



TOUCH ME, TOUCH ME NOT: SENSES, FAITH AND PERFORMATIVITY IN EARLY MODERNITY: INTRODUCTION

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Abstract

This issue brings together an exciting collection of essays that investigate the collaborative roles of senses in the genesis and experience of renaissance and baroque art. Examining, in particular, the ways in which senses were evoked in the realm of the sacred, where questions of the validity of sensory experience were particularly contentious and fluid, the contributors seek to problematise the neoplatonic imperialism of sight and sense hierarchies that traditionally considered touch, along with smell and taste, as base and bodily. The essays show instead that it was a multiplicity of sensory modalities – touch, sight, hearing, and sometimes even taste and smell – that provided access to the divine and shaped the imaginative, physical and performative experience of works of art. The issue's project thus brings us closer to achieving Geraldine Johnson's eloquent proposal, that, by revisiting Michael Baxandall's famous 'period eye', we might, in fact, arrive at a more aptly described, historically specific, 'period body'.

Keywords: art, vision, touch, senses, faith, performativity, early modernity

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5456/issn.2050-3679/2015w00>

Biographical notes

Erin E. Benay is assistant professor of southern renaissance and baroque art at Case Western Reserve University, Ohio. Her research examines the relationship of empiricism and the senses to early modern painting, the history of collecting in 17th-century Europe, and global currents of exchange and mobility in early modern cultural history. Together with Lisa M. Rafanelli, she is the author of *Faith, Gender, and the Senses in Italian Renaissance and Baroque Art: Interpreting the Noli me tangere and Doubting Thomas* (Ashgate, 2015). Her publications include essays in *Arte Veneta* and *Caravaggio: Reflections and Refractions* (Ashgate 2014). Her next book (under contract with Giles) will focus on Caravaggio's *Crucifixion of St Andrew* at the Cleveland Museum of Art and reveals the ways in which imperial movement in part obfuscated 'original' locations of production, collection and consumption, in this case between Italy and Spain. Benay's current research project, *Italy By Way of India: Routes of Devotional Knowledge in the Early Modern Period*, will consider how travel between Italy and South Asia complicated the iconological construction of saints' lives.

Lisa M. Rafanelli is professor of Italian renaissance art history at Manhattanville College in Purchase, New York. Her research interests include the relationship of early modern feminist theory to the visual arts, the thematisation of the senses in sixteenth-century European art, and the reception of the European renaissance in modern American culture. She has published essays in *Comitatus*, *Critica d'Arte*, *IKON*, *Mary Magdalene Iconographic Studies from the Middle Ages to Baroque* (Brill 2012), *Sense and the Senses in Early Modern Art and Cultural Practice* (Ashgate 2012), and *To Touch or Not to Touch? Interdisciplinary Perspectives on the 'Noli me tangere'* (Peeters 2013), among others. Together with Erin Benay, she is co-author of the forthcoming book, *Faith, Gender and the Senses in Italian Renaissance and Baroque Art* (Ashgate, June 2015).

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Over the past two decades, numerous conference sessions, symposia and several excellent anthologies have sought to reassess the role of the senses in the genesis and reception of early modern art, challenging entrenched notions about sense hierarchies and the privileging of sight as the primary means of acquiring knowledge. This sensory turn in art historical discourse was signaled by scholars of late medieval art, who first challenged the notion of a 'period eye', and proposed instead that the act of viewing in late medieval and early renaissance society was a necessarily imaginative, multi-sensory process. Their scholarship paved the way toward a more nuanced understanding of non-optical modes of reception in early modernity, while also having profound implications for the traditional gendering of sensorial experience, specifically the association of sight with men and tactility with women.

