and Dufrenne's thesis on the affective quality of the aesthetic experience.

This strange ambiguity about the immeasurable universes we interacted with by holding them in our hands elicited several questions. Were the works pointing to the insufficiency of sight in experiencing the vastness of space? For, we certainly recognised our minuteness when in the presence of the extraordinarily illuminated universes. And at the same time, we hoped to gain some knowledge about what we were seeing, since, after all these were celestial maps.

7.6 'Starscaping'

Could the installations function as interrogations of the implications of ocularcentrism specifically in the Western scientific pursuit of gaining mastery over the universe through the production of stellar maps? For, if seeing is the sense *par excellence* that has facilitated our mastery over the earth, then mapping, aided by the invention of scopic instruments to further its objectives, must surely be one of its strongest allies. In their endeavour to know the world, early cartographers set it in ink on two-dimensional surfaces, supposedly from the detached vantage point of the objective (sighted) observer whose elitist 'language' – its scientific symbols or codes – provides us with a tamer (but also inaccessible) version of the unruly earth.

The Western desire to map the universe is a product of the scientific 'eye-minded' rationalism of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries which was, to a great extent, characterised by the desire to order and control the world by presenting it on a two-dimensional surface (Harley 1988: 277). For, as Harley (1988: 278) argues, maps are a kind of language not only in that they record and name specific features, but also in that they make political statements and function discursively. Perhaps Wilsenach's illegible maps, though scientifically

precise, lose their power not only over the universe but more importantly over the human imagination of it precisely because they cannot be read.

The occurrence of maps in art, whether prominently displayed or subtly suggested, is profoundly evident in Dutch paintings of the seventeenth century. Svetlana Alpers (1983: 119) describes the Dutch artists' fascination with maps and the resulting coincidence between mapping and picturing as stemming from "the mapping impulse" of that time and place.³¹ That 'impulse' had a great deal to do with the common notion at that time that knowledge could be both "gained and asserted through pictures" (Alpers 1983: 119).³²



Figure 39: Johannes Vermeer, *The astronomer* (1668)

³¹ The high occurrence of maps in Dutch paintings of the seventeenth century can be attributed to the fact that it was the Dutch who first seriously produced them as wall decorations (Alpers 1983: 120).

³² When maps appear in paintings we effectively see a representation of a representation. For maps are representations in their own right. This leads back to my earlier point that Wilsenach's maps both present and represent the universe.

Map-making is the explicit theme of two paintings by Johannes Vermeer, *The geographer* (c. 1668-69) and *The astronomer* (1668) (Figure 39).³³ Not only do both paintings demonstrate the *camera obscura* paradigm of subjectivity to great effect as Crary (1990: 45) finds, but a closer examination of these works demonstrates my contention that Wilsenach's installations critique and, to some extent, subvert the assumed production of accurate, unbiased scientific knowledge of the world via its representation on a map.

In Vermeer's paintings, on the one hand a geographer ponders over a nautical map while on the other an astronomer studies a celestial globe. Both men, absorbed in their activities, are located in dark rooms – presumably their studies based on the presence of the tables and books – into which light enters from a single window. Neither man looks directly out of the window into the exterior world, instead focussing on gathering knowledge about it from the representations before them – their maps and books. In other words, “[...] the exterior world is known not by direct sensory examination, but through a mental survey of its ‘clear and distinct’ representation within the room” (Crary 1990: 46). In Vermeer's paintings, Descartes *res extensa* (extended space) and *res cogitans* (reason) apparently remain locked apart from each other separated by the dark room – the *camera obscura* – within which “[...] an orderly projection of the world, of extended substance, is made available for inspection by the mind” (Crary 1990: 46). Moreover, the men symbolise the rationalist notion of an “autonomous individual ego” who possesses the “[...] capacity for intellectually mastering the infinite existence of bodies in space” (Crary 1990: 47).

By contrast, the embodied responder to Wilsenach's installations, although looking at the representations of the constellations in the dark rooms of the gallery, participates, via her/his multisensory body, mind and imagination in the

³³ Alpers (1983: 119) also describes Vermeer's earlier *Art of painting* (1666) as a “unique”, “ambitious” and “splendid” example of the picturing of maps in paintings. Not only is the map that is reproduced in Vermeer's painting unique owing to the distinctive attention the artist gave to its material quality such as the paper on which and the paint with which the land mass is reproduced, but it is also according to Alpers (1983: 121), the largest reproduction of a map in any of Vermeer's paintings.

construction of knowledge and meaning. This is clearly evident in Figures 30, 31, 33, 37 & 38 which show that the participants are obviously not the distanced intellectual ‘masters’ of the universe or the earth, as portrayed in Vermeer’s paintings, but unavoidably involved, and bodily immersed in the installations, even as they are, paradoxically, dealing with representations thereof. Thus, the installations comment on the actual astronomer’s distance from the universe s/he studies, by allowing our tactile interaction with the representation of that universe and, at the same time, denying our access to knowledge about it. As with all cartographic representations of the universe, these celestial maps always deny our access to it.

Cartography artificially schematises reality by measuring and dividing it. Foucault (1970: 74) argues that the seventeenth century was characterised by a desire to discover “[...] simple elements and their progressive combination; and at their centre they form a table on which knowledge is displayed contemporary with itself”. “The centre of knowledge, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries [...]” he argues “[...] is the *table*” (Foucault 1970: 75). The ‘Cartesian’-like tables employed in four of the six works on the exhibition could be regarded as alluding to such a centre of knowledge, with the ‘specimens’ in the wooden cabinets coherently ordered and labelled.³⁴

The installations on *Die blinde astronoom* could be interpreted as a reflection on and also a subversion of the nature of the Western scientific project of cartography, which sets out to pin down and tame not only the ‘unruly’ earth, but also the heavenly realm, by representing it. For star maps are classifying systems created by astronomers who set out to organise the night sky by locating astronomical objects such as stars, constellations and galaxies in the same way that early explorers set out to explore, map and master the new continents they discovered.³⁵ In so doing, as both the uneven and unpredictable

³⁴ See my earlier discussion in Chapter 2, section 2.3.1 of the classification of knowledge from the so-called objective vantage point of the scientist (Kromm 2010: 73).

