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# “Haptic Optic” and Non-visual Perception in Art of the 20th and Early 21st Centuries

Kiseleva-Afflerbach Evgeniya Igorevna

Interdisciplinary Projects Department, The Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts, Moscow, Russia

**Email address:**

E.K\_Afb@yahoo.com

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**Abstract:** Multisensory approaches to contemporary art have become more popular in museums, galleries, and independent projects. This tendency indicates that in the arts, vision is losing its position at the head of the hierarchy of senses. Now, every sense can provide a conceptual message. This paper explores the relationship between visual and non-visual perception in a historical context. Starting with the revolutionary experiments of Dada, Surrealism, Futurism, and the Russian avant-garde, the first experiments in the 20th century were connected with the search for a new vision, helped along by critics of “retinal” art. Among diverse experimenters, Sadakichi Hartmann, Marcel Duchamp, Jean Arp, Wolfgang Paalen, Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, Vladimir Baranov-Rossine, and other innovators appealed to different senses. Pablo Picasso used blindness as a metaphor for his work. Hans Hartung, Arnulf Rainer, Alberto Giacometti, and Joseph Ginzburg used blind drawing as a creative method. The immersive and multisensory art of contemporaneity looks like the dream of avant-garde artists come true. The changing relationship between the artist, viewer, and work supports the development of new media and methods. Perceiving a work now often involves a multisensory experience connected to the reduction of sight: colorblindness, tunnel vision, or the domination of touch, scent, or movement. This text draws upon art history, phenomenology, and physiology to speak to the experiences of haptic vision and non-visual perception in exhibitions and art mediation with regard to inclusion projects in museums.

**Keywords:** Haptic Optic, Multisensory Art, Perception, Senses, Museology

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## 1. Introduction

Vision is no longer the key sense for the perception of art. A process that began as a challenge to develop a new vision among avant-garde experimenters of the early 20th century has propelled new methods and strategies of sight reduction and conceptual domination above the optic. Since the end of the 20th century, a shift has been taking place in the relationship between visual and multisensory perception of works of art. As the multisensory approach has received recognition through access and inclusion in museums [14], media themselves have been developing, supporting the process with ever-changing tools and techniques. Sound, smell, kinesthesia, tactility, and their combinations have become part of the mechanics and conceptual underpinning of individual pieces and entire exhibitions. In some cases, the intention is to create a synesthetic sensation in which no

single element of sensory experience is dominant [15]—that is, a work perceived equally by all senses. Another popular practice includes the reduction of vision or its replacement with other sensory channels. We propose to trace the path of the idea of tactile viewing from the “haptic” concept of Alois Riegl [19] to the immersive and participatory practices of our time.

## 2. Haptic Nature of Vision

“The painter stumbles like a blind man in the darkness of the white canvas. The light that slowly appears is paradoxically created by the painter” [7]. With these words Henri-Georges Clouzot began the famous 1956 film *The Mystery of Picasso*, starring the painter himself. Pablo Picasso was known to have an acute fear of going blind and often invoked the image of blindness in his thoughts, works, and words. Criticism of vision and, as a result, the idea of

abandoning visual perception in favor of a haptic sense becomes an artistic gesture, an expression of the desire for the opposite [4].

The term "haptic vision" [19] was borrowed from physiology and began to appear in art history in the 19th century. In the writings of Alois Riegl, the term signifies a closer vision, a non-illusionary, "material" vision, which is in contrast with the optical, distant vision that focuses on the expanse and communication of abstract ideas. The concept of "psychology of perception" in the 19th century proposed to characterize works of art in accordance with their relation to visibility in space. The German artist and researcher Adolf von Hildebrand, for example, distinguished between the ways in which surrounding objects are perceived by close and distant vision. The Swiss art critic Heinrich Wölfflin attempted to characterize the visual qualities of Renaissance and Baroque art within a set of binary pairs (linearity/pictoriality, unity/plurality, flatness/depth, closed/open form, etc.). The American art historian Bernard Berenson, in his writings on the Italian Renaissance, concluded that the most important quality for painting is "the power to stimulate the tactile consciousness" [2]. All of these studies can be considered the forerunners of the modern concept of haptic vision, which is still evolving today.

