ART AND THE SENSES


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Art and the Senses is an excellent sourcebook on the relationship between art and our senses. Comprised of over 30 chapters and coming in at over 600 pages, this compendium is, to my knowledge, the first to broadly tackle sensory perception in relation to artistic endeavors. Indeed, it offers an extraordinary overview of the subject. Moreover, despite covering a broad spectrum of both qualitative and quantitative material, the book is quite accessible to a generalist reader like me. Topics include the neuroscience of sensory processing in the body, cultural influences on how the senses are used in society, interviews with practitioners about their work, artist papers about their projects, and case studies (e.g. a blind artist). The majority of the papers are easy to read, although I did find a few of the articles a bit technical.

Given its length, Art and the Senses works best as a reference tool. One impressive (and appreciated) component is the cross-referencing from paper to paper, a feature too often excluded from anthologies. Readability is further enhanced by a useful index (23 pages), well-chosen illustrations and the book's overall organization. Early chapters set the stage by examining historical attitudes to and views of the senses. These foundational essays are followed by thematically based groupings that probe current projects and present contemporary research. Early essays cover touch and corporeal senses, as well as the chemical senses of taste and smell. Auditory experience and vision come next. The final chapters offer more of a potpourri, or perhaps a multisensory theme, with articles on synesthesia, multisensory work, dance and architecture. Some topics, film being a good example, fall into more than one of the above categories. The interspersed interviews are a nice touch, as they offer a change in rhythm and tone. These include a conversation between Francesca Bacci and Italian contemporary art critic Achille Bonito Oliva and two interviews by David Melcher (one with Brazilian artist and photographer Vik Muniz, and another with jazz musicians and educators Greg Osby and Skip Hadden on the mystery of representation).

Since our senses provide perceptual data, I think each reader will experience the essays quite differently, and the content is likely to stimulate both subjective and critical reactions. I found myself fascinated by the way the writing piqued my awareness of my own “body space” and reminded me of my biases. I also liked the way the book's multisensory focus interfaced with the contemporary interest in networks and interactions in the arts, sciences and humanities. In some cases I found the information from beyond my normal scope spoke to old conundrums. For example, several of the articles about music reminded me that it is easy to simply like music without having any educated understanding of basic musical notation and auditory research. As a naïve listener, I know much of the resonance of music is more opaque to me than it is to others with knowledge of the finer points. Nonetheless, I recognize that musical sounds impact me deeply. Thus, I particularly appreciated the essays on musical topics.

The subtle tension between thinking, knowledge and sensory space often came to mind as I read. This got me thinking about the basic division into exteroceptive and interoceptive senses. I appreciated the examples that clearly expressed the ways in which art is multidimensional. For example, the Alexis Wright phantom-limb photographs, discussed by Siân Ede, offer a means for us to see the missing limbs of phantom limb subjects and to sense how the non-existent sensations “feel.” The paper on “mirror neurons” hovers around this kind of empathy. Galilese also adds: “Creativity is a distinguished feature of the human condition that I am afraid can hardly be reduced to the functional properties of specific populations of neurons, mirror neurons included” (p. 461).

As a whole, the inclusion of artists, scientists and humanists provides many contrasts and counterpoints. For example, I found that Rosalyn Driscoll's chapter, “Aesthetic Touch,” in which she discusses how haptic experiences enrich and enhance visual perception and her own efforts to develop art that people with all abilities can touch, provides a nice counterpart to the scientific research on touch. Bacci’s chapter, “Sculpture and Touch,” follows up on Driscoll’s discussion of her method by pointing out that “Driscoll regularly suggests that the public use a blindfold to first encounter her sculptures haptically before doing so through sight” (p. 143).
Much later in the book a chapter on a blind painter, Subject E.A., presents a striking contrast to Driscoll’s work. The research presented in this chapter focuses on mental representations and detail work that shows the blind use the same parts of the occipital cortex that the sighted use for visual processing to process other sensory modalities. Subject E.A., who lost his vision at a young age, offers a means to investigate how the “visual” brain of the blind works, using brain imaging to isolate the perceptual and cognitive processes involved in his drawing, scribbling, etc. By contrast, in their chapter David Melcher and Patrick Cavanagh look at pictorial cues in art and visual perception. They were not concerned with mental representations, but how the brain recognizes objects, understands spatial depth and uses illumination information in natural environments.

