

Tactility.

Tactile or tactility originates from the Latin word 'Tactilis' which means "that may be touched, tangible" (Lewis and Short, 1879, p.151). Tactility or touch "allows us to perceive objects as smooth or rough, as warm or cold, as light or heavy" (Mika and Miika, 2018, p.91). Tactility is often associated with sensations involving just the hand when, in fact, tactility involves the entire body. Martin Grunwald (2004) explains that our entire body is covered in an estimated six million to ten million tactile sensors and that tactile awareness can be passively sense external factors such as temperature and pressure. Tactility is a "mode of perception and expression wherein all parts of the body commit themselves to, or are drawn to, a relationship with the world" (p.3, Barker, 2009). We are constantly interacting with the world through touch, and this is how we forms relationships with people and the world around us. Through tactility, we understand the shape of our favourite coffee mug, how its comfortable sits in our hand and how it fits to our lips when we take a sip. We form a relationship, a tactile understanding of the object. There is an element of reciprocity in touch as "the sensitivity of touch regarding objects is dependent on our complex sensitivity of our own bodies" (Mika and Miika, 2018, p.91) which means that while a person is touching an object, it is important to consider that the object is also being touched. The tactile engagements that we have with objects and how they respond to touch will influence the way in which we understand the object.

However, tactility and the importance of meaningful tactile relationships is underappreciated in modern Western culture. We are a society obsessed with superficiality and "instead of experiencing our being in the world, we behold it from out-side spectators of images projected on the surface of the retina" (Palasma, p.30, EOTS). This implies that we view the world as a series of images rather than and physical reality which can be interacted with.

This is most evident in contemporary architecture. Pallasmaa describes the "inhumanity of contemporary architecture... as the consequence of neglect of the body and the senses" (Eyes of the Skin, p.21*). Modern architecture, and modern design in general, lacks tactile consideration. Everything seems flat and two dimensional, most modern construction and modern products are made to be functional and not personal. This is because contemporary industry has created a disassociation between the products that we have readily available at our fingertips and the receiver of the final product. Albers explains that "we remove the cellophane wrapping and there it is – the bacon, or the razor blade, or the pair of nylons. Modern industry...bars us from taking part in the forming of materials and leaves idle or sense of touch" (Albers, p. 69, Selected writings on design). Despite the usefulness and connivence of contemporary industry, it is also creating barriers between the complete product and its relationship the self. The layman purchases a product and uses it without any consideration for how the product came to be, all the hands that were involved in the products creation seem to vanish behind cellophane wrapping. These kinds of industrialised products appear as "ghostlike apparitions" (Palassma, p.34, EOTS) suggesting that the lack of human exchange with said products means that its humanity is removed. Without that expression of tactility made by the human hand, the product appears as ghostly, as dead.

(Modern buildings are flat, have no character – archetypes of buildings)

Along Orchard Street in Swansea city centre, there are a variety of architectural structures from early to modern. The Oldway Centre, as seen in Figure One is a recently developed (2019) block of student flats owned by company Omnia (Walesonline.co.uk) is a prime example of modern architecture. The exterior of the building is clad in grey, silver and orange tiles and the windows follow a systematic pattern across the facing. The blocky structure of the building, with its flat and geometric design, makes it look like a digitally generated image. There is no depth nor dimension. This is a complete juxtaposition from the Alex building, formally the Swansea Central Library, now an art school of the University of Wales Trinity Saint David. This building was designed by Henry Holtom in a classic Italian architectural style and opened in 1887 (heylibraries.co.uk). This building, yet recently modernised and refurbished, most notably with a geometric glass entrance, retained its artisan details such as the ornate arched doors and windows.