### 3. The Phenomenology of Touch

In the 20th century, the relationship between visual and tactile perception was problematized within various philosophical frameworks. The phenomenological concepts of Edmund Husserl [11], Maurice Merleau-Ponty [20], and Michel Foucault [9] were the first to touch upon the idea of haptic aesthetics, intertwining the subject and the object of vision. As Merleau-Ponty wrote, although vision, with its ability to extend over distance, allows us to boast that we ourselves constitute the world, objective thinking emphasizes "visual qualities, because these give the impression of being autonomous, and because they are less directly linked to our body and present us with an object rather than introducing us into an atmosphere. But in reality all things are concretions of a setting, and any explicit perception of a thing survives in virtue of a previous communication with a certain atmosphere" [20].

Jacques Derrida's deconstruction and Gilles Deleuze's post-structuralism were actively involved in the criticism and reinterpretation of this approach. All of these reflections contributed to the growing appreciation of culture as a central factor in contemporary visual studies. In this regard, they led to a reinterpretation of the relationship between the artist, the viewer, and the work and, accordingly, to the inclusion of other ways of perception alongside vision or even in place of it.

### 4. To See the Unseen

The desire to see something beyond what is visually accessible was common to many artists of the 20th century. André Breton and André Masson used automatism to unleash

the subconscious, with the artist's body becoming a machine for broadcasting hallucinations and dreams. Filippo Tommaso Marinetti called for the painting of sounds, noises, and odors. Vassily Kandinsky discovered synesthesia and Mikhail Matyushin researched "back of the head vision" and "vision of the heels." Among diverse experimenters, Sadakichi Hartmann, Marcel Duchamp, Wolfgang Paalen, Vladimir Baranov-Rossine, and other innovators appealed to different senses. Pablo Picasso used blindness as a metaphor for his work. Many artists experimented with haptic techniques. Some, like Swiss sculptor Alberto Giacometti, worked to the point of exhaustion, spending 40-50 hours in the workshop in order to achieve the effect of deteriorating sight. So-called "blind drawing" emerged, meaning that the artist worked with his or her eyes closed or in a completely dark room. This practice has been employed, for example, by the Austrian Arnulf Rainer, the German Hans Richter, and the Russian artists Joseph Ginzburg and Yuri Albert. Conceptual art itself is a critique of visibility. It transfers the content of the art piece from the visual domain to the textual. Since the 1980-90s, works that investigate how blind persons see have emerged, inviting the viewer to experience temporary blindness. Antony Gormley, Gregor Schneider, Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster, Olafur Eliasson, Tino Sehgal, and many other artists address this theme, encouraging viewers to feel the space with their eyes closed or vision reduced. Thus, Alois Riegl's notion of the "haptic" was unexpectedly expressed literally in bodily forms of perceiving the aesthetic experience at the turn of the 21st century.

### 5. Haptic Aesthetics

The development of haptic [6] and multisensory ways of transferring artistic meanings in contemporary art is explored in detail by US art historian and film critic Laura U. Marks [18]. In her 2002 book *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media*, she examines hierarchical rearrangements in the history of the five senses from Aristotle to the present day, tracing the relationship between seeing and understanding this hierarchy in different cultures and at different periods of human history. Drawing on examples from Islamic, Shinto, African, and other cultural practices of antiquity and modernity, she reminds us that sight has not always been the dominant sense. She applies the phenomenological concept of "haptic aesthetics" [18] to the film and art experiments of the late 20th and early 21st centuries. The possibility of experiencing something fragile and mortal, according to Marks, can arise mostly through tactile, not visual perception. In addition to Marks's research, modern sensory-oriented artistic practices largely refer to the "action of contemplation" by Mikhail Bakhtin and the concept of "artistic defamiliarization" by Viktor Shklovsky, as well as to many other aesthetic and philosophical concepts of the 19th and 20th centuries.

