

Spaces of Sensation: The Immersive Installation and corporal literacy

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In this paper I will be offering my thoughts on the primacy of the corporal in understanding the environments we inhabit. I will be speaking from the perspective of an installation artist who takes this conceit as one of the founding principles of her work. My work is predicated on understanding the immersive installations I generate with my collaborators environment primarily through the somatic perceptual systems. (SHOW MOVIE1) My aim here is to explore the notion that such installations can serve to enhance, or heighten corporal literacy. In this paper I will using the terms 'literacy' and 'literate' in an extended sense, frequently transposing their original meanings (which pertain to the written word) into meanings which refer to those understandings we glean through our senses. Just as in the visual arts the term visually literate is used to refer to the ability to make fine discriminations in the detail, texture and structures of visual phenomena, and in music the term aurally literate refers to a highly refined ability to identify the detail, texture and structure of sound, so I will using the term corporal literacy to refer to the ability to discriminate equally subtle details of the structurings and textures of corporal sensation which emanate from the somatic perceptual system¹ during interaction with the environment. It is recognised that the visual and auditory perceptual systems cannot be separated out from the corporal. However, in this paper my focus will be on the somatic perceptual systems², *which incorporate the sense of touch, the kinaesthetic sense, proprioception. And the physiological systems which allow us to sense subtle changes in pressure, temperature and so on. (Gibson; 1968; Rodaway; 1994).*

The somatic perceptual system is concerned with knowing the world in a fundamental way, (SHOW MOVIE 2) that is through 'feeling' the world, both by means of an immediate and an extended sense of touch. It is through the somatic system that we can know (sense) our 'place' in the environment at a given time. For example, if we pay attention to the somatic we can *feel* the proximity of objects and others even when we can't see them.³ [Peter Rodaway (1994, p49) notes that the blind can detect the presence of large objects through the sense of a noticeable change in air pressure around the object] We sense as well as hear sound (through the excitation of the receptors in the skin and internal organs generated by sonic vibrations). Yi-Fu Tuan (1993) suggests "To lose an ability to feel, that is to touch, is to lose all sense of being in a world, and

¹ This term incorporates the sense of touch, the kinaesthetic sense, the visceral sense and proprioception, and thus extends beyond J.J>Gibson's 'haptic' perceptual system.

² In which psychologist J.J. Gibson (1968?) includes touch, the kinaesthetic sense and proprioception)

³ Rodaway (1994, p49) notes that the blind can detect the presence of large objects through the sense of a noticeable change in air pressure around the object.

fundamentally of being at all.” (cited in Rodaway: 1994, p41). To refine the corporal means of understanding the world then, can only enhance our sense of being in the world.

It is increasingly being argued that embodied understandings of the physical and social environments that we inhabit underpin not merely our language (Lackoff & Johnstone;1980), but also our modes of thinking (Antonio Damasio; 2000, Gerald Edelman; 2001, Lackoff & Johnson;; 1999). In this paper I will be suggesting that immersive digital installations which focus on a purely corporal understanding of the experience of being in that environment can enhance the experiential (and thus corporal) understanding of the world in which we live and communicate.

This form of digital installation immerses their visitors in a shifting, multidimensional, multi-sensory, world – a world permeated by spatialised sound, images and motion. (SHOW MOVIE 3) The visitor does not merely observe these environments s/he inhabits them. The world of the installation is thus not known from without, as something unfolding before you, but from within, as something unfolding with you. In an immersive installation the visitors’ perception of the intricate interweavings of sounds, visual images, colour, physical textures, even smell is mediated through an equally complex interweaving of the individuals’ perceptual systems. Sound and visual images are not only heard and seen, but also sensed through the body. The experience of an immersive installation is consequently never a detached experience, as the viewing experience can be, but an intimate one which addresses the ‘sensation of sensation’ directly through the somatic systems. (*Neuroscientists have shown that even the perception OF colour has measurable physiological responses which are extra to the primary neural responses of the visual system (Féré; 1887).*) (SHOW MOVIE 4) When in the installation visitors are active participants in the ongoing event, affected by the environment as they engage with it. In interactive installations the effect of their engagement is taken one step further, for they affect the environment directly by their behaviour. As such these installations emulate in a particularly intense form the conditions which obtain in the process of perceiving the world we inhabit. They are, as such, spaces for bringing to consciousness the processes of perception.

