

The Sensorium of the Extraordinary

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Written in 1986 at the height of continental philosophy and literary criticism's obsessive turn towards textuality, philosopher Michel Serres' extraordinary poetic study of "mingled bodies," *The Five Senses (Les Cinq Sens)* is a searing indictment of Western thought's continued parsing and hierarchization of sensory life in which "abstraction divides up a sentient body, eliminates taste, smell and touch, retains only sight and hearing, intuition and understanding." "To abstract," according to Serres, is to "tear the body to pieces rather than merely leave it behind;" what he ironically labels "analysis."¹

Structured over five long chapters, each with a cryptic but seductive sounding title (*Veils, Boxes, Tables, Visit, Joy*), *The Five Senses* seeks to thoroughly restructure the ways we understand sensory experience not as rationally split between the five sense organs but instead, mingled and mixed. Yet, the book's structure operates as a paradox, at first appearing to reify the very sensorial boundaries that Serres seeks to demolish. The opening chapter *Veils* depicts a life altering event in which Serres (a former naval officer) describes in excruciating detail the bodily experience of being trapped in the hold of burning ship with only the sense of touch to guide him to salvation. Amplifying tactility over visuality and aurality, *Veils* focuses on the exquisite details of haptic life; the voluptuous folds of skin and fabric redolent in Pierre Bonnard's canvas *The Bathroom* from the late 1800s, in which the all powerful eye attempting to scan across the surface's rich textural details is unseated by the tissue-like veils of nude bodies, draperies and chiaroscuro creases of light and dark. Vision, states Serres, "loses its pre-eminence in the very area in which it is dominant, in painting."²

Initially, other chapters of the book also follow the logic of separation. *Boxes* is a longing paean to an auditory world in which the senses of hearing "anesthetized by language" are freed through atavistic disruptions of noise. The audible is rooted both inside and outside the body: in the murmur and hum of cells, the clattering of nature and the social racket of collectives' eternal shouts and arguments. Alas, when Serres hits the chapter entitled *Tables*, he betrays his ruse. Smell mingles with taste as demonstrated by his description of a bottle of 1947 Yquem wine in which both senses

¹ Serres, *Five Senses*, 26.

² Serres, *Five Senses*, 37.

cross each other graciously, their discretization falling away. Writing in his introduction to the English translation of the book, the cultural historian Steven Connor claims that Serres' strategy of illusionary separation and then, sudden leakage, is anchored in the attention to the senses as they relate to their corporal situatedness – that the “senses are nothing but the mixing of the body, the principle means whereby the body mingles with the world and with itself, overflows its borders.”³

The Five Senses is also useful for grappling with *Displace v.2.0*, the experience that unfolds over the three rooms of the abandoned TAG gallery here in Den Haag, not only through Serres' critique of how the tyranny of language segments the sensible world of the body (“the word prohibits the senses and most especially those that do not concern it”) but also in how the relationship between body and world is re-imagined through a perspective of weaving, intermingling, crossovers and interference.⁴ Serres populates his work with references to the ways in which the sensible is diffused into the environment surrounding us through occellations of skin-like surfaces, the supple flows of tapestries, the bursting forth of storms and quivering winds, shimmering reflections and resonating and shouting black boxes.⁵

The sensible is thus exchanged among voluptuous textures, chaotic din, atmospheres of aroma and charged objects in the world. “Cultures mature when they transfer their focus on relationships between people to innocent objects,” yet, the sensible that Serres posits is not simply deferred onto the inanimate.⁶ Indeed, in an ironic twist, his conception of the sensible exchanged suggests distant similarities to Maurice Merleau-Ponty's (a philosopher criticized by Serres for his earlier overemphasis on understanding perception through language) later concept of a universal “flesh” which explores the potential interdependence between formerly separated subjects and objects, sentience and the sensible. Unraveled in his final unfinished work *The Visible and the Invisible*, the concept of the flesh is developed by Merleau-Ponty as a way of repairing the breach between sentient body and objective world that was the purview of the philosopher's mammoth *Phenomenology of Perception*. The relationship between the sentient and sensible is now thought to be chiasmic or one of the *reversibility* in which the flesh of world and body wrap back onto each other's realms of perception. We feel ourselves being sensed by things just as we make those things visible and tactile through our intertwining with them.

Although Serres' *The Five Senses* is aligned alongside Aristotle's division of the senses, this schematization has also historically been challenged, not the least by artists. From Proust to Scriabin, Kandinsky to Klee, Messiaen to Ligeti, as well as the work you find yourself inside of here at Today'sArt, the entangling of the supposedly divided

³ Serres, *Five Senses*, 3.