Today, a toolkit for the perception of a work of art must be interdisciplinary, informed by neurobiology, psychology,

anthropology, and other spheres. What senses, besides sight, are involved in the formation of the viewer's experience? What methods are used to achieve the effect of being immersed in an art project? The growing interest in touch, tactility, and multisensory perception in visual and media art of the early 21st century has led to the emergence of separate movements, such as sound art or olfactory art, where sounds or smells act as media for the artistic message. Touch has the potential to create emotional impact through brief interaction with the skin of the hands and body [15]. This makes it an important tool of contemporary art, both within a performance and outside.

## 6. The Sixth Sense, Proprioception

Among the senses that turn out to be extremely important for the perception of a work of art, we cannot avoid mentioning proprioception—that is, the muscular feeling or sensation of one's body in space. It is a set of sensations arising from the work of the body's muscles, first described by the Russian physiologist Ivan Sechenov in the 19th century [23]. Sechenov used the term “muscular feeling” or “dark feeling” to denote a special form of cognition of the spatio-temporal relationship between the body and the environment. Poor awareness of proprioception signals and the “darkness” of this muscle feeling, according to Sechenov [24], led Immanuel Kant to consider space and time to be *a priori* forms of contemplation [12]. Today, works of spatial and performing arts cause us to recall this approach to the bodily perception of surrounding space more and more often.

Let us not forget that proprioception was involved in the perception of art long before the term appeared. Every time we strain our necks looking at the ceiling paintings at the Scuola Grande di San Rocco or feel the space of a three-nave Catholic cathedral above us, we experience proprioception. Auguste Rodin, who got rid of the pedestal and placed *The Burghers of Calais* on the same level as pedestrians, also used proprioception, which, in addition to its already mentioned functions, is responsible for the perception of the position of one's own body in relation to other objects. In other words, painters, sculptors, and architects have always known the importance of muscular feeling when working with volumes, sizes, and proportions.

So what fundamentally new thing happened to proprioception in the art of the late 20th and early 21st centuries? It is fair to say that this feeling ceased to be a special effect used to enhance the impression produced by sight. This period has produced works in which the muscular feeling is the center of the perception of the artistic message, and its very usage is a meaningful part of the work of art.

The importance of proprioception as a separate mode of perception becomes evident, for example, in Bruce Nauman's works, which create complex sensory effects in the viewer, inducing frustration, anxiety, claustrophobia, stiffness, and emotional stress. We can recall *Live Taped Video Corridor* (1969-70) or *Going Around the Corner Piece* (1970), where the viewer is placed in conditions of limited movement, poor

visibility, and proprioceptive failures. It was not Nauman's intention to study disabilities, but all the types of anxiety that he explores are characteristic of people with a low threshold of sensory sensitivity such as that manifested in the autism spectrum disorders, some forms of cerebral palsy and other developmental disorders, and post-traumatic stress disorder. He became acquainted with Gestalt therapy in 1967 and then used the interconnection of space and the mental state (“materials and mental activity” [17]) for decades in experiments with corridors, cages, tunnels, and other sensory, sound, and spatial stimuli to produce certain sensations in viewers. His works drag the viewer out of the stream of “normality,” using fairly common means that can be encountered in everyday life.

Many works by Daniel Buren, who also frequently used the dependence of the mental state on spatial arrangements, have a highly emotional and proprioception-oriented effect. Since the 1970s, the process of feeling oneself a part of space has been a recurrent topic in his works. Buren himself often used the concept of sensation or experience when interpreting his ideas [22]. The conditions needed in order to perceive his works include continual movement within the art piece, a physical feeling of being inside the color and structures, and bodily participation—just as for Nauman's works, but with an emotional plus sign, so to speak. The list of works that use proprioception as much as vision, or even more than vision, is huge. The land art pieces by Robert Smithson, Michael Heizer, and Richard Long or the spacialist experiments of Lucio Fontana and Ennio Finzi come to mind. Contemplating these works, we are forced to admit that vision is not enough to perceive their artistic messages, and in some cases it is even of minor importance for the possibility of spatial perception of an art piece.