New avenues of inquiry have emerged of late as scholars have come together from disciplines as wide ranging as art history, the social sciences and cognitive neuroscience to examine these issues. Much of the important work to have emerged from these conversations concerns the broader recognition of the importance of touch, hearing, smell and taste, in addition to sight, in what we now understand to be the 'somaesthetic' experience of *beholding*. Papers presented at two panel sessions at the Renaissance Society of America Annual Conference (San Diego, 2013) titled 'Faith, gender and the senses in Italian renaissance and baroque art', added to this lively discussion by further exploring how in devotional contexts, sensory modalities and image reception might be further delimited by gender (both of the subject and the beholder). Contributors to this volume of the *Open Arts Journal* continue this dialogue, exploring the ways the senses were evoked, engaged, embodied, constructed, and at times circumscribed, in devotional art and cultural practice of the early

modern period. As the authors of essays in this volume reveal, it is in devotional contexts in particular – where art could arguably inspire the beholder to transcend the sensorial reality of the artwork itself – that questions of sensory engagement can be most contentious and fluid. These complex issues are compounded by the profound and rapid changes in the theological, philosophical and scientific landscape that altered beliefs about the epistemological value of the senses generally in the early modern period, as well as by changes in gender identities, gender roles and gendered spaces. Indeed, as our understanding of how the senses functioned in early modernity grows increasingly nuanced, we must also consider whether in fact the senses can and should be discussed as naturally delimited phenomena – biological imperatives – rather than culturally and historically specific constructs (Classen, 2012).

The ground-breaking work of Jeffrey Hamburger, Michael Camille and Mary Carruthers, among others, upended the traditional hierarchy of sense premised on the primacy of sight and reminded art historians that even according to the scientific theories of intromission and extramission espoused by Robert Grosseteste (1175–1253), William of Conches (1090–c.1154) and Adelard of Bath (1080–c.1152), vision was understood to entail a haptic, experiential exchange between the viewer and the seen object. Such realisations added 'spatial and bodily means to the perception of the visual' and suggested a greater fluidity between seeing and feeling than was previously acknowledged (Hahn, 2000, p.179). Numerous recent publications have expanded upon these foundations to include the visual culture of the 16th and 17th centuries, demonstrating unequivocally that the five senses functioned far more collaboratively than once understood. Alice E. Sanger and Siv Tove Kulbrandstad Walker's *Sense and the Senses in Early Modern Art and Cultural Practice* (2012) investigates how the faculties of sense were thematised in art and in what ways they were made to function as agents of carnal indulgence, scientific revelation and devotional fervor. Wietse de Boer and Christine Göttler's *Religion and the Senses in Early Modern Europe* (2013) further reveals the degree to which early-modern religious theory and practice 'considered sensation as an interconnected, or even integrated set of experiences', thereby giving rise to profound conflict and difference, particularly during the Reformation period (p.13). In his short and cogent volume, *The Sensory World of Italian Renaissance Art*, François Quiviger argues that 'a culture can be characterised through the ways in which it organises the sensorium (the sensory system), and censors

or promotes certain clusters of perceptions at the expense of others' (2010, p.8). These conclusions parallel those of Penelope Gouk and Helen Hills, who posit in *Representing Emotions: New Connections in the Histories of Art, Music and Medicine*, that human emotions cannot be understood as fixed and unchanging, but rather are brought into being, recognised, controlled and encouraged by social and historical processes (2005, p.15).

This issue builds upon these foundations, while also drawing on recent developments in cognitive neuroscience, which is engaged in re-evaluating how the senses interact on a physiological level. In *Art and the Senses* (2011), for instance, Francesca Bacci and David Melcher reveal the increasing importance – in both neuroscience and art and art history – of the effect of other senses on visual perception. 'The idea of one sense dominating over the others has been superseded in favor of the more accurate view that our perceptual system combines the information coming from different sensory modalities into one unified precept' (Bacci, 2011, p.135). Richard Shusterman has usefully reframed this in terms of pragmatist philosophy, suggesting that the 'living, sentient, purposive body' views objects and spaces in a somaesthetic way – elevating, rather than neglecting the body's role in aesthetic consumption (2012, p.3). Thus, as Geraldine Johnson has so eloquently proposed, we may be on the threshold of re-envisioning Michael Baxandall's famous 'period eye', and arriving at a more aptly described, historically specific, 'period body' (Johnson, 2011, p.59).