But what of perception? Gibson (1968) and Damasio (2000) argue that perception goes beyond the mere act of seeing, hearing, smelling, etc. Rather it constitutes, and is constituted by, the *interaction* between perceiver and environment.

“The organism actively modifies itself so that the interfacing [between organism and environment] can take place as well as possible. The body proper is not passive....[rather] perceiving is as much about acting on the environment as it is about receiving signals from it.” (Damasio DE p 224).

This is more than pertinent to the experience of the immersive installation.

All the senses, including the somatic system, must be fully deployed in a multimodal immersive installation if the installation is to be 'grasped' or 'understood'. Any interpretation of the installation environment, even those which invite such interpretation (e.g. Keith Piper, whose installation works are concerned with making explicit issues raised by racism) makes itself known not merely by a conceptual interpretation but through a 'felt' interpretation of the issues. This mode of coming to know the ideas which lie behind the installation affects not only the more obvious senses, but also the general body state, our 'state (or sense) of being in the world'.

I would suggest that this 'state of being in the world' is similar to that described by Rebecca Skelton yesterday, and similarly "foregrounds the psychophysical experience's of Husserl's "lifeworld"" (Skelton (2003). However, I believe that it has even deeper implications than that. Damasio (2000) and Edelman (2001) claim that our body state, our sense of being in the world' underpins not only our sensational and emotional life, but also our thoughts and our belief systems. If thought itself is not immune to influences from the corporal then the enhancement of corporal literacy has far reaching implications. [SHOW MOVIE 5](#)

The kind of immersive installations I am using as my paradigm in this paper deliberately focus the visitors' attention on the more subtle readings of the information reaching us from the senses⁴. These installations are ideal environments for helping the general public to become familiar with the intricacies of their corporal relations with their world, and thus of their 'being-in-the-world'. They deliberately direct participants'⁵ attention away from attending to the work as a representation of that which lies outside the body (that is from understanding 'what' we perceive) towards attending to their sensation-al responses to the installation (that is to understanding 'how' they perceive).

It is rare that we are given the opportunity to attend to the complex interweaving processes of perception for its own sake. In everyday life what we 'perceive' is what we need to perceive at a given time. Our everyday perception is thus skewed towards the functional. Immersive installations provide an opportunity for the general public to engage actively, and consciously, with the process of perception for its own sake, and in doing so heighten both their corporal and their perceptual literacy in a variety of ways.

Now it could be argued that all art forms serve to heighten our skills in perceptual discrimination, and by extension, our sense of 'being in the world'. This cannot be denied. However, most art forms ask that a viewer or listener watch or hear an event as it unfolds before them, whether that

⁴ Examples of which are Char Davies's *Osmose* (1994?); Paul Sermon's *Telematic Dreaming* (1994); Bill Viola's *Five Angles for the Millennium* (2001), Susan Kozel and Gretchen Schiller's *trajets* (2000)

⁵ Necessarily they are not always successful, however anecdotal evidence suggests that the rate of success is relatively high.

event be a series of performed incidents or the act of viewing a painting or a sculpture⁶. Gibson points out that the senses of sight and hearing are 'distant' senses. That is the object of perceptual attention⁷ can be sited a considerable distance away from the perceiver and still impact on their visual and auditory perceptual systems. Immersive installations conversely require that we perceive primarily through the more intimate senses, touch, proprioception, the kinaesthetic sense, the sense of smell, of temperature, even of pressure. That said, they do not exclude the 'distant' senses – but they do ask that we employ them in a more intimate context. Sight and hearing must be used as *another* means of accessing the very immediate, palpable environment the visitors find themselves in. The visitor is encouraged to allow the elements in the environment to manifest themselves not merely as visual or sonic images, but as sensations in the body. Through this we are deliberately laying ourselves open to an understanding of the deeper 'forms of knowing' which underpin not only our sense of being in the world, but also our understanding of the world.

