

The Full Experience: Touch as a Method of Exploration

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In this essay I will be discussing one area of research that has interested me surrounding my practice, touch. The element of touch is something I have been trying to explore since I began making sculptures and installations. With my work having a variety of textures and a very physically intriguing method of construction. I have found myself wrestling with ways to allow touch in my work and how not to make it the main focus, I wish to allow touch as a method of exploration not as the sole purpose of the work. So to try and develop this in my work I have explored the history of why we cannot touch art, artists who have explored the use of touch in their work and also the use of participation in artworks. My aim is to find the point at which touch as a privilege became separated from artworks and revise the path it has taken back to this point in the modern art scene.

There is a general understanding when it comes to not touching things that it is to protect that item, when we talk about art we seem to also think of it as a way of preserving works and stopping erosion over time. With this being a big factor in the matter, it is not the entire truth, the history of the rule that we so commonly see in our museums and galleries also has political implications. Artworks before the 18th century were primarily in private collections where the touching of artworks was standard and the owner of the work was able to touch the work how they pleased. The stigma around touch did not appear until late 18th century where,

"The prohibition on touching was essentially class-based. Since the French Revolution in the late 18th century – when statues, for example, were toppled there had been a growing fear in England that museums and galleries could become the target of the rage of the labouring classes."

(Lamb, 2022)

This shows there was a clear political motive within the systems which took touch out of the world of art. That is not to say that this was without reason, as we can see this came from a place of fear that artworks were going to be defaced in a sense of retaliation. This fear is still present to this day with artworks being protected by glass cases and sensors to stop people getting close to artworks. This creates a physical disconnection with the viewer and the work.



Figure 1 - Protective Barriers

This disconnection is not just something I feel, it is a discussion which has been going on since at least the late 1920's with Dr James J. Gibson, writing an essay about the matter in 1928. Gibson states "all the senses including vision can be regarded as extensions of the sense of touch, as specialisations of the skin." (Gibson, 1928) This suggests that touch is where all senses stem from. I like this statement as it reveals a lot about how we learn to observe things, that what we try to perceive is only how well our body can judge the thing we are looking at. This is stated further by Irish Philosopher George Berkeley who claims "sight detached from touch could not have any idea of distance, outness or profundity nor consequently of space or body" (Berkeley cited by Pallasmaa, 2012) This statement is suggesting that our experience with viewing things is reliant on our sense of touch, that without touch we would not have the knowledge needed to be fully aware of our surroundings and I agree, I have had many deceiving experiences with works of art, with materials pushing the limits of our perception.

