

CENTRE FOR SENSORY STUDIES

DISSERTATION DEFENSE AND RECEPTION



Image credit: Ernesto Neto, *Ernesto Neto: The Edges of the World*, 2010, exhibition, Hayward Gallery: Southbank Centre, London. Image courtesy of India Roper Evans

Constructed Atmospheres: Synesthesia and the Senses in Contemporary Art

Melanie Schnidrig

Wednesday, 14 February 2024

Defense: 10:30 – 13:00,
LB362, Webster Library

Reception to follow at ~ 1:30 PM
H-1122.01, Hall Building

[RSVP](#)

This dissertation appropriates the term “synesthesia” from the neurological condition synesthesia, wherein the stimulation of one sense results in the stimulation of another sense. In this study synesthesia is referenced in the proposed terminology “plastic synesthesia,” a term used to define multisensorial contemporary artworks and stretch the neurological definition of the condition to encompass the concept of sensory “layering.” The concept of “layering” refers to the multiple senses induced by the case studies that are felt at the same time. Plastic synesthesia is also used to define the non-ocularcentric methodology demonstrated in this study. As a methodology, plastic synesthesia identifies the senses and affects involved in multisensory artworks to emphasize how the senses are layered to produce embodied and immersive experiences that augment the “visual” art experience.

This study posits that plastic synesthetic artworks draw attention to the multisensorial nature of perception distorted by the ocularcentric and sensorially segregated model established in the modern period. This point is demonstrated first with an analysis of Brazilian artist Ernesto Neto’s sculptures, which stimulate the “lower” senses of touch and smell to facilitate an immersive art experience. It also examines Danish-Icelandic artist Olafur Eliasson’s pieces that use non-art materials to produce multisensory atmospheres. Finally, this dissertation analyzes London-based design group Flying Object’s 2015 multisensory installation Tate Sensorium, Tate Britain, London, which layers visual artworks with non-visual stimuli. In utilizing these two iterations of plastic synesthesia in this dissertation, this study demonstrates an approach to analyzing artworks that considers all of the senses.

Melanie Schnidrig is an art historian from British Columbia, Canada. She is currently pursuing her PhD in Humanities at Concordia University, Montreal. She graduated with a BFA from the University of the Fraser Valley in 2012, and completed the Contemporary Art, Design and New Media Art Histories (MA) program at OCAD University in 2015. During her masters research, her interests came to focus on problematizing the ocularcentrism of western art history by interrogating the multisensorial and synesthetic qualities of contemporary installation art. The resulting dissertation was awarded the Outstanding Major Research Paper Award from OCAD University. Schnidrig’s PhD research continues on this trajectory. Her thesis research amalgamates the disciplines of art history, psychology and anthropology. In so doing she aims to address both the psychological and anthropological foundations of synesthetic responses and multisensorial perception, while exploring ways synesthesia-like responses can be stimulated by artworks.