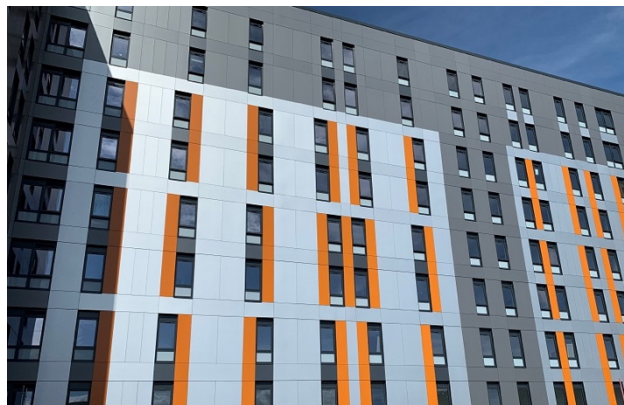


Fig One



Fig Two



Fig Three

Due to the recent and ongoing pandemic, there has been a change in how tactility and tactile appreciation is viewed. After being deprived of touch and contact, the world has gained a new mindset about tactile perception, especially in the design world.

Due to the recent Coronavirus (Covid-19) outbreak, there have been many changes to the way in which perceive touch and physical contact. An article by Durkin, Jackson and Usher

explains that touch is an essential part of nursing and care because it is used to establish relationships and provide comfort. Due to the highly contagious nature of Covid 19, Nurses and other National Health Service (NHS) staff needed to increase their use of personal protection equipment (PPE) during the pandemic. The physical barriers such as gloves and masks create not only a physical barrier but also an emotional barrier between staff and patient. However, it was not only in hospitals and other care giving settings where these emotional barriers occurred. Covid-19 social distance and 'stay at home' restrictions meant that many people were left isolated without physical touch for weeks and even months. The lack of social and physical contact has led to an increase wanting to give and receive tactile engagement, this is also known as 'touch hunger'" (2021, e4- e5).

Touch is used as a communication method for helping others to relieve anxiety and stress so although the Covid-19 restrictions have a positive effect for prevention the spread of the virus, these protective measurements had a negative effect on people's mental well-being due to being deprived of physical interaction. Touch is an essential part of our daily social lives and having this taking away has created a new appreciation for the tactile.

Barriers between Art and the Self.

When visiting an art gallery, there is a physical distance between the self and the art. The pieces clad with large glass cabinets or hung on the wall behind rope barriers. This distance is not only physical but also psychological.

Pyle explains that the reason for such barriers were for preservation and security. There is a hierarchical reasoning for this distancing as the artefacts were considered, by elites, to valuable to be trusted with people of the 'working class'. The upper-class population believed that the working class were dirty and would therefore damage or steal the items (p.16-17, Pyle, 2007). Due to these old-fashioned prejudice views, the public have and continue to suffer from touch-hunger.

How can one fully realise a piece of art without the use of touch? There is an emotional factor to touch engagement that cannot be understood through sight alone. This is evident in our everyday use of language as "we say I see to mean I understand. We say something is touching to mean I am emotionally effected" (Driscoll, p.13). If I can only 'see' the object, I can only understand the work on a surface level. Looking at a painting from a distance, I feel nothing. I only see an aesthetically pleasing scene of colour across a canvas. It is no different from looking at an advertisement poster spread across a billboard above a busy road. Especially when behind glass as the work becomes even flatter and unreal with the distorted perspective added by the glass.

However, if I could reach out my hand and feel the piece, I would be able to feel something. Physically I feel the texture left behind by the artist's brush stroke and my hands can follow the direction of the brush stroke. Emotionally, I feel the efforts and sentiments left behind by the maker.

Sight cannot be fully relied upon when making observations.

"most people believe that looking is simply a matter of visual recording... the eye as a camera posits that seeing imprints images on the retina, like light on film, faithfully recording everything within the field of vision. Yet sight is highly subjective in what it chooses to see and how it responds"

Technology creating boundaries?

However, it is not only in a gallery setting where we find barriers and walls dividing people and art. In fact, one of the biggest contributors to this issue is the machine.

As previously mentioned in this essay, modern Western culture highly values visual content and aesthetics. This has become more and more evident as our technology develops. Popular social media like Youtube, Instagram and TikTok are just platforms of endless visual content.

We live in an age where technology has brought endless amounts of convenience to our lives... Sennet explains that certain things can get lost when artists replace physical for digital,

Rosalyn Driscoll performed an experiment where she blindly feels sculptures relying on touch alone to grasp the object.