⁴ Serres, *Five Senses*, 186.

⁵ Serres, *Five Senses*, 32.

⁶ Serres, *Five Senses*, 39.

senses has resulted (perhaps unwittingly) in the forging of unholy synesthetic relationships among our complex “perceptual systems” (as James J. Gibson uses the term) of seeing and hearing, tasting and smelling, touching and hearing.⁷ Meanwhile, the social sciences are also getting into the fray. The burgeoning field labeled the anthropology of the senses has set out high goals to explode the Aristotelian separation of the senses, a separation which sensory anthropologists argue is not replicated in indigenous cultures where sensorial factors from the symbolic to the experienced are not conveniently split between the dominant Western faculties of vision and hearing but involve phenomenon such as heat (the Tzotzil of Chiapas, Mexico), color (the Desana of the Amazon) and smell (the Onge of the Andaman Islands).⁸

But sensory anthropology and sensory ethnography also seek to rescue the study of the senses from the rubrics of psychology, the measurement techniques of psychophysics and neuro-chemical attributions arising in cognitive science. As anthropologist David Howes writes, “This revolution in the study of perception highlights the fact that the senses are constructed and lived differently in different societies and periods. The perceptual is cultural and political, and not simply (as psychologists and neuroscientists would have it) a matter of cognitive processes or neurological mechanisms located in the individual subject.”⁹

Despite a history of separating the senses into discrete categories and spatial realms in the brain, as in the 19th century German physiologist Johannes Müller’s long accepted 1826 [1838] doctrine of *specific nerve energies* which articulated that “sensation is not the conveyance to consciousness of a quality or state of an external object but rather the conveyance to consciousness of a quality or state of our nerves, brought on by an external cause,” now even cognitive neuroscience has begun to shift its interest towards what researcher Simon Baron-Cohen calls “the breakdown of modularity,” which occurs, in one instance, in the clinical condition known as synesthesia.¹⁰ In fact, if synesthesia, the cross mixing of one sense modality with another, is an anomalous physiological condition caused by electrical interference or

⁷ See James J. Gibson, *The Senses Considered as Perceptual Systems* (New York, Greenwood Press, 1983).

⁸ See Constance Classen, “McLuhan in the Rainforest: The Sensory Worlds of Oral Cultures,” *Empire of the Senses: The Sensual Cultural Reader*, ed. David Howes (Oxford: Berg Publishing, 2005), 147-163.

⁹ David Howes, “Architecture of the Senses,” *Senses of the City: An Alternative Approach to Urbanism*, ed. Mirko Zardini (Montreal and Baden: Lars Muller, 2005).

¹⁰ Andrei Gorea, “Thoughts on Specific Nerve Energies.” *Representations of Vision: Trends and Tacit Assumptions in Vision Research*, ed. Andrei Gorea (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 219-230; S. Baron-Cohen, et al. “Coloured speech perception: Is Synaesthesia What happens When Modularity Breaks Down?” *Perception*, 22, 1993, 419-426.

“leakage” between different areas of the brain that relate to perception, what science holds as the perceptual norm is as equally involved in the breakdown of modularity. As neuroscience is increasingly investigating, so-called *cross modal integration* suggests that overlaps between different senses at the core neural level are more complex than originally thought. Serious research has only been focused on such cross and *multi-sensory integration* for the past few decades since historically, vision and hearing were approached as being processed by separate sensory channels and nerve systems.

In the final pages of *The Five Senses*, Michel Serres announces the overcoming of language through the practices of contemporary science. Science, Serres writes, not only shifts the makeup of the world but also “derealizes the things designated by language.”¹¹ If calculations, algorithms and the endless flow of data replace language, then what becomes of the body and the senses? Does sensation and perception still exist, unadulterated by the deafening noise of information, technology and media? Has science in its thirst for knowing the world left the body as well as language in what Serres describes as a “phantom in rags,” gasping for its last breaths? Or is the supposedly new knowing that science announces just another turn in our anthropocentrically-centered worldview which continues to deceive us from the sentience of spaces beyond human skin, eyes, noses, mouths and ears? Has technology liberated the “old organ from an old duty” as Serres names the senses or has the sensorium always already been beyond the cuts of subject and object, self and world, nature and techne— in other words, something truly extraordinary?

¹¹ Serres, *Five Senses*, 342.