For medieval worshippers, true vision extended well beyond the parameters of sight, and entailed insight, knowledge and, ultimately, faith (Carruthers, 2006, pp.287–302). Similarly, we now understand that early modern devotees engaged in an act of *beholding* images – that is, not simply viewing, seeing or witnessing images, but instead binding these activities with a multiplicity of phenomenological dynamics in order to interact with the images more profoundly and over longer periods of time. As Allie Terry-Fritsch and Erin Labbie have explicated, this somaesthetic mode of beholding, whether manual or kinesthetic, allows the subject of the work of art to become central to the acquisition of knowledge and certainty (Terry-Fritsch and Labbie, 2012, p.2). Such devotional beholding might be further delineated by three categories defined by Sarah Blick and Laura Gelfand in their introduction to the important two-volume anthology, *Push Me, Pull You: Imaginative and Emotional Interaction in Late Medieval and Renaissance Art* (2011, pp.xxxv–xxxvi). Blick and Gelfand propose physical interaction (requiring physical movement around or through the work of art

or building), purely imaginative interaction (requiring the viewer to complete a meditative or emotional act via the contemplation of a visual image) and performative interaction (a conflation of both types, enabling the viewer or beholder to engage physically and emotionally within a space-mind continuum), as central models for the types of 'viewer' perception and engagement with which the essays collected here are concerned.

In their recent introduction to the anthology *Performativity and Performance in Baroque Rome* (Ashgate, 2013), Peter Gillgren and Märten Snickare propose that we are now experiencing a 'performative turn' in methodological approaches to humanistic research (2013, p.4). Coined in the 1950s by J.L. Austin, linguistic concepts of performativity revealed the ways in which language does not simply describe, but rather is an active agent in social and cultural change. Judith Butler notably employed this ideology to show how gender identities are 'produced and inscribed through repeated acts and gestures within specific cultural contexts' (Gillgren and Snickare, 2013, p.4 and discussed in Alexander, 2006). Extended to aesthetic theory and art historical discourse, Erika Fischer-Lichte uses this concept to emphasise meaning and experience rather than interpretation, 'phenomenology rather than hermeneutics' (Gillgren and Snickare, 2013, p.5). In many ways this modality offers a corrective to the qualitative, stylistic approach outlined by those like Wölfflin or the iconological directives of Panofsky who identified drama, spectacle and performance with an anti-modernist sentimentality (see, for instance, Panofsky, 1995, p.75). Rather, and as the essays in this volume clarify, the sensorial performance of art – as a durational experience of beholding in a site-specific context – is in many ways quite modern in that it renders passive viewing obsolete. For artists working in the 15th–17th centuries, viewership was not delimited by sight and nor should our interpretation of art of this period be so circumscribed.

Finally, scholars such as Andrea Bolland, Geraldine Johnson and Allie Terry-Fritsch have frequently asserted compelling intersections between the ways in which art was affectively consumed or performed and gender, a topic that we have recently taken up in our book *Faith, Gender, and the Senses in Italian Renaissance and Baroque Art* (Ashgate, forthcoming 2015). In her seminal work on modes of expression of gendered piety in the Middle Ages, Caroline Walker Bynum explicated the ways in which male patrons appropriated aspects of female identity and imagery, thereby teaching us to recognise the fluidity of interplay between gender and modes of devotion. The contributors to this

volume also understand, as Judith Brown has aptly put it, that gender is ‘a process in which men and women situate themselves and are situated by others along a shifting continuum that varies according to several characteristics, among them age, class, region, and even, but by no means only, sex’ (1998, p.5). In recognising the complexity and variability of gender constructs, we must by necessity also acknowledge that the relationship between gender and the senses is far more nuanced than traditional formulations equating men with sight and women with touch, or women more generally with sensorial experience and moral weakness (as elucidated in the writings of Carl Nordenfalk (1995), among others). A somaesthetic interpretation of ‘viewership’ in the early modern period also precipitates a reconsideration of such simplified constructs of gender and phenomenological experience. It also compels us to acknowledge the artificial limitations on sensoriality, especially when the experiences of certain people – often, but not always, women – were prescribed and controlled by social conventions or social institutions.