## 7. Critique of Vision

Since the 1970s, the need for a purely visual perception of a work of art has been presented by some authors as a conceptual archaicism, a form of coercion and dictatorship. In his *Enough Tyranny* (Serpentine Gallery, 1972), Marc Camille Chaimowicz literally forces the viewer to listen, smell, and touch parts of the installation, experiencing different, even contradictory sensations. The smell of fading flowers, the glare of a disco ball, the murmur of water and the need to go past heaps of household items create a “tactile reality,” equally involving sight, hearing, smell, and touch. Here we see the management of senses, shared experience, and notions of “anti-alienation” beginning to be applied to works of a relational [8] character, focusing on direct interaction with people. Along with vision, artists of “interaction aesthetics” are beginning to use other sensory capabilities (sound, tactility, smell, taste) constantly, transmitting their messages with a multisensory method.

Conceptual art, which reverses the visual and verbal levels of a work of art, has become a global protest against the visuality and market bias of creativity in the post-war period. In the context of the long process of the conceptualization of

art, we can recall several exhibitions of the late 20th century, the messages of which were formulated not by art critics, but by philosophers. For example, in the 1970s the Yvon Lambert Gallery asked Roland Barthes to write two essays for Cy Twombly's personal exhibitions, "Non Multa Sed Multum" and "The Wisdom of Art." These speak of "sparseness" and "scattering" as painting methods, as well as of the self-elimination of a canvas. According to Barthes, Twombly's art begins exactly where the viewer does not find the Sahara or Italians in the pictures whose names contain these words, but which, however, display nothing contradicting these ideas: "In other words, the spectator has an intimation of another logic [...] At [the] first stage, the title so to speak bars the access to the painting because by its precision, its intelligibility, its classicism (nothing strange or surrealist about it), it carries us on the analogical road, which very quickly turns out to be blocked. [...] This is art according to a rare formula, at once very intellectual and very sensitive, which constantly confronts negativity in the manner of those schools of mysticism called 'apophatic' (negative) because they teach one to examine all that which is not so as to perceive, in this absence, a faint light, flickering but also radiant *because it does not lie*" (author's italics) [1].

Speaking about philosophers as curators of contemporary art exhibitions, we must recall the *Immaterial* exhibition (*Les Immatériaux*) conceived by J.-F. Lyotard and presented in 1986 at the Centre Pompidou. The exhibition offers a chance to see the relationship between art and the viewer as a stream of changing perceptions. The focus is on immateriality and its embodiment in new technologies—in information, media, and digital data that cannot be touched, smelled, or physically felt. The exposition consists of installations and holograms, space photographs and fragments of chemical materials shot through a microscope. To move around the exhibition, visitors use special devices that reproduce internal noises made by their heartbeat, breathing, and walking. Music, advertisements, and audio performances are played loudly. "The immaterial is found among what is visible, felt or audible," the project catalog declares [13]. The exhibition follows the concept of total installation in all of its arrangements and at the same time criticizes Gesamtkunstwerk. Just as classical figurative painting of the post-war period bears the stamp of totalitarianism, Wagner's synesthesia symbolizes terror and violence for Lyotard. In *The Postmodern Explained to Children*, Lyotard wrote that "it is our business *not to supply reality* but to invent allusions to the conceivable which cannot be presented [...] only the transcendental illusion [...] can hope to totalize them into a real unity [...] the price to pay for such as illusion is terror. The nineteenth and twentieth centuries have given us as much terror as we can take. We have paid a high enough price for the nostalgia of the whole and the one, for the reconciliation of the concept and the sensible, of the transparent and the communicable experience. Under the general demand for slackening and for appeasement, we can hear the mutterings of the desire for a return of terror, for the

realization of the fantasy to seize reality. The answer is: Let us wage a war on totality; let us be witnesses to the unrepresentable..." [16].