This feeling of guilt originates from the taboo of not being able to touch, however it seems as though this concept should be reconsidered because of the plentifulness of insight that touch can provide that sight alone cannot. There is an aspect to touch and being able to touch a handmade object that is essential to grasping an object in its fullest.

Breaking the boundary?

Boundaries can be broken through the use of tactility,

An example of physical and emotional boundaries between people and art being broken is the exhibition by Olafur Eliasson called 'Your waste of Time' (2006). Eliasson is an Icelandic artist, highly recognised for his contribution to climate change awareness in the world of art. Olafur Eliasson (n/a) describes the exhibition as consisting of "several blocks of ice from Vatnajökull...the blocks were transported to the Berlin gallery neugerriemschneider, where they were exhibited in a refrigerated space". According to McLellan the purpose of Eliasson's exhibit was to "bring the visceral reality of human-driven climate change to the attention of the audience through a sensory engagement with ice" (2017). Eliasson has brought physical pieces of ice from Iceland to be viewed and tacitly engaged with by the public to externalise and communicate the issue of climate change. The ice blocks, now taken from their natural habitat and into an enclosed room where it is now able to be seen and felt which makes it so that both the physical and the emotional distance between people and the ice (representing climate change) is diminished.

There are many tactile elements to this exhibition. Hancox explains that the temperature of the room, which is kept cold enough to prevent the ice melting, will affect the bodies of the people viewing the piece, there will be "a number of visible mechanisms that [the] body will begin to employ in order to maintain a stable core temperature" (p.56). The ability for this exhibition to physically effect the body will enable the work to also be able to emotionally affect the body.

An important part of the exhibition is the element of touch, visitors of the exhibit were encouraged to touch the ice which would make them see how "the exchange of human warmth is enough to begin to decay the ice..." (Eliasson, 2017). This creates the perfect analogy, ice melting at the hands of humans both literally and metaphorically. The closeness and tactility allow us to connect with the object as "we think of ourselves as separate from what we see. The seen object remains aloof, independent, beyond us. This physical and psychological distance can breed a feeling of disconnection". (Driscoll, p.18). The tactile nature of the exhibition and how the ice responds to interaction, means that a relationship is created between the object and the person. The ice is personified, something that we sympathise for, something which represents how human hands are destroying the Earth.

Tactile essence?

There is a definitive distinction between sight and touch, there are elements to tactile knowledge which cannot be realised through sight.

“Sight always contains haptic information and haptic memory even when we are not touching. Touching triggers visual imagery even if we are not looking” p.15

“When I looked it felt cold. It felt warm when I touched. You can’t tell how it feels by looking at it” p.16

Around my house are metal works hand casted and moulded by my grandfather. There are so varying in texture and grain that they are a pleasure to both the eye and the hand. The metal and bronze sculpture always feel cold to the touch and yet there is a warmth I find within them, the hand and the presence of the maker.

Chapter 3: Tactility divides the real and the unreal.

Modern day society displays an issue with defining the real and the unreal. Modern day society is so caught up in the realm of the digital world that they cannot define the line between the real and the digital. (This is not a Pipe)

What is seen and how the mind's eye interprets – semiotics (Ways of Seeing, John Berger)

Emotional projection

Externalisation – Freud

Manifesting

Tactility grounding us in the present

Tactile interaction can ground one in the present. Peter Zumthor links tactility to memories explaining that “sometimes I can almost feel a particular door handle... when I went into my aunts garden... I remember the sound of the gravel under my feet...” (Zumthor, p.7)

Reminiscing on memories is an asset,

Tactile knowledge is the confirmation of the real, of the present - empiricism.

“Our sense of touch gives us a sense of reality” (p.14, Pyle, x)

Rubbings – surface/touch

Western culture has become so accustomed to consumption of visual content that the other senses are forgotten. “while the blind may lack the sense of sight, the sighted are often out of touch with their other senses” (p.X).

touch is slower than sight, it can afford a greater pleasure of discovery