Overall, I found the book to be solid, and yet it also reminded me of the limitations of an edited volume. Even though a reader becomes aware of a great deal of material, reading Art and the Senses feels like taking an introductory course rather than an in-depth seminar. However, the content also makes it clear how much one can gain from comprehensive essays that cover a spectrum. Moreover, since there were common themes across the essays, the quality of the contributions will make the book a fulcrum for more expanded studies. One theme is the need to include the body and embodiment in the sensory discussion. Another is the role of learning in shaping the way people use their senses. Finally, individual authors and the volume as a whole make the point that we need to include equal measures of taste, touch and smell in the discussion of the senses, as opposed to the historical tendency to elevate vision. There is also some agreement that art has a role in making us aware of our senses. In summary, while Art and the Senses introduces exciting ideas, because the authors present short papers the collection as a whole is more general than specific. Fortunately, as mentioned above, the careful internal cross-referencing in the volume makes it more useful than many collections. In addition, most of the authors also include extensive bibliographies readers can use to follow up further.

As a visual artist who writes about visual art, perception, synesthesia and both contemporary and historical topics, I was—not surprisingly—drawn to the sections that intersected with these areas. The two papers on synesthesia (by Jamie Ward and Cretien van Campen) argue that studies in this area are important for both synesthetes and non-synesthetes; a sentiment I think is important to keep in mind as we re-visit the senses. Geraldine A. Johnson’s paper, “The Art of Touch in Early Modern Italy,” offers a nicely fleshed out discussion of the paragone debate of that period, one that continues to this day. She looks at the key players (e.g. Alberti, Ghiberti, Il Tribolo, Benedetto Varchi, Leonardo, Michelangelo, etc.) and reiterates the debate over whether sculpture or painting was the more noble art. To oversimplify, those who advocated for sculpture saw its tactility as a plus, while those who advocated for painting saw sculpture’s use of touch as crude, even arguing that painting was superior because a painter could imitate a sculpture abstractly.

Nick Wade’s paper, “The Scientist and the Sixth Sense,” uses perceptual portraits to depict the scientific history of the senses and offers an overview on the changing views of key figures. As always, Wade’s work is impressive. His framing of different sensory classifications outlines differing categorizations among scientists as he surveys debates about whether there is a sixth sense and what it might be (a muscle sense, a temperature sense, a movement sense, etc.). It may seem odd to offer more than one choice for a sixth sense and invidious to choose only one—Wade addresses this point, too. In Wade’s essay, as in most included in Art and the Senses, the Aristotelian “five senses” serve as the traditional touchstone, with the larger theme being that there is also an expanded framework. Howes presents somewhat of a contrast when he introduces an anthropological perspective and tries to lay the groundwork for a cross-cultural multimodal theory. In advocating for unity-in-multiplicity, however, Howes’s framework did not seem flexible enough to account for the multiplicity of our universe of senses.

I highly recommend Art and the Senses. The volume creates a space for examining the topics through a number of lenses. This introduction to sensory awareness in terms of the arts, sciences and humanities is, I believe, the first to comprehensively tackle the senses from a cross-disciplinary vantage point. The treatment is robust and can help develop further conversations in this area. Finally, perhaps the highest compliment I can give the book is to relate my experience with it. Although I received a review copy of the hardcover version some time ago, the writing of this review got sidetracked because I began to use the book for my own work. Given how helpful I have found the papers, I think those who are interested in this area of study will want a copy of the volume in their own library.