³⁵ Although the stars have fascinated humans from various different cultures since time immemorial, the quest to map the stars that are invisible to the naked eye began accidentally when the Dutchman, Hans Lippershey looked at a church steeple through two spectacle lenses

earth and universe have been represented in two dimensional forms they have also been subjected to control, mastery and domination. In other words, it could be suggested that, by contrasting the visual with the tactile and the two-dimensional with the three-dimensional, the installations critique the attempt to scientifically visualise the heavens and to subject the universe to discipline through categorising and labelling it and constructing a particular representation of reality.³⁶ On various levels, the works counter the visuality imposed by the discursive scientific claim to truth by allowing our participation in ways that permit the experience of the sublime nature of the universe.³⁷

Maps, whether of the earth or the heavens, are meant to provide us with accurate details of our world and should lead us coherently and unambiguously through its spaces. But surely the ever-changing stars cannot be entirely measured and fixed in this way? For no scientist could claim to know all the components of the highly complex universe, parts of which still remain invisible, despite the current availability of highly sophisticated visualising technologies. It is precisely the inability of scientific discourse to communicate the invisible dimension of the universe that seems to be exposed by Wilsenach's blind astronomer whose absurd quest is to map the heavens.

he had made. The image of the steeple he saw appeared nearer and larger when the lenses were positioned at a certain distance from each other. Galileo developed Lippershey's lenses and applied them to astronomy instead of a church steeple. In so doing, he was the first person to see not only the phases of Venus but also the craters on the moon. Subsequently, from Kepler and Huygens to the more recent development of telescopes to map the universe, astronomers have been preoccupied with giving permanent form to that which lies beyond the capabilities of our inadequate vision. An example of this quest is the work of the international team of astronomers associated with the Cosmological Evolution Survey (COSMOS) Project who are attempting to map two square degrees of the universe. South African artist, Karel Nel's exhibition entitled, *Lost light* (2007), showed work generated from his involvement with the project as resident artist.

³⁶ By contrast, the seven overlapping constellations of *In die sterre geskryf II* and the overlapping sliding panels in *Night-time manoeuvres* produce a depth unmatched in traditional cartographic practice.

³⁷ It may be feasible to suggest that, as is the case in Karel Nel's work, the critique raised here is not only against the mapping of scientific conventions onto the ineffable skies, but also such mapping of mythological conventions in different cultural spheres (Maurice 2007: 13). For, in both attempts to decipher the unknowable heavens, the stars are ultimately colonised and contained.

The artist contrasts the sensory detachment of the scientist with the sensory immersion that characterises a blind person's everyday experience. By turning mapping against itself, Wilsenach reinstates the multisensorial body, not as centre of, but as participant in the world and as a generator of meaning. The instruments used in the quest for rendering the invisible visible – maps – are given to us here as tactile surfaces awaiting our touch, our somatic involvement.

In *In die sterre geskryf II* we see the universe as if through a bright green screen which renders the image similar to that which one might see through night vision goggles or other devices used in night-time military encounters, surveillance, security, and other visual technologies of law enforcement. The screens themselves remind the viewer of a flat computer screen, or a high-tech transparent digital touch-screen on which digital information and images are rapidly and readily accessed and moved around at will, allowing a user to plug in and download an infinite spectrum of information which is accepted as truthful. Owing to their resemblance to such high-tech digital information technologies, it could be suggested that the works compel us to accept their claim to accuracy and authority. Paradoxically, however, the meaning of the stars eludes us and we cannot understand what is shown. Even the blind audience, who presumably has the upper hand in our endeavour to understand the works, is denied access to the information. The screens are simply too large for a blind person to make sense of them; the immense size of the panels exceeds the two hand span required for blind people to read Braille (Wilsenach 2009). In this way, therefore, all the works continually forbid comprehension. For unlike land maps, whose conventions are generally well understood by the everyday user, people must already have a degree of specialised knowledge of astronomy in order to make sense of star maps.

Standing directly in front of the first panel in *In die sterre geskryf II*, one notices the depth that is produced by the seven panels having been placed one behind the other. And this sense of depth is increased when people populate the spaces in-between the panels (Figure30). The sense of depth is also

highlighted in *Night-time manoeuvres* as we slide the panels over each other. The endlessness of deep space, its multiplicity, complexity and limitlessness is highlighted. The remote is brought near, the distant is brought into proximity and that which is literally beyond our grasp, is made tangible.

Sight and touch become intimately acquainted in these installations. In our nearness to the universe, depicted both on glass panels and in stone (which are both essentially produced from the same material – sand) we are denied the view of the distanced, dispassionate, contemplative spectator. Here, we cannot look into the “unbounded depth of the universe” and contemplate the infinite which, according to Jonas (1954: 519) is so crucial to the “formation of our ideas” and “the essential ingredient in what we call ‘objectivity’”. Instead we relinquish our distance from the installations and immerse ourselves in the experience of the magnitude of the ineffable. When we engage with *Die blinde astronoom*, our eyes need a hand. Now our skin seeks out and tries to understand.

For, in our interaction with these installations, we experience the pieces aesthetically, not only through sight but also through the sense of touch and our bodily movement. If we are sighted, the touch we bring to the installations, however, is not the kind of touching we use in everyday life, which Driscoll (2011: 107) describes as overall “manipulative, functional, and largely unconscious”. In contrast, the kind of touch that informs our interaction with the pieces on the exhibition can be described as *aesthetic touch*, which is “[...] conscious [and] inquiring [...]” and which “[...] explores forms, materials, and spaces for their qualities, their effects, and their meanings” (Driscoll 2011: 107).