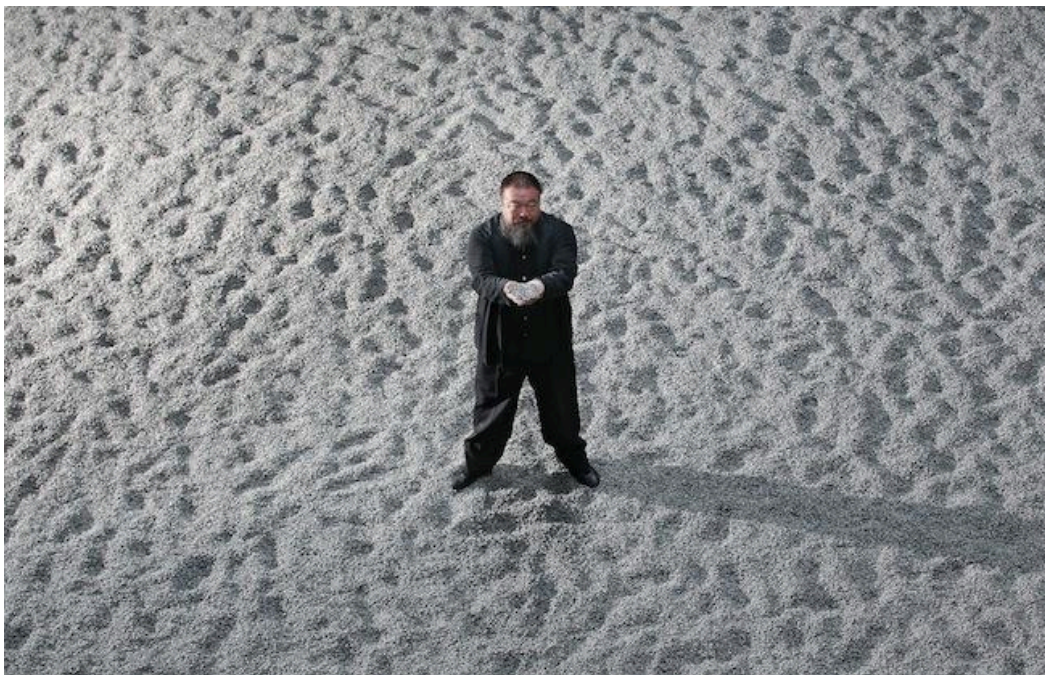


Figure 2 - Ai Weiwei's Sunflower Seeds

For instance Ai Weiwei's *sunflower seeds* with the Tate modern. This work was vast and covered the entire turbine hall floor in what looked like sunflower seeds, although these sunflower seeds were not truthful to their appearance, as every seed was actually a ceramic representation, hand painted and transported from China.

The work being displayed in the Tate had its controversy however, with the exhibit beginning with people being able to walk over the work and experience it with their entire body, feeling their weight disperse through the ceramic seeds and feeling the material with their hands, picking them up and observing them with all their senses. This however was short lived as the Tate had to release a statement which said,

“Although porcelain is very robust, we have been advised that the interaction of visitors with the sculpture can cause dust which could be damaging to health following repeated inhalation over a long period of time. In consequence, Tate, in consultation with the artist, has decided not to allow members of the public to walk across the sculpture.”

(Bingham, 2010)

This then led to the reduction of the sculpture to only half the size and not allowing the visitors to walk over the work and only being able to access the work from the North and West sides. This is interesting to me as the work has a need for physical interaction, the work was created by hand and there are over 100 million sculptures which combine to create this field of deception, the moment you are able to touch the work you can break the illusion of the sunflower seed and start to unpack the works intention, this interaction is a part of the work. So lets take away the option to touch and say the work is only for observing, that interaction with the work is now reduced to reading it off of a sign. I understand that the work still has its impressive features but now it has been depersonalised.

Considering touch as an important sense then, I would like to mention Brancusi's sculpture for the blind which is as it says in the title, for the blind, meaning the main aspect of the work is the way it feels, how a blind person experiences the work through touch is vital. This piece however is displayed behind a glass vitreen in the museum of Philadelphia.



Figure 3 - Brancusi's Sculpture for the Blind

The absurdity of this should not be lost on anyone, a sculpture made for the blind only available to experience as a sighted person. Touch is vital to this piece, for instance if I were to ask you to guess how big this work is based off of the image above your answer could vary indefinitely. However what if I was to reveal that the size of the sculpture is described as,

"This object is 6 11/16 x 11 7/16 x 7 1/8 inches. The length is roughly an elbow to wrist span or about the size of a medium-sized cat, curled up. Like a cat, it would fit easily on your lap and would take two hands to hold comfortably."

(Clayton, 2017)

This shocked me as I thought the piece would easily fit in my hand and was the size of a small pebble, but this description of the work comes from artist Lenka Clayton who saw the absurdity of this herself. In 2017 Clayton decided to create an artwork in collaboration with The Fabric Workshop and Museum (Philadelphia) which allowed blind people to interpret the work of Brancusi themselves, taking it into their own hands to create a sculpture each from her description. *A Sculpture for the Blind, by the Blind* had a fascinating outcome with the artists involved all interpreting the description differently.



Figure 4 - Lenka Clayton's, *A Sculpture for the Blind, by the Blind*

As you can see from the image there is no restriction with the works presentation, the tables are open top and have no barriers. These works therefore have the opportunity to be held and observed by anyone who wishes to do so. This allows the viewer to participate in the work, be involved in its history and create a conscious and physical connection with the work.

Participation as an element of artworks has been something I am very interested in. When considering participation in an artwork we open up a place in which the artist surrenders an element of the work in order to access another. "Participatory art can be understood not only as a reduction, but also as an extension of authorial power" (Benezra, 2008) This quote was taken from Richard Wagner's *'The Artwork of the Future' (1849)*. Wagner was a composer, theatre director, polemicist, and conductor who got these beliefs as he was aiming to create an artistic response to the failure of the 1848 revolution in Germany. Wagner was interested in the substance of social life and saw participatory art as a way of connecting bodies and revealing the power dynamics which stand between artists and their viewers.

