

Art is a composite creature: a repeatedly reassembled, hybrid anatomy that borrows from many places – those from within and beyond its borders.

A hint of this migratory, cross-pollinating, interspecific quality can be read in Alphonso Lingis's observations: "Aren't all the plastic arts derived from the artwork that the artist makes of his own body in song and in dance? It was song and dance that continually motivated humans to adorn themselves with plumes and furs of other species whose songs and dances they took up. And like the stagemaker bowerbirds, humans began to fashion their habitats, their homes and gardens."¹

But first and foremost, every creature – either in biology, or art – needs a body. And the body starts with touch.

A sentient body is tactile and haptic:

A hand that can probe and caress. The skin that pulses, tickles, burns, gets aroused or repelled. The mouth that can grasp and tear apart – much like the hands. The sliding or pressing lips; the wet tongue that is meeting the roof of the mouth and licking the teeth. A finger that fits perfectly in the cavity of the nose or the ear. A whole leg, or an arm, or the belly, immersing slowly into the ice-cold sea.

One can imagine the supposed darkness of blindness, the silence that might come with hearing loss, and even a tasteless, odorless world. But what would it feel like to have no sense of touch? Without touch – without the sensation of any material contact – there is not only no sensing of weight, textures, volumes, temperature, shapes. There is no feeling of solid ground, of gravity, even of movement. Without a touching body, there is also no space.

While all the senses are vital for our embodied existence, the role of touch is unique as it provides the fundamental experiences necessary for knowing the distinction between the external world and ourselves. Étienne Bonnot de Condillac's thought experiment², where a marble statue was gradually brought to life by unlocking its senses one by one, served to demonstrate precisely that; it was only by means of touch that the statue became fully alive and self-aware. Empiricism also reminded that the senses are essential not only for our immediate sensory perception, but for the formation of any complex knowledge and ideas, including the processes of memory and imagination.

However, the relation of touch and memory is intricate – perhaps due to the fact that touch conveys (more strongly than other sensory modalities) the sense of presence. So much so, that we may feel what is not present anymore: like in the rare phenomenon of phantom limb, where an amputated limb is felt as real as if it was still there. Conversely, we all know the experience of the loss of sensation – either as a temporary numbing of a limb, or as the consequence of medical anesthetizing – and the uncanny feeling of the seeming non-existence of that body part.

On the one hand, skin and other sensitive bodily tissues work as a collection of our lived and then archived sensations: the lingering memories of caresses and embraces, or all the traces inherent in wounds, sunburns, bruises, scars. On the other hand, touch allows for more than just storing the past. It can conjure what is not there (yet): even in the absence of any contact taking place, a mere anticipation of touch can induce the experience of an actual sensation.

Therefore, a body that touches inevitably collects as well as projects. What emerges from this growing repository of past recollections and future constructions is an assemblage of stories and tales that are as phantasmal and imaginary, as they are palpable and felt. Both, remembering and sensing, are shaped through a kaleidoscopic lens.

As Jorge Luis Borges concludes in one of his poems:

We are our memory,
we are this chimerical museum of shifting forms,
this heap of broken mirrors.³

Indeed, being is another composite creature. Not just of two arms, two legs, and a head, even if adorned with feathers, fins or claws; but a plural morphology of countless limbs, of extensions that stretch into the lived and imagined time, a continually changing body molded by the liminal articulations between the world and the self. A chimera.

Maša Tomšič

1 Alphonso Lingis, *Body Transformations: Evolutions and Atavisms in Culture* (London: Routledge, 2005).

2 Étienne Bonnot de Condillac, *Traité des sensations* (1754).

3 Jorge Luis Borges, "Cambridge (1969)," in *In Praise of Darkness*, trans. Norman Thomas di Giovanni (London: Penguin Books, 1975).

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