The Senses and Society

ISSN: 1745-8927 (Print) 1745-8935 (Online) Journal homepage: http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rfss20

Making sense and the sense of making

Nigel Power

To cite this article: Nigel Power (2017) Making sense and the sense of making, The Senses and Society, 12:2, 227-230, DOI: 10.1080/17458927.2017.1319159

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17458927.2017.1319159

Published online: 16 Jun 2017.

Submit your article to this journal

View related articles

View Crossmark data

Full Terms & Conditions of access and use can be found at
http://www.tandfonline.com/action/journalInformation?journalCode=rfss20

Download by: [5.63.149.67] **Date:** 16 June 2017, At: 20:55

Making sense and the sense of making

Sensory arts and design, edited by Ian Heywood, London, Bloomsbury, 2017, 253 pp., £84.99 (hardcover), ISBN: 9781474280198

It is odd, perhaps, given the fundamental role of the senses in the arts, that so little detailed attention has been paid to the sensorial dimensions of artistic production, expression and experience. In *Sensory Arts and Design*, editor Ian Heywood sets out to address this lacuna by weaving together a collection of contemporary perspectives drawn from across the creative sectors. The result is a kaleidoscope of rich and varied material – theories, methods, sources and resources – that will prove valuable for both arts specialists looking to apprehend and unpack the sensory aspects of their disciplines and for others wishing to gauge the kinds of sensory concerns that animate innovative areas of contemporary creative practice and discourse.

With thirteen contributions ranging from architectural criticism to epistemologies of creative practice, and from art historical reinterpretations to questions of design application, giving coherent form to this collection must have presented very real editorial challenges. In my opinion, however, Heywood's attempt to shape these into three sections never really convinces. For example, Section Three comprises "essays that explore visual and tactile responses to original paintings as opposed to reproductions, the challenges to interface design offered by virtual objects and screen access, and the strategies of artists confronting invisible or barely visible subjects" (21). If anything, this list points to a rather appealing aspect of the book, its unruliness. This is then a heterogeneous collection, with theories and ideas in the essay one is reading repeatedly chiming with methods and practices in others one has read. Indeed, much of the pleasure and interest for the reader of *Sensory Arts and Design* will arise, I feel, from this hypertextual quality. Not surprisingly, perhaps, the range and complexity of the material in the book also presents challenges for the reviewer. My approach here is to try to assemble a selection of essays that engage with central and recurring themes, and suggest this sense of interconnectedness.

The book begins with Heywood's extended introductory essay. In the first part of this, the author seeks to frame the approaches to sensory arts and design pursued in various ways throughout the book. Here Heywood draws on Howes (2013) to good effect, arguing for the necessity of combining a sensory approach to the understanding of culture and a cultural approach to the understanding of the senses. At the heart of the book's project, then, is an interrogation of the ways in which the processes and products of art and design, "give meaning to sensory phenomena and a sensory presence to meaning" (1). With an agenda established, Heywood proceeds by setting out an art-historical context for the collection. This part of the introduction is eloquent and informative and will be useful for the non-specialist reader. The section on the visual arts – though sticking close to a rather conventional art historical narrative – is clearly presented and deftly theorised. If anything, the section on music and sound art is even more successful. Heywood is less sure footed, however, in his discussion of design, overlooking, for example, the profound reassessments of theory and practice emerging from industrial design's exploration of ecological psychology and architecture's ongoing encounters with phenomenology (see Smets et al. (1994) for an example of the former and Pallasmaa (2014), the latter).

The collection proper begins with Nick Dunn's essay "Shadowplay". In this, Dunn argues that a deadly double movement systematically impoverishes contemporary urban reality. On the one hand, our growing reliance on "attention-leaching digital devices" isolates us from the rhythms and textures of the urban everyday, recasting us as desensitized, distracted and de-situated social subjects. On the other, the simultaneous fragmentation, homogenization and privatisation of our cities flattens out urban life, draining it of its socio-sensory qualities and foreclosing ludic

possibilities. In response, Dunn takes his creative practice into the streets, night walking through the overlooked and often-avoided fringes of Northern English cities. With vision compromised and habitual mental maps short-circuited, heightened yet ambivalent multi-sensory urban experiences disclose themselves to the nocturnal wanderer, fuelling – Dunn argues – critical and creative responses to the urban platitudes of abstract space.