This idea has been adopted by many artists since, trying to bridge the gap between the audience and the creator, for instance Lygia Clark, with their *Bichos* series (1966). This work is a really interesting sculpture series with the audience holding control of the form of the pieces. The viewer has the option to move the piece and fold it in on itself, manipulating the form to an entirely new piece. The works are made in the form of hinges and panels, this allows the work to have so many variations that each new viewer gets a new visual and physical experience with the work.



Figure 5 - Lygia Clark configuring *Bichos*

“A type of body-to-body relationship between two living organisms.”(Benezra, 2008). This statement from the artist captures perfectly what I am aiming to discuss, the work allows you to relate yourself as a physical object interacting with another, you can view these interactions as conversations, the more you ask the more you learn. The work holds a state of limbo where the viewer can grasp a point in time where its physical state is dictated by their actions. The work is activated by its interaction taking on another life through touch.

Yet once again, the work is displayed in a case, a perspex case, restricting the work to a single form and attenuating its capabilities. Directly disobeying the artist's wishes for the work to be interactive, ultimately disregarding the purpose of the work. Not allowing the activation of the work as a living breathing piece of art that can transform and reshape into many variations.

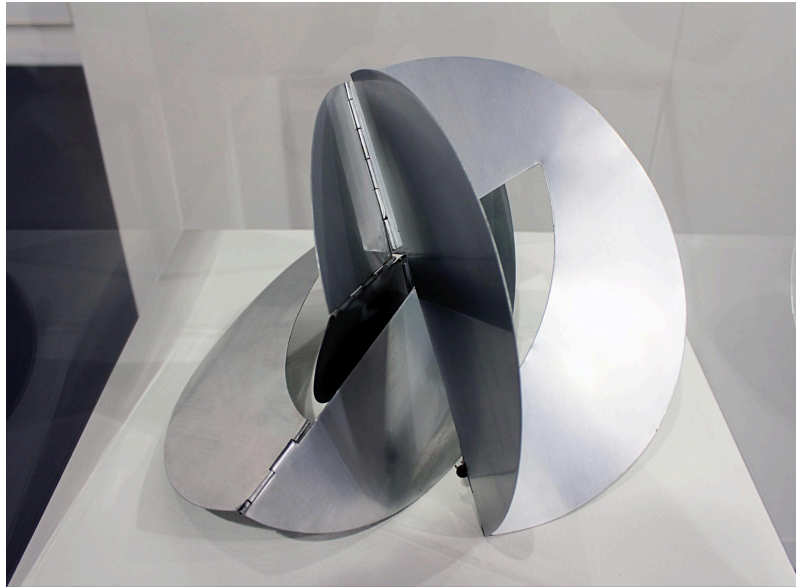


Figure 6 - Bichos, in a perspex case

Activation is something I have been interested in with sculpture and artworks since beginning to create my own. The activation of an object is a really intriguing moment, when a piece comes to life through the presence and the interaction of a viewer. This is something that goes unnoticed a lot of the time, the pieces above being a perfect indication of this, the object is transformed by the viewer, bringing things to the piece which can only be theorised by the artist until that moment.

As an artist I like to imagine what sort of interactions my work will invoke, it is as Giuseppe Penone mentions in his writings when talking about his own work,

“Touch is the fundamental gesture of sculpture...a way to shape and mould materials but rather as a way in which to perceive and understand the world.”

(Penone & Zevi, 2011)

This statement is a significant feature to the artist's work. Their involvement with their surroundings fascinates them and they explore these avenues of creating by using touch, by bringing two bodies together and creating a bond. Touch however, has long been forgotten by society and has fallen to the bottom of the hierarchy of senses. It has been made clear in western society that vision is held at the top of that chain and touch at the bottom when referencing art.

Touch comes in many forms, it is not restricted to a simple skin to skin interaction, touch is a haptic sensation. These sensations are categorised into terms such as Proprioception (the body's capability to sense movement action and location), Vestibular (sense of balance and orientation), Kinaesthesia (the act of proprioception as an awareness of muscular placement), Cutaneous (relating to, or affecting the skin), Tactile (perceptible by touch).