The essays

This issue begins with two essays that are concerned with artists not normally spoken of in the same breath – Albrecht Dürer and Jusepe de Ribera – both of whom consciously problematise sensorial hierarchies and expectations by visually privileging the ephemeral experiences of the flesh in order to deepen the devotional experience of the beholder. As Shira Brisman explicates in her contribution, in one of the final scenes of his 1511 woodcut sequence, *The Small Passion*, Albrecht Dürer depicts the newly risen Christ extending his forefinger towards the head of Mary Magdalen. As a moment of touching, the *Noli me tangere* belongs to a category of representations that attests to the indexical nature of Christ’s image. The stain of his face in the *Sudarium* or the imprints of his feet on the mountain of the *Ascension* are testaments to his corporeal presence on earth. Throughout *The Small Passion*, Dürer expands the vocabulary of indexical transfer to a ‘haptic theology’ and proves the suitability of prints as a language in which to tell the story of God’s mark on earth in the form of Christ. Yet at the same time, the subtle undermining of these moments of contact signal Christ’s touch as impermanent, a substitute for a more sustained embrace to come. In emphasising the transmission and dissemination of Christ’s contact with those in his immediate circle through a visual vocabulary of touching, pressing, hugging and kissing, Dürer also finds a language with which to describe the process of printing itself.

The link between content, style and the performative aspects of making art are also taken up in Itay Sapir’s essay. By exploring the limits of visibility in his tenebristic paintings, Caravaggio initiated a revolutionary style that seemingly confronted the limitations of mimetic observation by darkening the peripheries of his compositions and concealing the ideal view first promoted by Leon Battista Alberti. In his essay, Sapir argues that it is Jusepe de Ribera, a painter who is often unfairly labeled a ‘Caravaggist’, who brings Caravaggio’s stylistic and ideological approach to a culmination. Ribera’s presentation of martyrs, in particular, create a fascinating play between the saints’ tactile experience of their suffering, their complex, often deficient visual perception, and the viewer’s limited access to visual information when reconstructing the narrative on the basis of pictorial evidence. Sapir analyses Ribera’s creation of mock-tactile textures through purely visual techniques, and the implications of such an artistic method for the hierarchy of the senses and illusory modes of deceit common to much baroque art.

The two essays that follow also recognise the limitations of enumerating and prioritising sensorial experience, while also drawing particular attention to early modern cultural practices that sought to control sensorial agency, in this case on the basis of gender. In her essay, Theresa Flanigan explores these tensions by interrogating the ways in which Dominican Archbishop of Florence Antonino Pierozzi (1389–1459; later St Antoninus), urged women to control their senses for the sake of their own virtue. Antoninus’ magisterial *Summa theologica* (completed c.1454), and his additional spiritual manuals for some of Florence’s most elite women, contain instructions for Christian devotion and virtuous living aimed at ensuring the salvation of the soul. Flanigan’s essay focuses on his *Opera a ben vivere* (c.1454) written for Dianora Tornabuoni Soderini and her sister Lucrezia Tornabuoni de’Medici. In this book, Antoninus prescribes a daily ritual that includes instruction for the custodianship of their external senses, especially vision and speech (his sixth sense), and explains the necessity of sensory control for the protection of the soul, cultivation of virtue and achievement of spiritual salvation. Exactly how Antoninus understands the external senses, their moral potential and their connection with the internal senses, including common sense, imagination, cogitation and memory, is explained in his *Summa* and is contextualised by Flanigan within the broader physiological, psychological and moral conception of the senses to better understand their role in renaissance devotional practice. This analysis in turn may shed new

light on the representational strategies employed by Ghirlandaio in his depictions of the Tornabuoni women in the Cappella Maggiore of Santa Maria Novella.