As has been argued in the preceding chapters, touch is the sense that not only involves the whole body but also brings the body in direct contact with the world/object. When we touch, we are reminded that “[...] we are bodies exploring other bodies and selves exploring other selves” (Driscoll 2011: 109). In this case, of course, it is heavenly bodies that we are exploring through

touch, and also human bodies seen through the transparent glass. Precisely because these installation pieces stimulate our senses of sight, touch and bodily movement they provide the opportunity to “forge intersensory connections” (Howes 2011: 174) that inform and shape our overall experience of them.

7.7 Blindsided

There is, however, more to the matter of perception than either Dufrenne’s (1973 [1953]: 228) notion of a “communion” between ‘aesthetic object’ and ‘perceiving subject’ or Berleant’s (1991: 18) notion of “perceptual unity” are able to address in the context of *Die blinde astronoom*. Although not strongly realised literally, the pieces are designed to be experienced, at least partly, by blind people. In other words, the aesthetic experience is meant to include the conjoined experience of a sighted and a blind person who would each assist the other in understanding the installations. This is at least deduced from the artist’s use of Braille on the visually spectacular pieces. However, a blind person’s experience of the installations cannot be adequately addressed by Dufrenne’s notion of ‘aesthetic object’ and ‘perceiving subject’ as I have discussed and applied them thus far. For the blind participant cannot perceive the artwork in the particular way that Dufrenne finds necessary in order for it to be transformed or perceived as an ‘aesthetic object’. In other words, Dufrenne’s account of aesthetic experience overlooks precisely that which is expressly invited in *Die blinde astronoom* – a blind person’s aesthetic experience. This is because a phenomenology of aesthetic experience assumes that vision would be the primary mode of experience where visual art is concerned, at least. Can phenomenology assist in understanding the encounter between these installations and a blind person who would not experience them as aesthetic objects in the same way that a sighted person experiences them?

Perhaps much could be learnt about the multifarious nature of participatory aesthetics if attention were given to a blind person's experiences of these installations. The question of how a blind person experiences space and objects in it was a matter of concern for, amongst others, Descartes and Locke in the seventeenth century and for Berkeley, de Condillac and Diderot in the eighteenth century as has already been shown in Chapter 3 in my discussion of Molyneux's problem.³⁸ Diderot, in particular was fascinated with the question of how a blind person experiences spatial relationships between the objects they touch. In the *Lettre* he concluded that the blind mathematician, Nicholas Saunderson, could judge symmetry quite well with the sense of touch compensating for the absence of the sense of sight (Diderot 1916 [1749]: 70).³⁹ In this way, Diderot comes to the conclusion that this blind mathematician could construct a sublime picture of the universe.

But the question of a blind person's spatial perception was resolved neither by Diderot's predecessors nor his contemporaries. As Oliver Sacks (1995: 117) notes, a blind person's experiences are built up from a complex "sequence of impressions (tactile, auditory, olfactory)". In other words, unlike the sighted, who can take in a visual scene at once, such as an art exhibition or looking into the night sky, a blind person's spatial perception is completely different with "[...] even the *idea* of space [...] incomprehensible (Sacks 1995: 118). In his autobiography, *Touching the rock* John Hull (1990: 77) writes that blind people live almost exclusively in time rather than in space, noting that:

Space is reduced to one's own body, and the position of the body is known not by what objects have been passed but by how long it has been in motion. Position is thus measured by time. [...] For the blind, people are not there unless they speak. [...] People are in motion, they are temporal, they come and they go. They come out of nothing; they disappear.

³⁸ See Chapter 3, section 3.4 in particular.

³⁹ Diderot (1916 [1749]: 101) is amazed that Nicholas Saunderson "[...] gave lessons in optics, lectured on the nature of light and colour, [...] explained the theory of vision; [...] wrote on the properties of lenses, the phenomena of the rainbow, and many other subjects connected with sight and its organ".

This means that a blind person would undoubtedly experience the installations in an utterly different way from a sighted person. And, therefore, as a sighted person I can hardly imagine what that experience would be. As Georgina Kleege (2005: 179) (who is blind) points out “[...] the average blind person knows more about what it means to be sighted than the average sighted person knows about what it means to be blind”. And the question of whether a blind person might be interested in obtaining the sense of sight was already refuted by the blind man interviewed by Diderot (1916 [1749]: 77) whose answer was: “[i]f it were not for curiosity, I would just as soon have long arms: it seems to me my hands would tell me more of what goes on in the moon than your eyes or your telescopes”. Saunderson’s position on the absence of vision is starkly in contrast with Rilke’s contention to which I referred at the beginning of Chapter 2 and which bears repetition here. For, Rilke (qtd Merleau-Ponty 1993: 146) contended that:

The eye [...] through which the beauty of the universe is revealed to our contemplation is of such excellence that whoever should resign himself to losing it would deprive himself of the knowledge of all the works of nature, the sight of which makes the soul live happily in its body’s prison, thanks to the eyes which show him the infinite variety of creation: whoever loses them abandons his soul in a dark prison where all hope of once more seeing the sun, the light of the universe, must vanish.

Quite clearly, Rilke is mistaken when he suggests that a blind person’s experience is in any way limited, deficient or inferior to that of a sighted person. And even though they cannot see objects in a room, Kleege (2005: 186) maintains that blind people can usually feel the presence of large objects without actually touching them. This feeling can be described as a sensitivity to “atmospheric change” which is experienced “kinesthetically and by the body as a whole” (Kleege 2005: 187).⁴⁰

⁴⁰ Kleege (2005: 187) also draws attention to the fact that there are varieties of blindness, with only “[...] about 10 – 20 percent of people designated as legally blind [...] without any visual perception at all”. In other words, both blind and sighted visitors to the exhibition would have

Although the sighted viewer touches the glass screen, the stones and the paper, their touch is vastly different from that of a blind person. For, as Diderot surmised, the sensitivity of a blind person's fingertips is quite unlike that of a sighted person (Barasch 2001: 152). Furthermore, even though the darkness through which we clumsily moved and for which we needed to be guided like the blind, our experience included the visual spectacle set up for us.