Whilst Dunn's essay is rewarding in its own right, it also sets in motion a set of recurring themes: critique of the hegemony of vision; celebration of the richness and complexity of multi-sensory embodied experience; exploration of the senses as a medium for imagination, analysis and innovative inquiry. The possibilities of social research through sensorially informed creative practice is, for example, addressed and extended in Chapter Four of the collection. In "Sonifying Memory", sound artist Linda O'Keefe sets out a critical exegesis of her 2014 gallery installation, *Sound Radio Spaces*. O'Keefe carefully and effectively weaves together a theoretical account of the socio-cultural significance of urban soundscapes, the necessity of creating robust interdisciplinary sensory research methodologies, and the delicate compromises between space, technology, content and audience, required to realise site-specific artistic work. This exemplary essay illustrates and illuminates the rhythm and texture of research-led artistic practices and will, I believe, make an important contribution to this increasingly important field. For non-artists, "Sonifying Memory" will provide valuable insight into the structure and dynamics of that complex of intellectual, investigative and material concerns that animate creative processes.

Section Two – perhaps, the most thematically coherent in the book – shifts our attention from the perceptual dimensions of creative practice to the largely untapped sensory possibilities of art and design history, criticism and theory. In the first essay, Caro Verbeek constructs a sensory history of the early twentieth century avant-garde movement of Futurism. In particular, Verbeek investigates an often-overlooked aspect of the Futurist project: the aesthetic and cultural engagement with olfactory experience. Futurist artists were amongst the first to write about smell, produce scents and integrate odours into everyday and artistic objects. In exploring this little researched aspect of Futurist practice, Verbeek confronts a central problem facing the sensory historian: *sensory reconstruction*. Verbeek works out from Smith's (2007) influential work on sensory history, in particular, his premise that to grasp the meaning of a scent requires the researcher to locate it in its historical context. However, unlike Smith, Verbeek is dubious that language alone can capture and communicate the complexity of historical olfactory experience, arguing instead for the creative integration of actual or reconstructed smells within the explanatory and interpretive frameworks more typical of the art museum. For most of his essay Verbeek grounds this perspective in theoretical discourse or with reference to his own research and curatorial practice. In the conclusion, however, he adopts a more speculative tone, imagining future possibilities for the storage and transmission of olfactory information and with this the promise of enriching understanding of our volatile heritage.

If Verbeek's work seeks to open up new territory for a sensory art history, Joy Monice Malnar's contribution does similar labour for sense-based critical practices. The 2015 Chicago Architecture Biennial set out to survey the "State of the Art of Architecture". Yet, as Malnar forcefully argues, what was revealed was a sensorially impoverished and culturally insensitive profession intoxicated by self-importance. Malnar focuses on one aspect of the Biennial, a competition to design an iconic yet functional lakefront kiosk. One would imagine that the architectural firms and schools involved would develop programs that took into account the specific socio-cultural and ecological contexts of place, and base their design decisions on the various needs of the area's users. Yet none of the finalists seem vaguely interested in such matters and choose to explore instead the universal, formalist and de-contextualised concerns of much contemporary architectural theory and practice. Unusually, this competition required the finalists to construct their proposals *in situ*. This gave Malnar the opportunity to subject each to a detailed sensory deconstruction of the

buildings' physical, social and cultural affordances. The result is a powerful analysis that demonstrates the potency of sensory approaches for art and design criticism and theoretical discourse.

As noted above, the five chapters that make up the book's final section are the most diverse of all. Of these, "Drawn Away from Vision" by Susan Casey and Gerry Donnelly, is particularly significant. Through a series of philosophically contextualised case studies of creative practice, the authors construct a subtle, complex and persuasive account of the epistemological status and possibilities of drawing. To draw, they argue, is not simply to depict or represent the visible world but to register it phenomenologically, to probe its visuality and to produce knowledge of it. Seen in this light drawing is not a wholly visual medium but rather an embodied means of materialising our corporeal and, therefore, multi-sensory encounters with the world. The rejection of hierarchical and compartmentalised models of the senses is, as we have seen, a recurring theme throughout *Sensory Art and Design*. Yet nowhere, perhaps, are conventional views of the sensorium more effectively challenged and the complex and unruly reality of sensory experience more vividly brought to light than in Casey and Donnelly's discussion of the depiction of *weight* and *silence*. Here, the act of drawing cuts across subject-world dualisms and the drawings produced, "capture a particular aspect of the subjective experience of the drawer" (213). Moreover, according to this sensory reimagining, drawing not only greatly enhances what the drawer *sees* but, intriguingly, also provides a powerful means of navigating the liminal territories of the *seen* and *unseen*. Through the thoughtful selection and careful presentation of the work of artists and scientists who have used drawing to engage with aspects of the sensory world that lie beyond the thresholds of even advanced photographic media, this essay suggests fruitful and exciting interdisciplinary directions for both theory and practice in the arts and sciences.