Like Antoninus, the Florentine Dominican preacher Fra Giovanni Dominici (1355–1419) provides additional in-roads to understanding the complex relationship between gender and the senses in the period, and the perceived needs to limit female sensorial agency. Dominici warned his female reader of the dangers posed by the senses, sight in particular, reminding her of how Eve was led to sin by looking at the apple, Samson by looking at Delilah, and David in looking at Bathsheba. In a related fashion, the Franciscan preacher Fra Bernardino da Siena (1380–1444) warned women against what was evidently a common practice, that of running to kiss the altar or the sacred stone, chalice or paten, and reminded his listeners that they were to consider themselves unworthy of such privileges. The sense of touch was often instrumental in obtaining cures, as well as fulfilling ritual requirements such as the kiss of peace and receiving the sacraments and yet, as the words of these preachers warn, the senses, whose site is the body, can be agents of temptation. Catherine Lawless thus examines the ways in which men sought to control women's sensory engagement with the world, and also how holy images were 'sensed' by women in renaissance Tuscany, where small panel paintings could be held, embraced, kissed and even, in a fashion, became one with the devotee in somatic piety – leaving us to wonder if these practices encouraged the very behavior they sought to police.

The next three essays take as their point of departure the sensorial performance of art, and, in so doing, continue to highlight the fluidity of gender dynamics in the period, while also drawing attention to important distinctions between the public and private experience of beholding art. In her essay about the image type known as the *Johannesschüssel* (St John's severed head on a plate), Barbara Baert argues that this iconography channeled the ancient cult of the severed male head into the Christian context and compelled multisensory engagement with the devotional object and the spiritual experience, from gaze and empathy, to tactile and performative activities, including the act of wearing the severed head. The image of John the Baptist's severed head functioned as a visceral reminder of the actual relic of the Baptist's skull and became one of the most important devotional images of the middle ages and early modern era, in both sculpture and painting. Although optic and haptic perceptions of the *Johannesschüssel* offer compelling interpretive models, in Baert's estimation, it is the often-neglected realm of sound and the acoustic relationship between

worshipper and artifact that is most relevant, especially when what is ultimately at stake is the recognition of silence.

Images of the *Johannesschüssel* enabled the beholder to commune optically, haptically and aurally, with the object. This performance was arguably at its most potent in the private realm, where the devotee enjoyed unmitigated access to the divine image. Private devotional art of the early 17th century was similarly subject to such extended viewing, but it also often found its place in the galleries of noblemen and women whose diverse collections were filled with objects that symbolised their sophisticated taste in art as much as they symbolised their acquisitiveness and inquisitiveness as collectors of 'curiosities'. In her contribution, Erin Benay suggests that these domestic settings created permeable boundaries between sacred and secular within devotional compositions, as the unprecedented physical intimacy portrayed in popular religious subjects such as St Matthew and the Angel, the Stigmatisation of St Francis, or Christ's Agony in the Garden reveal. Representations of the latter reminded viewers of Christ's human, corporal suffering and suggested a model of resolve strengthened by prayer. The *Agony in the Garden* appears on the interior of Jacopo Ligozzi's virtuosic *Portable Altar with Carrying Case* (1608), likely a Medici gift presented to the Austrian court in anticipation of the marriage of archduchess Maria Magdalena to soon-to-be grand duke Cosimo II, and the case study at the center of Benay's essay. Adorned with lavish botanical motifs on its exterior, the Altar's potency as a sacred possession was redoubled by the owner's tactile revelation of the portrayal of Christ supported by an Angel contained inside the case. Comprised of wood, oil on copper, and *pietre dure* inlay, it is an object intended to be held, opened, and its meaning internalised by the likely female beholder. Benay argues that Ligozzi's selective combination of sumptuous materials and choice of subject matter – botanical illustration and Christological iconography – allowed the object to appeal to the full sensorium, and therefore to function as efficaciously as a devotional aid as it did as a curiosity among other rare collectibles.