7.8 Star-struck

Confronted with the paradoxical relations between night and day, darkness and light, blindness and sight, touch and (in)sight, the inaccessible and accessible, the comprehensive and the unfathomable, the actively engaged responder understands the conceptual problems at work through her/his bodily engagement with the installations. Wilsenach appears to probe the complex tension between the dark recesses of both language and vision, neither of which shed sufficient light on the complicated universes he gives us.⁴¹ No written explanations of the works were provided that might guide our attempts at understanding them. It may be only the blind astronomer (who must be able to read both Afrikaans and English Braille) that can unlock the meaning of these works. Our hopes to decode the night sky were only shattered upon realising that the massive book, *Sterre-atlas vir die blinde astronoom*, teasingly illuminated by a single light in the otherwise dark room, was also only legible to someone who could 'read' Afrikaans Braille. We can hardly even see the 88 constellations this time, embossed onto black pages.⁴² Ultimately our search for clarity is in vain as that which we see – and feel – belong to the realm of the awesome and the overwhelming as opposed to the rational and the concrete.

had a plethora of both unique and sometimes overlapping experiences, based on their particular skills at accomplishing the tasks or performing the event in which they participated.

⁴¹ The Afrikaans titles of the works are also significant. A person who does not understand Afrikaans would not even be aided by a title which would also deny them access to the meaning of the works.

⁴² In 1930 the International Astronomical Union officially declared the existence of 88 constellations.

The universe, made available to our touch and shown as three-dimensional, counter the visuality imposed by scientific regimes of knowledge. Despite the attempts of the astronomer to make the universe concrete – or set it in stone – the star maps did not demystify the universe, the aim of scientific investigations; rather they ‘re’-mystified the unfathomable heavens. Standing between the glass panels of *In die sterre geskryf* we experienced (were inserted into) that which is beyond human experience. We felt as if we are in space. The ‘excess’ of both the cosmos and human experience will not – cannot – be quantified or explained by means of scientific models and grids, or neuroscientific visualisations of the human brain (as discussed in Chapter 3). For human experience is varied and uneven, unquantifiable and immeasurable. But, being unable to fully understand the meaning of the constellations did not impede people’s interaction with the works. Instead visitors to the exhibition simply made it their own. For instance, I noticed several people photographing each other standing behind the glass panels - with the effect that they seemed immersed in the constellations (Figure 40).

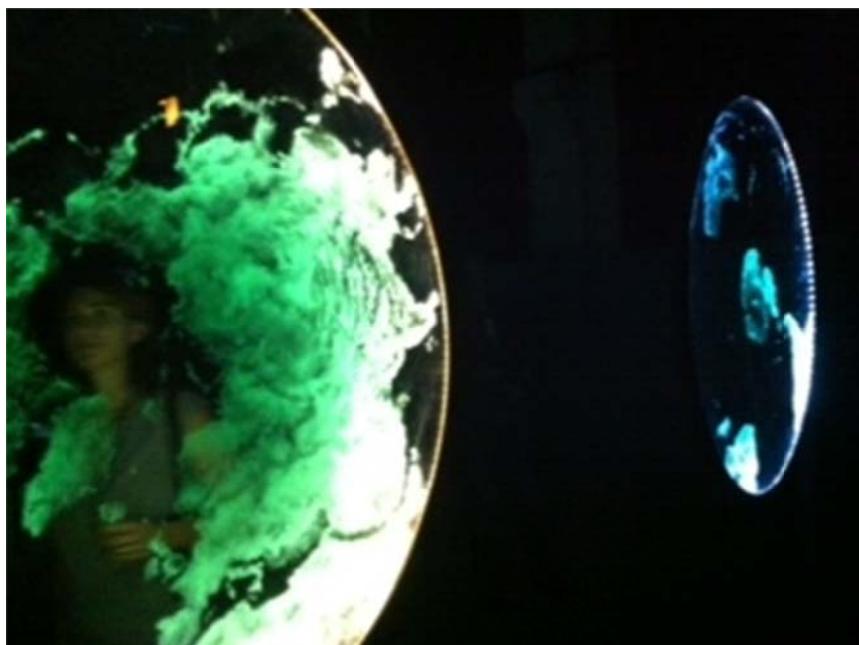


Figure 40: Berco Wilsenach, Person reflected in *Stereographic shift* (2013)

Although the layperson did not learn anything scientific about the cosmos from this exhibition we did learn that the universe is mysterious, unfathomable, awesome, wondrous and something to which we respond intuitively. The celestial images cannot be contained, neither on glass, in stone, nor in wooden chests of drawers. There is nothing straightforward about Wilsenach's work. In fact, the artist strongly suggests that our getting lost is "written in the stars" (Wilsenach 2009). Although the stellar maps are rendered with meticulous precision there are, in the words of the artist, "[...] only certain points of enlightenment for the viewer" (Wilsenach 2009). Of course this interpretation is not only literally applicable to the works but also has much to do with the fact that, against our strongest attempts to tame the visually overwhelming heavens, nature never fully reveals itself to our gaze. The night sky represented here, once again, exceeds our interpretation of it. Meaning is thus both accessible and inaccessible which is precisely also the reason why Wilsenach's exhibition opens up the possibility for the actively engaged perceiving subject to experience something new, even beyond the meanings I have attempted to sketch out above.