Finally, the exhibition named *Mémoires d'aveugle: l'autportrait et autres ruines* (*Memoirs of the Blind: The Self-Portrait and Other Ruins*), which took place in 1990 at the Louvre and was curated by Jacques Derrida, worked directly with non-visibility. Its main subject was blindness. The exhibition was accompanied by a book of the same name. Examining 41 Louvre drawings, Derrida put forward a "hypothesis of blinding," referring to the mimetic nature of drawing and comparing the moment of creating a drawing with the loss of vision. According to this hypothesis, the essence of the drawing is in no way connected with the visible because the source of imagination lies entirely at the level of memory. For this exhibition, Derrida selected very different drawings made by 30 different artists from the 14th to the 20th centuries. Henri Fantin-Latour's three-quarter-view self-portraits with an emphasis on one eye are interpreted as Cyclops-Narcissuses; Odilon Redon's self-portrait, as a head-eye. Another important self-portrait is Derrida himself in front of drawings by Matthias Grünewald and Pisanello, clicking mouse buttons and explaining his hypothesis in a video recorded specially for the exhibition. Derrida begins with the pleasure of the gaze and comes up with the idea of arranging an exhibition around the blind spot. Here, the blind spot means the subtle, invisible, and unrepresentable nature of drawing. According to Derrida, every time an artist depicts a blind man, he is fascinated by this figure, hallucinates with it, projects it onto himself, and, in this sense, in every drawing of a blind man, a self-portrait of the artist reveals itself [5]. When the artist, barely touching the surface of the sheet, draws the first line, he no longer belongs to his own vision, he no longer sees, but finds his bearings with his hands, like a blind man wandering in the darkness of extinguished eyes. Blinding here coincides with insight. It brings the artist to life, literally bringing him into the light, which from now on is always inside. Barely touching the sheet with the first slate pencil stroke, the artist loses his vision, but gains a reward (a restitution, if we recall the name of the final text in Derrida's *The Truth in Painting*) in the form of the drawing itself. The drawing coincides with this prophecy of the blind man, it is this prophecy itself, tracing the horizons of the visible with the line of the stylus. But it is visible only for us, not for the artist, whose hand slides along in the impenetrable darkness of the eternal night [5].

## 8. Less Is More

These and many other instances of the conceptualization of the limited capabilities of perception make it obvious that at the end of the 20th century, a radical reduction in the possibility of perception, specifically visual perception, became a very widespread method of contemporary art. For the first time since antiquity, vision has stopped playing an exclusive role in the perception of a work of art. Techniques that limit vision or replace visual perception with bodily perception can be considered one of the key aesthetic

parameters of art at the turn of the 21st century. In our opinion, the trend toward a radical change in the balance of senses is historically associated with the development of the concept of empathy (*Einfühlung*) proposed at the beginning of the 20th century in the aesthetic writings of Theodor Lipps. In modern studies, the idea of non-visual perception intersects with Laura U. Marks's "tactile aesthetics" [18], as well as with the concepts of "experiential aesthetics" and "experiential turn" by Dorothea von Hantelmann [10]. Working within the Cultures of Performativity research project at the Free University of Berlin and summarizing her curatorial and scientific experience at MoMA, Museum Ludwig, and other museums and theaters, von Hantelmann notes that the term "performative" is now applied to a wide range of creative forms, including those works of art that in a purposeful or formal way imply the involvement of the viewer or spectator, theatricality, and play, but are not true performances. She singles out works where experience is a meaning-forming element, the viewer's feelings themselves are a work of art, and the viewer is a co-author. Von Hantelmann denotes the transition from what is depicted by the art piece to the sensations and experiences that it creates as "experiential aesthetics" [10]. She considers the statement made by Robert Morris in 1971 to be one of the key moments in this transition. Morris wanted to create a situation in which people could understand more about themselves and their experiences, rather than get to know one of the versions of his own experiences [3]. This idea, supported by the desire to free the work of art from objectivity, is present in Morris's numerous works and the works of many of his contemporaries.