In arguing for a physically dynamic mode of handling, viewing and perceiving the small Ligozzi altarpiece, Benay argues that the owner of such an object would have done far more than consume this precious commodity with her eyes. Instead, as Allie Terry-Fritsch postulates in her essay, the encounter between patron/recipient and object was a somaesthetic one. Terry-Fritsch examines this mode of beholding in her treatment of the Sacro Monte di Varallo in northern Italy. She proposes that the active cultivation of

renaissance pilgrims' bodies and minds at this unusual location contributed to a heightened somaesthetic encounter within the multi-media chapels at the site. The physical performance of viewing at Varallo accentuated awareness in all sensory receptors to activate the prosthetic body and mind of pilgrims, who were physically challenged while simultaneously mentally engaged as they made their way through the steep and winding landscape of the site. Invited to enter into the architectural environments and to touch, smell, taste and hear in addition to view the holy simulacra, both male and female pilgrims recorded the powerful affective bonds produced through such active bodily cultivation and spiritual stimulation. By considering the historical experience of visiting the site, Terry-Fritsch provides an alternative explanation for artistic style at Varallo, which, she argues, must be understood through the somaesthetics of the artistic programme's original viewers. Moreover, the somaesthetic strategies employed at Varallo enabled pilgrims to move beyond traditional gendered performance of the body in devotional contexts, and to assume multiple alternative identities and genders, from the role of a contemporary pilgrim to the Holy Land to that of a Biblical personage (or multiples thereof).

The tensions and misunderstandings inherent in the assumption that female experience may only be situated in a liminal place between riotous abundance and righteous control – between sense and spirit – are at the heart of Andrea Bolland's essay. Although seemingly ripped from a different page of this history, Gian Lorenzo Bernini's *St Teresa and the Angel* for the Cornaro Chapel (1647–52) is perhaps the artist's most sensually charged creation, and the seemingly physical nature of Teresa's ecstasy is today even acknowledged in survey textbooks. In her new assessment of the sculpture, Bolland demonstrates the ways in which Bernini staged this sculptural performance. Teresa herself opened the door to this reading when, in describing her spiritual ecstasy, she admitted that 'the body doesn't fail to share in some of it, and even a great deal'. Yet the balance between sense and spirit in the sculpture emerges somewhat differently when it is viewed (literally and figuratively) in context: as an altarpiece in a chapel where its presentation is structured as a 'performance', complete with spectators/witnesses, and as the central image of the

left transept of Santa Maria della Vittoria – a church whose dedication derives from the power of an image displayed. If the statue group is read as a divine ecstasy *witnessed*, rather than a mystic encounter *experienced*, it engages another discourse, with its own metaphors and meanings. According to Bolland, the saint's swoon has less to do with the erotic pull of the senses than with their absence, challenging an artist celebrated for his ability to transform insensate stone into vulnerable flesh with the task of deliberating staging an inaccessible event.

The authors included in this issue thus contribute to the expanding art historical discourse on the complex processes of *beholding* works of art in the early modern period. In their work, Allie Terry-Fritsch, Erin Felicia Labbie, Jonathan Sawday and others have proposed an 'approach to the construction of the subject who not only sees, but who *beholds*, with a multiplicity of phenomenological dynamics at play' (Terry-Fritsch and Labbie, 2012, p.2). Arguing for a mode of perception that sees with the body, 'touches with the eyes, and which synaesthetically transfers affect and cognition through visual encounter', these scholars and those included herein, suggest a system wherein the 'viewer' becomes a beholder who is engaged in a dialogue with the visual image (p.2). By upending antiquated understandings of sense hierarchies and outmoded truisms about the gendering of sensorial experience, this wide-ranging collection of essays sheds new light on the shifting variables needed to fully contextualise the imaginative, physical and performative experience of works of art – issuing a clarion call for continued investigation.

Acknowledgements

We would like to extend our thanks to the many people who have been involved in the making of this special issue of the *Open Arts Journal*. Helen Hills and Susan Russell provided both inspiration and invaluable feedback for which we are enormously grateful. Thanks as well to Heather Scott and Peter Heatherington, among others on the production staff, whose tireless work behind the scenes helped to make this volume a reality. Finally, we would also like to thank Alice Sanger, who has encouraged and supported our work on this volume and in other endeavours.

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