7.9 Conclusion

What we as participants – or even more aptly, full-bodied, 'sensorially emancipated' responders – contributed to the work lent a particular texture to our imaginative interaction with the installations. At the same time the particular character of the objects we encountered in their enlivened space (or place) infused that dialectical experience. As I have argued throughout, the exhibition made us aware that an abstracted notion of vision as the primary sense in our interactions with the world is restrictive. Rather, it is precisely the reciprocal relationship between the sculptural pieces and the people who encounter them in their multiple complexities that gives rise to one's new or transformed awareness not only of the installations but also of the unfathomable starscape with which we were interwoven.

CHAPTER 8

CONCLUSION

At the close of this study I want to return briefly to Moore's *Still sounds* which was introduced at the beginning (Figure 41). Incorporating sound, smell and touch alongside its visual component, this installation is aligned with interventions in, and challenges to, the predominantly visualist paradigm which colours much writing on art. By encouraging audiences to participate in the work, thereby denying, or overcoming, the alleged distance that exists between viewers and art – traditionally at least, a requirement of the so-called rational and suitably disinterested spectator – not only is the hegemony of sight overturned, but the possibility of a supposedly detached subject is subverted. In this way, as I have tried to demonstrate in the discussions of *After the last supper*, *Sense*, *Buigkrag*, *As inside as the eye can see* and *Die blinde astronoom*, artists like Moore are, in various ways, dethroning seeing from its privileged position in the sensual body of the responder to, or perceiver of, art.

The interconnected functioning of the senses operating inseparably from the imagination of the embodied, aware and active responder is a significant aspect to which attention must be paid when installations such as *Still sounds* are investigated. For, in this type of art sounds, smells, textures and sights present themselves to a person who is now recognised as a participant rather than merely an observer.

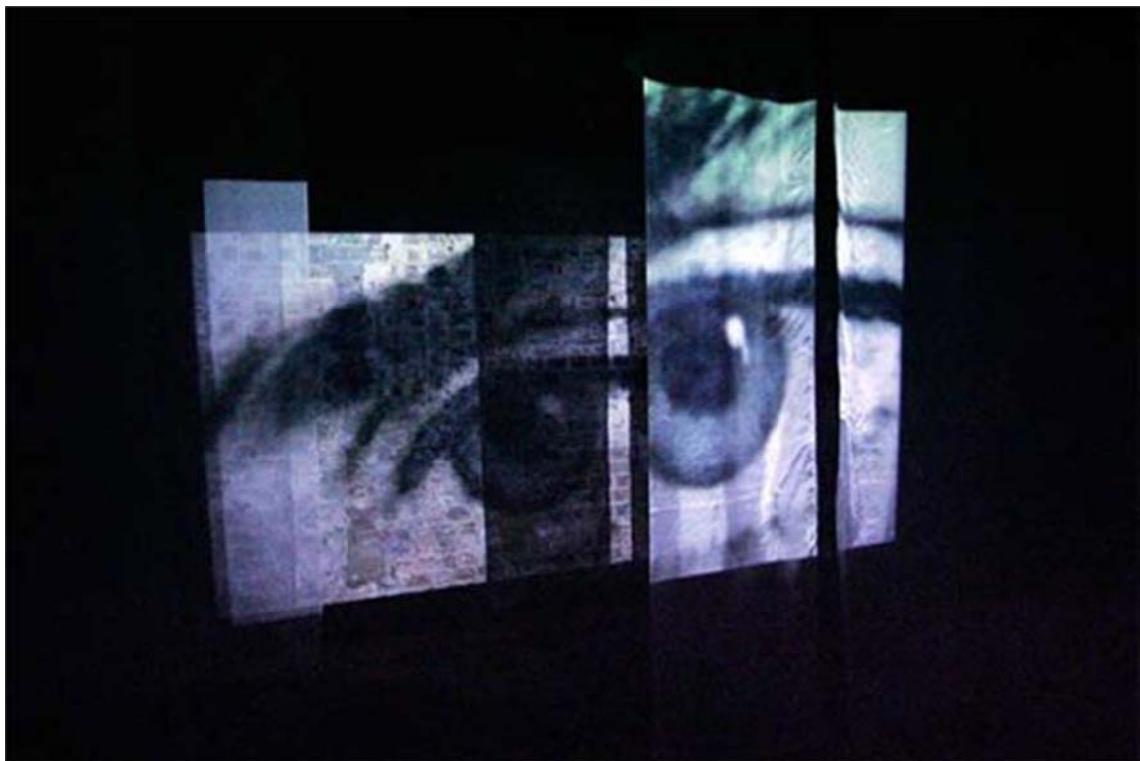


Figure 41: Margaret Moore, *Still sounds* (2008-2011)

Whereas it has been suggested that “[...] art reviews and first-hand accounts of installations rarely focus on their multi-sensoriality” (Di Bello & Koureas 2010: 12), an exploration of Moore’s installation would be impoverished without acknowledging the embodied participation of a responsive appreciator in the imaginative construction of meaning through her/his engaged experience of the work. This means that, in order to travel toward a richer analysis, a researcher would explore their own, as well as that of others’, multisensorial and imaginative ‘play’ with a work of art’s potential meanings as it is presented and situated in a particular context.

In the case of *Still sounds*, that context was a musty, dark and sinister crypt whose smell – which brought to mind a bygone era – both merged seamlessly with the nostalgic photographs and sound recordings and, at the same time, jarred with the technological sophistication of the video projection. In terms of sound, the particular recordings of Moore’s voice overlaid with the hushed voices of others, mixed with a woman’s voice singing the Scottish lamentation,

Griogal Cridhe, lent a specific evocative ambience to the event. In addition, the hanging sheets of voile (onto which family photographs were both printed and a video was projected) lightly touched us as we brushed past them. Their movement evoked a sense of passing time and the vulnerability of our own memories. The individual and particular responses of an embodied subject whose emotions, associations, memories, imagination, beliefs, attitudes and so forth that are brought forth or triggered by cues provided by the material and affective presence of the installation, including its form, space, scale, texture, temperature, mass, surrounding smell are the site, not so much of a multisensory analysis, but, more precisely, of a critical exploration of embodied engagement with art, beyond spectatorship.