Sensory arts and Design begins with an account of a creative practice embedded in urban experience. It closes with "A Choreography of the Senses", an essay that looks indoors towards a more familiar setting for artistic work, the painter's studio. One might assume, Pip Dickens suggests, that the visual artist's working space would be organised to support visual practices. And of course, in many ways this is the case. After all, the purpose of the artist's studio is to set up and structure a space for a particular form of picture production. Yet through a measured discussion of a range of artist's studios and their accounts of working within them, a rather different sensory geography is mapped. Central to this, Dickens argues, is the tightly-coupled interaction of visual and haptic experience: to paint is, after all, to connect the body and canvas through the mediation of tools and materials, with all the expressive possibilities that gesture and touch afford the painter. Other senses, too, play their part. Scent, for example, provides the artist with important clues about materials and their properties as well as establishing an affective ground against which imagination and association figure and play out through practice. Seen in this light, the artist's studio is re-imagined as sensory space organised to calibrate and enhance perceptual experience in support of creative processes and productions.

Sensory Arts and Design is an ambitious and valuable project. It will, I believe, help to raise the profile of sensory approaches to art and design both within the disciplines represented in the book and in the broader community of sensory scholarship. Through the examples discussed above, I have attempted to draw attention to some distinctive and significant contributions. At the same time, I sought to use this selection as an interface to some of the recurring themes and issues that animate the disparate practices and approaches in the book as a whole. It is this latter quality – the quality of interconnection between different fields within art and design – that I find particularly interesting and productive. The sheer variety of processes and practices covered in *Sensory Arts and Design* could have diluted its interrogation of the interplay of the perceptual, the material and the cultural. That it doesn't is not due to a common theory or ideology of sensory experience. Rather, it is due to a shared commitment to identifying and exploring novel ways of re-imagining the senses for imaginative and analytical purposes.

References

Howes, D. 2013. "The Expanding Field of Sensory Studies." Accessed March, 2017. http://www.sensorystudies.org/sensorial-investigations/the-expanding-field-of-sensory-studies/

Pallasmaa, J. 2014. *The Eyes of the Skin: Architecture and the Senses*. Chichester: Wiley.

Smets, G., K. Overbeeke, and W. Gaver. 1994. "Form-giving: Expressing the Nonobvious". *Proceedings of CHI '94*, 79–84. Boston, MA.

Smith, M. 2007. "Producing Scent, Consuming Scent, Making Sense: Perils and Prospects for Sensory History." *Journal of Social History* 40: 841–858.

Nigel Power
King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi, Bangkok, Thailand
ipetower@kmutt.ac.th, peternigelpower@gmail.com

© 2017 Nigel Power
https://doi.org/10.1080/17458927.2017.1319159

Check for updates

Beyond text and back again

Beyond text? Critical practices and sensory anthropology, edited by Rupert Cox, Andrew Irving, and Christopher Wright, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2016, 240 pp., £75 (hardback), ISBN: 978-0-7190-8505-5

The ambitions and scope of *Beyond Text? Critical Practices and Sensory Anthropology* can hardly be contained within the pages of the edited volume or its accompanying audio-visual materials. Not that any of the contributors would wish it to be. Edited by Rupert Cox, Andrew Irving, and Christopher Wright, *Beyond Text?* is the culmination of a series of discussions and projects that began with a 2007 conference at the University of Manchester under the same name. In both contexts, anthropologists and multimedia artists gathered to bridge disciplinary boundaries, experiment with ethnographic methods, and develop a series of creative projects that ask not only if we are ready to move beyond text, but how we might do so with an eye towards the moral and political implications of representation.

What do the contributors understand to be a "text," given their keenness to challenge the concept? Most authors follow Cox, Irving, and Wright's provocations in their "Introduction: the sense of senses." This first chapter includes synonyms for "text" such as the written word, reading, and narrative but also the general sorts of abstractions and theorizations that facilitate the exchange and circulation of academic work. While the authors by no means suggest that written or spoken language be discarded as the objects or means of study, they point to what they see as a disciplinary "difficulty in assessing non-textual media as viable forms of research and knowledge production" (7). The introduction situates this aversion within an anthropological genealogy that stems, at least in part, from James Clifford and George Marcus' *Writing Culture*: *The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (1986). "The problem of writing and representing culture, which centred on the issue of *for whom* and *to whom* the anthropologist is speaking … also served to reinforce the idea of *text* as the primary means and testing grounds for the discipline." (2)The pieces in *Beyond Text?* ultimately ask how anthropologists can reconfigure the relationship between text, image, sound, and other media in order to develop new ways of practicing and representing in anthropology and further afield.

The visually stunning and aurally arresting pieces within the volume are rooted in what the editors frame as "aesthetic" practices of ethnographic inquiry and representation. Examples include