Among the exhibitions exploring the topic of non-visibility, one of the most important is *Welt ohne Aussen* (*World Without an Outside*). *Immersive Spaces since the 1960s*, organized at Martin-Gropius-Bau in Berlin by curators Thomas Oberender and Tino Sehgal in 2018. The exhibition featured works by artists of different generations, including Larry Bell, Lucio Fontana, Nanda Vigo, Carsten Höller, Nonny de la Peña, Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster, Wolfgang Georgsdorf, Michael Helland, and Cibelle Cavalli Bastos. *Welt ohne Aussen* is an encyclopedic exhibition, progressively systematizing spatial sensations as an artistic technique of the late 20th and early 21st centuries. In the 2010s, exhibitions on this topic were held in several of the world's largest museums. We can also recall Olafur Eliasson's *Din Blinde Passager* (*Your Blind Passenger*, 2010), where the viewer moves along a long corridor through dense fog, unable to see anything past arm's length. The tunnel vision metaphor here refers to the endless process of reconfiguring the senses. A sudden feeling of blindness and disorientation activates all other sensory capabilities, sharpening the perception of one's own body and space. Antony Gormley's *Blind Light* (2007), which also uses fog, can be cited as well. After entering the fog, the viewer experiences his or her own disappearance, which makes the lack of vision an aesthetic experience.

## 9. Multisensory Museum

The Museum Boom of the early 21st century has boosted visitor attendance, as well as the inclusion of new audiences and the incorporation of multisensory practices that equally employ visual and bodily perception. The trend of multisensory communication with new audiences also seems to be part of a global shift that does not yet have a universally accepted designation. Using immersive approaches, multisensory objects, and touch models, contemporary exhibition design communicates with teens, people with disabilities, and visitors with different educational backgrounds. The new logic of the art space also influences the classical museum audience, pushing them to rethink boundaries and hierarchies in the arts and history.

In this regard, the experience of the *Sensing Spaces* exhibition, held in 2014 at the Royal Academy of Arts (London), curated by Kate Godwin and supported by ASC (autism spectrum condition) consultants, is remarkable. Álvaro Siza, Eduardo Souto de Moura, Kengo Kuma, and other architects created, specially for this exhibition, spatial installations in the historic halls of the gallery with the aim of exploring how proportions, materials, and their relationships affect the viewer's sensations in space, how in addition to vision we can perceive the space in which we are located. Calm, anxiety, frustration, euphoria, and other affects in the gallery halls were the artistic messages of the exhibition, including rethinking of the bodily perception of space and visitors' own boundaries.

Similarly, touch models at exhibition halls of the Pushkin Museum (Moscow) as a part of the Accessible Museum Project have been attracting interest from more and more visitors. Touching these reliefs, visually impaired visitors often repeat poses and gestures of characters in order to better understand the plot. And sighted people often close their eyes to imagine how it is to perceive the world through touch. This practice leads to the rethinking of perception by both audiences: sighted and visually impaired.

## 10. Conclusion

Summarizing all of the above, we can say that at the turn of the 21st century, the combination of radically opposite modes of perception or the substitution of one with another became a key method of contemporary art. Since the 1990s, social and dialogical works on the aesthetics of interaction refer, among other things, to the theme of bodily, social, and cultural otherness [21]. Art projects center disabilities, illnesses, and particular physical or mental conditions as alternatives to the totalitarian "norm," casting light on them from various directions.

With regard to the haptic optic in art and art museums, we must mention a very important and multifaceted trend that currently primarily affects educational projects and visitor experience, but is rapidly expanding.

In the last thirty years (ten years in Russia), there has been a tendency to use art as a tool for the inclusion of excluded

people into society. This trend extends to many other groups and communities in need of support, depending on the ethnic, social, and cultural characteristics of each region. Quite often, the solution is found in the field of art therapy and inclusive initiatives, whereby people with disabilities and experiences of social inequality are invited to participate in art mediation as a supportive measure. The introduction of the concept of inclusion into the visitor management of modern cultural institutions has led to the emergence of touch tours designed for the visually impaired, but which are available to all visitors. At first glance, these implementations mainly affect the adjustment of rules and prohibitions in the museum, where just yesterday nothing could be touched. But on closer examination, this is an organic part of an "experiential turn," in which both viewers and artists are not satisfied with distant, optical contact, thus forcing the museum to seek a balance and a form for this contact. We are still at the beginning of this journey.

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