Although in this study I have focussed on a very limited set of contemporary artworks that already invite participation and engagement, there is immense possibility for applying such an approach to artworks of the past. For, it is now possible to consider the variety of meanings that emerge from a specific encounter with works ranging from a Greek sculpture to a modernist painting or a building for that matter.

8.1 Summary

I have attempted to show that scholarly negotiations of the visual field have, until recently, often avoided explorations of the affective multisensorial body of the viewer in relation to what s/he sees even though many art practices invite the engagement and participation of the whole body. Sensory scholars propose that it is no longer feasible for either art history or visual culture studies to limit their enquiries to the *visual* field alone, for this field is also informed by the senses of touch, hearing, taste and smell. Phenomenology has been used in sensory investigations as a means to dismantle and dissolve ‘Cartesianism’ as the dominant strategy for negotiating the relationship between a viewer and art.

Whilst the sensory turn may be better conceived of as a *return* to the senses, it does appear feasible to suggest that, owing to the prominence given rationalist thinking in the modern period, the involvement of the non-visual senses in human aesthetic experience has not always been acknowledged especially in the twentieth century. In striving to achieve ideal aesthetic disinterestedness, to some extent, art history may have been complicit in dismissing sensual and embodied experience as a valid mode of artistic enquiry. A re-conception of aesthetic experience as embodied (in the fully integrated sense) and participatory is a necessary shift. In following Berleant's main ideas regarding participatory aesthetics I have attempted throughout to find ways in which to theorise the involvement of the whole person in aesthetic experience and not only the mind, intellect or consciousness.

A conception of aesthetic experience as embodied, engaged and participatory must proceed from an understanding of embodiment as encompassing a fluidity of bodily/mental modes of perception. These modes, I have proposed, include not only the senses and their interrelation or interaction in experience, as suggested by the 'multisensorialists', but also the intellect, our beliefs, attitudes and preconceptions based on our particular personal history and multisensory experience in a specific culture. In addition, embodiment also takes into account a person's memories, emotions, feelings and imagination all as embodied phenomena and ingredients of experience. In other words, embodiment refers to the human person as a unified body-mind entity.

While a certain trajectory of research on visual culture and art takes the socially constructed nature of vision as its starting point, the study developed here attempted to understand a person's encounter with art as sensorially integrated, fully embodied and multifariously experienced in interactive and participatory ways without denying that vision is informed by ideas shaped by society and culture. Primarily following a phenomenological understanding of embodied perception and engagement in the world through lived experience, an aesthetics of embodiment is also concerned with proprioception, or "our

sense of being in a body and oriented in space" (Csordas 1994: 5). In this way, an aesthetics of embodiment acknowledges a person's bodily participation in works of art, in the sense that the expanding field in which an artwork is encountered, including the scale of the work in relation to the perceiving body, is considered not as an empty or objective space into which a person enters, but as deeply invested with meanings that are brought forth in the interaction with embodied participants.

Although I have drawn on my own experiences of the installations under discussion, my explorations were not personal, subjective, autonomous or isolated in the modern understanding of these concepts. Instead, my approach throughout has been grounded in an understanding of the intersubjective intertwining of a subject and an object, things and persons, mind and body, places and being in the world. In other words, although I have described my own experience, I have not subscribed to the notion of a subject of experience who is the master and centre of all meaning. Instead, I attempted here a self-reflexive account of one encounter amongst many possibilities. For, an individual's experience is open to and altered by the experiences, ideas and interactions with others.

In this endeavour I do not want to suggest that all encounters with the many varieties of art can be examined in precisely the same way. I have therefore not proposed a formula, for this would be a far too reductive, essentialising and misguided approach. Rather, the research posed here suggested that recognising the embodied nature of the so-called 'spectator' of art may well be necessary in light of the types of works and exhibitions that are rapidly increasing as 'events' in our time. But, at the same time, and even though I have restricted my examples to works by contemporary artists who may already be part of the thinking community investigating a person's embodied participation with art, it is equally feasible to understand the relationship between persons and so-called 'traditional' or pictorial art as embodied,

engaged and interactive. This, I believe, will prove to be an immensely productive direction for future research.

The sensory revolution is pressurising art history to introduce novel approaches into its language (Di Bello & Koureas 2011). The challenge to the academic practice of art historians who search beyond the visual and into the embodied dimension of aesthetic experience, is whether or not they are sufficiently able to thicken their analyses of multisensorial experiences to ensure that art history retains its significance as a rigorous discipline. In other words, the current task of art historiography is to explore ways in which to reflect on discussions and explanations of experiential encounters with art that do not ‘read’ art as texts or merely as representation but also do not slip into vague and sweeping generalisations.

This entails a re-examination of aesthetic experience as not only multisensorial, multimedial and transmedial but also as self-reflexive. For, approaches to works of art that analyse only the ways in which the works appeal to the bodily senses, would surely weaken the discipline. Instead, studies are needed that take into account the psychic suggestions made by works of art and recognise the site of the imagination as integral in aesthetic encounters. In other words, art historical approaches that acknowledge that a person’s engagement is based on their broader imaginative interactions with art in particular ambiences, may lead to far more nuanced accounts of aesthetic experience than either vision-centred or multisensorial approaches on their own can provide.