These terms are all specific to reactions our bodies have to our surroundings, proprioception for instance is the perception of the position state and movement of the body and limbs in a space. An example of an artwork which utilises this sense is the work of Vito Acconci's, *Proximity piece*, a performance piece which took place at the Jewish Museum, New York in 1970. This piece consisted of Acconci following members of the public around the museum and placing himself in the personal space of the viewers, persisting on making them uncomfortable and indirectly influencing their movements.



Figure 7 - Vito Acconci's *Proximity piece*

This feeling of knowing someone is near to you, is something you feel through your skin and although it is not a direct touching as such, it is your skin reacting and feeding you information. This is your body's proprioception and cutaneous reaction to its surroundings, realising that you feel the vibrations in the area near you. This piece uses these body functions effectively, although not obviously. The artist was dismissed by many viewers who did not realise they were a part of the artwork themselves, that they were simply there to see an exhibition and had become a vital part to an artwork which had required their physical presence to be successful.

This work complements statements I have noted of Juhani Pallasmaa's saying, "the eye is the organ of distance and separation, whereas touch is the sense of nearness, intimacy and affection." (Pallasmaa, 2012). When reading further into Pallasmaa's writings I found that he also mentions the fact that during overpowering emotional moments people tend to close their eyes, cutting off the element of distance, grasping at moments of intimacy and effectively allowing themselves to think clearly without the ambiguity of vision as a distraction to how you feel.

This is really intriguing to me as I have since noticed the recurrence of closing our eyes as a way of appreciation, closing our eyes to listen to music, to enjoy the taste of food, as a response to fear, these are all things where we have a natural instinct to close our eyes, to focus our thoughts, on senses other than vision. This is an attempt from our brain to draw attention away from our main source of information (vision) and to focus on the senses that we neglect in our daily lives that give us so much insight.

The reason I chose to write this essay on touch is as a way of making people aware of the complexity of its uses and how much it offers us, compared to the restriction of modern galleries and museums. There are more artworks emerging now in the 21st century which embrace this complex relation with haptics, and the more we experience the more we learn about this forgotten sense. It is as Pallasmaa said,

“The duty of education is to cultivate and support the human abilities of imagination and empathy, but the prevailing values of culture tend to discourage fantasy, suppress the senses, and petrify the boundary between the world and the self. Education in creativity today has to begin with a questioning of the absoluteness of the world”.

(Pallasmaa, 2012)

If then we are considering the ‘absoluteness of the world’, as Pallasmaa says, then it is only reasonable to mention the ‘Gesamtkunstwerk’. The gesamtkunstwerk is the idea of a total artwork, a piece of art that is entirely encompassing of its viewer and utilises the use of multimedia artworks. Examples of such a work are limited as not many artists have claimed the title themselves but the term was coined by the German philosopher KFE Trahndorff and later made popular by the aforementioned Richard Wagner. The term since has been used in reference to many forms of art and has been used across the world. For instance the exhibition *GESAMTKUNSTWERK*, Saatchi Gallery (2011), where the gallery put together an exhibition of what they thought were ‘total artworks’.

This exhibition included the work of many artists such as Thomas Zipp, Dirk Bell, Alexandra Bricken, Markus Selg, Jeppe Hein and many more. The artist whose work I would like to focus on from this exhibition is Markus Selg, Selg uses a variety of media including printmaking, sculpture and video based work to create an atmosphere and engulf the viewer in a series of myth-based works. One element of the exhibition which really intrigued me was the presence of furniture in Selg’s work, these pieces being *Bench (Tiger)* and *Chair (Hanush)*. The reason these pieces interest me is because they are household items and lend themselves to the domesticated spaces we inhabit, parts of our everyday lives which Selg comments on, stating; “the cardinal example of a Gesamtkunstwerk is life itself.” (Núñez-Fernández, 2011)



Figure 8 - Markus Selg, Bench (Tiger) 2010



Figure 9 - Markus Selg, Chair (Hanush) 2010

I agree with this statement from Selg, I believe life is the true total artwork, but in my total artwork, I see the Hapticity of the piece as an element of the utmost importance as life is full of touch and we make day to day decisions based off of these tactile details that we are fed by the objects around us. The feeling of Selg's *Bench* beneath you, or the marble surface of Brancusi's *sculpture for the blind* against your fingertips. These are things we should be able to experience. Yet we are restricted by the rules that are embedded in our galleries, in our museums and in our culture.

This leads me to my question...

What is more important, the experience of an artwork or the prolonging of its life?

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