As I argued in Chapters 3 & 5, whilst poststructuralist approaches to understanding social life gained increasing status in the humanities and social sciences in the 1990s, effectively denying the validity of ‘nature’ – in other words, feeling, emotion, intuition, sensation and so on – in human experience and understanding, other scholars, in particular neuroscientists and cognitive psychologists were investigating the brain as a dynamic, flexible and vital organ and component of the multisensorial body and, more importantly, is influenced

by it. It might even be tempting to consider neuroscience as bringing us closer to an understanding of embodied engagement with art as more complex and multidimensional than poststructuralism allowed. But the scientific mapping of the brain in order to show the interrelated sensorium does not satisfactorily account for the multitude of ways in which people experience and respond to art. For, surely the science of the body organism – in its attempt to shed light on the dark recesses of the working of the mind in its analysis of physical processes – is deeply rooted in the paradigm of scientific ordering and control. In other words, the neuroscientific mapping of the brain seems to be yet another instance of the submission of the body to domination.

At the same time, a different brand of scholars in the humanities, such as the multisensorialists and theorists of affect, have been concerned with non-representational aspects of experience. But if the multisensorialists confine their analyses of human experience of the separate sensory categories, once again, we slip into a reductive notion of human experience. Similarly, if advocates of affect reduce human beings, their life-worlds and their cultural products to an abstract concept of affect they fall into the same dilemma. But if theories of multisensoriality, affect and presence can be understood in non-psychological ways as more than some kind of basic emotion or awareness and instead recognise the mutual involvement of persons and life-worlds, we are nearer to a richer account of a person's embodied and active engagement with art. In other words, if the sensory turn, which has been my entry point into the conversation around embodied interaction with art, explores realms of human being or wholeness beyond the five senses and approaches art as a "communion" (Dufrenne 1973 [1953]: 228, "performance" (Dufrenne 1973 [1953]: 15, Jauss 1982: 21), "transaction" (Berleant 1970: 88) and "event" (Massumi 1995) that unfolds between the body of the spectator and art, it has immense potential for art historians.

But, this kind of approach is, of course, not easily talked about by the socio-cultural researcher working within the paradigm of new art history, social art

history, postcolonialism and feminism. From a poststructuralist perspective, such an approach runs the risk of “[...] retreating back to a universalising, depoliticised notion of the body” (Macpherson 2006: 101). But, surely they are not necessarily dualistic approaches? For Howes (2005:4) “[t]he senses, in fact, are not just one more potential field of study alongside, say, gender, colonialism or material culture. The senses are the media through which we experience and make sense of gender, colonialism and material culture”. Or, rephrasing Howes slightly, the unified human *body* is the “[...] medi[um] through which we experience and make sense of gender, colonialism and material culture”. In other words, studies of art must take into account the psychic suggestions made by works of art and recognise the site of the imagination, memory, fantasy, dreams as they are shaped in part by geographically, historically and culturally specific contexts as integral in aesthetic encounters.

Memory is one of the modalities that make this encounter more meaningful or even more arresting. Our memory of past encounters with art fuses with present encounters. It is through the powers of the imagination that our experience of a work of art deepens as it evokes recollections from deep within our unconscious. Thus, the meanings we derive from and the associations we immediately make in our experience resonate with past memories and the working of the imagination housed in and mediated by the body.¹ All of these are facets of our corporeal condition which work together in aesthetic experience thereby producing the varied texture of the meeting, the reciprocity, between a person and art.

To be an actively engaged and embodied subject means to recognise that the character of our affective appreciation is infused with our beliefs and attitudes already shaped, and continuously being re-shaped by various other modes of the human realm, including the social, political, the religious and the moral, and so forth. Pallasmaa (2005: 11) contends that “[...] when experiencing a work of art a curious exchange takes place; the work projects its aura, and we project

¹ Paul Ricouer's position regarding the vital role of the imagination in perception has already been discussed in Chapter 5.

our own emotions and percepts on the work [...]. Enigmatically, we encounter ourselves in the work" (Pallasmaa 2005: 68).

I have also argued that it is necessary to re-examine aesthetic experience as not only multisensorial, multi-medial and trans-medial but also as self-reflexive. For, approaches to works of art that describe only the ways in which the works appeal to the body impoverish art history and ultimately do not undo the hegemony of elitist aesthetic experience. For this kind of inversion would not solve the problem of aesthetic experience. Instead, studies that take into account the psychic suggestions made by works of art and recognise the site of the imagination as integral in aesthetic encounters, are needed. In other words, art historical approaches that consider not only the senser's engagement with works of art, but also their wider imaginative and self-reflexive interactions with it, may lead to a far more nuanced account of peoples' experiences of art than either interpretative or multisensorial approaches on their own can provide. For, the body is the site of our experience of art and through that immediate and mediated experience new knowledge emerges. As Wylie (2007: 147) puts it: our "knowledge, experience and perception" are a product of the corporeal nature of human being. Furthermore, this knowledge emerges precisely because art means and does critical work and, for this reason, critical reflection need not be avoided.

In this study I have approached aesthetic experience as direct and immediate, at the same time acknowledging that such experiences are mediated by the body (including its physical, psychic, conscious and unconscious modes), the installations in their particular expressive presence and *mise-en-scene* as well as the broader complex framework of the political, the institutional and the social. In other words, I have argued that direct and immediate aesthetic experience can be conceived as a playful interaction always imaginatively produced and reproduced in intersubjective encounters that are at once both mediated and immediate. Understanding perception as at once both direct (or immediate) and structured (or mediated) has proven a helpful way in which to

understand and explore a person's engaged encounter with the examples used in this research.

8.2 Blind spots: limitations of the study

Throughout the course of this study, it has proven immensely problematic to find the most suitable term to adequately describe the concept of a 'sensorially-emancipated' and fully engaged viewer/participant of art.² The problem was to find a term that could satisfactorily describe the concept of the human being that encompasses all her/his bodily functions beyond the restrictive sensory, physical, physiological, neurological and affective dimensions and which would also include her/his personal human action and experience in culture, society and history. Admittedly, the situation is not yet finally resolved. For the most part, I have simply used 'person' in the hope of avoiding any reductive and functionalised accounts of human engagement with art and recognising instead that both the human body and works of art are multifunctional and metafunctional entities and individualities.

A further limitation of this study concerns the very brief mention but hopelessly inadequate investigation of the relationship between the sensory turn and certain strains of American Pragmatism, particularly the work of Dewey (1934) and Shusterman (1999). Dewey's well-known text *Art as experience* deals with art as an event or occasion that should be approached and analysed as an experience. However, in the literature dealing with the sensory turn, Dewey has not been referred to as often as Baumgarten for instance, if at all. In the same way, Shusterman's (1999: 302) notion of 'somaesthetics' and his interest in the lived experience of the body and awareness of our changing "bodily states and feelings" in relation to aesthetic experience may also prove a fruitful avenue for

² In Chapter 5 I referred to the following terms: "perceiving subject" (Dufrenne 1973), "whole-body seer" (Hull 1990: 217), "appreciative experiencer" (Berleant 2003: 1), "senser" (Di Bello & Koureas 2010: 3), "fully embodied being" (Di Bello & Koureas 2010: 12), and "sensorially emancipated perceiver" (Lauwrens 2010: 9) all of which hinge on a notion of embodied aesthetic experience.

future research. While I am fully aware of their contributions to the discussion on aesthetic experience, it was simply impossible to pay substantial attention to their work in this already extensive study.

8.3 A foreseeable future: suggestions for further research

Although I have focussed on contemporary works in this study (mainly sculpture/installation and video), a promising topic for further writing would include how pictorial art and visual culture engage a person's whole body. Having initially begun this research by investigating multisensorial art or art that obviously "exceeds the visual" (James 2005: 46) an interesting shift in my thinking about all art has occurred. For, it is not only obviously participatory art whose "least distinguishing feature" (Cherry 2005: 11) may be its visuality that can be regarded as an event or performance occurring with a person. I have already begun to think along these lines in Chapter 6 where I argued that a two-dimensional video work engages a person empathetically. But, further than this, it is now possible to imagine that more traditional two-dimensional art and art from the past has always engaged its viewers not through spectatorship only but as full bodied perceivers. Perhaps the most serious omission of this study is a sustained discussion of art of the past. For all works of art (not only installations and performances) are more fruitfully recognised, I believe, as performative presentations concretely engaging embodied persons. This means that research can be done to discover and perhaps compare the particular ambiences of the aesthetic transactions that occurred and continue to occur in specific 'interactive' and imaginative situations. In other words, all art can be investigated in terms 'beyond spectatorship'. For instance, one might ask how the embodied encounter with a Renaissance painting or bronze sculpture informs the meanings generated by these works. This would be an immensely interesting direction to pursue in future research.

Furthermore, visual culture is rife with images that engage people in various ways. From video or online gaming platforms, to films and advertisements, the ways in which people imaginatively encounter images requires further sustained analysis. An investigation into people's encounter with art in digital formats would also be a prosperous avenue for future research.

Another suggestion for future research stems from one of the limitations of this study. For the most part I have relied on my own experiences and limited observations of other people's interactions with the works I have discussed.³ I propose that a fruitful avenue for future research would be to curate an exhibition in South Africa of the six works that I have discussed in this study. By means of dialogue and conversations with a wide variety of visitors to the exhibition a deeper understanding of the complex and dynamic 'event' of these works could be speculated on. A conference dealing with the interactive nature of aesthetic experience and possible ways in which to critically reflect on such experiences could also inform and assist such conversations.

What has come to light in this study is that the work of art is an event that can continuously be visited and revisited and people's unique responses in those various situations can productively and critically be discussed and compared. In other words, since art's potential meanings are produced, articulated and continuously unfolding in the various contexts of its performance with different people, the shared reactions and experiences of those other subjectivities that also bear "witness" (Dufrenne 1973 [1953]: 56) to the event can be investigated.

8.4 Coming to our senses

Aldous Huxley, who suffered from a degenerative eye condition known as *keratitis punctata*, recognised that neither seeing nor the greater domain of human experience takes place in isolation from the rest of the body. Similar to

³ It was only with *Die blinde astronoom* that I had the opportunity to speak to other visitors to the exhibition about their experiences.

Merleau-Ponty (2002 [1945]: 170) who contended that the body “behaves like a general function” and is “susceptible to disease”, Huxley wrote the following in *The art of seeing* (1942: 21):

The most characteristic fact about the functioning of the total organism, or of any part of the organism, is that it is not constant, but highly variable. Sometimes we feel well, sometimes we feel poorly; sometimes our digestion is good, sometimes it is bad; sometimes we can face the most trying situation with calm and poise, sometimes the most trifling mishap will leave us irritable and nervous. This non-uniformity of functioning is the penalty we pay for being living and self-conscious organisms, unremittingly involved in the process of adapting ourselves to changing conditions. The functioning of the organs of vision – the sensing eye, the transmitting nervous system and the mind that selects and perceives – is no less variable than the functioning of the organism as a whole, or any other part of the organism.

The current speed at which optical instrumentation continues to expand suggests that vision is set to retain its position, if not as the “master sense of the modern era” (Jay 1998: 3), then certainly as a complex mode by means of which humans experience themselves and the world around them. A new understanding of vision (as both interlaced with the world and the other embodied senses, and ‘susceptible’ to the rest of the general functioning of the body) may be particularly urgent at this moment when virtual reality and cyberspace beckon those who assume that they can lose touch with their bodies. In this milieu in which the denial of our bodies may be enticing, recognition of the complex relationship between the embodied self, what that self sees and feels and how the embodied imagination operates may perhaps be critical.

I suggest that the embodied and multisensorial emphasis from sensory studies on the one hand and the ideological and discursive critique of representation and perception on the other are complementary endeavours that can potentially enrich our approaches to the investigation of art and visual culture. The

question however remains: to what extent will socio-cultural art historians be prepared to come to their senses?

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