The kinds of non-rational understanding which are required for grasping immersive installations are, I would suggest, the matrix upon which our supposedly objective understandings of our world are built. These kinds of understanding in and of themselves constitute fundamental modes of thought which do not require translation into words to be understood (indeed such translation reduces them as shall be seen). And they may have more value than has, perhaps, been acknowledged. If Damasio, Edelman, Lackoff and Johnson are correct these modes of understanding may colour the more conventional modes of reasoning which use words and symbols as their medium of communication. *(It has been suggested that philosophers may have been exercised to develop new philosophical systems not merely because previous explanations of the way the world is did not make sense conceptually, but because they were at variance with that philosopher's 'sense' of the world. (Edelman 2001). Even scientist admit to following lines of enquiry which have no more scientific weight than other options open to them, but just 'feel' right (hunches)⁸.* Indeed, Edelman, a Darwinian neuroscientist, argues that "...thought is a conscious process underlaid by a deep structure of necessary non-conscious mechanisms" (Edelman 2000 p 218) and takes the position that "...emotions are fundamental both to the origins of and appetite for conscious thought" (ibid.)

These are not new ideas, however, merely reclaimed ideas, for the intuition that the corporal has a significant role to play in the way we think can be traced back to Henri Bergson. Bergson was, perhaps one of the first contemporary philosophers to suggest that the body is 'minded' and that

⁶ Which is in itself constitutes an unfolding to the perceiver of various features of the artefact over time.

⁷ And let us here consider a sound event to be an 'object' of perception.

⁸ It has even been suggested that philosophers too may have been exercised to develop new philosophical systems not merely because previous explanations of the way the world is did not make sense conceptually, but because they were at variance with their 'sense' of the world they engaged with. (Edelman 2000)

the corporal (sensation) colours our mode/s of more literary or verbalised understanding. As far back as 1910 he was exploring the workings of consciousness. He proposed that consciousness comprises more than reflective consciousness (through which we are able to recognise and analyse our world) but that it incorporates what he called 'deep consciousness' which constitutes our sense of being in the world. Deep consciousness is composed of

“...a succession of qualitative changes ... [which] melt into and permeate one another without precise outlines, without any tendency to externalise themselves in relation to one another.” (Bergson (1910) p 104)

He noted that our verbalised interpretations of this deep mode of consciousness are necessarily reductive. He argues that

...we instinctively tend to *solidify* our impressions [sensed experience] in order to express them through language. Hence we confuse the feeling itself, which is in a perpetual state of becoming, with its permanent external object, and especially with the word which expresses this object.(Bergson, 1910; p130) (my italics)

The word, he argues, “overwhelms or at least covers up the delicate and fugitive impressions of our individual consciousness” (ibid p131) offering only a reductive representation of 'reality'.

Bergson alerted his readers to the danger of confounding quantitative differences in the intensity of perceived sensation with the felt intensive differences in quality or “shade” which constitute the body-state. These are not localised, but are complex, and spread across a number of co-existing, interwoven psychic states. Bergson was warning that the reductive tendencies of reflective consciousness, which relies on symbolic references to the world, could lead to the diminution of the importance of the *sense* of the world, and obscure the importance of the corporal in understanding the environments, physical, social and cultural, that we inhabit. His warning proved to be apt.

Interestingly Bergson suggests that art can be a means of regaining contact with the deep corporal roots of consciousness.

SHOW MOVIE 6

“Sometimes the feeling which is suggested [by an artwork] scarcely makes a break in the compact texture of psychic phenomena of which our history consists; sometimes it draws our attention from them, but not so much that they become lost to sight; sometimes ... it puts itself in their place, engrosses us and completely monopolizes our soul.” (TFW p 17)

This is particularly apparent in immersive installations such as Sensuous Geographies

Although Bergson uses a linguistic turn which might raise difficulties for us in this century, with his talk of 'soul' and 'psychic states', his underlying ideas find resonances in the work of several contemporary neuroscientists who are according 'emotion', or 'feeling', a place in both reflective consciousness and the character of our modes of thinking. Bergson offers the argument that "a larger or smaller number of simple states make up [a] fundamental emotion" [1910, p.8]. He also suggests that deeper we go into consciousness " ...states of consciousness cease to stand in juxtaposition and begin to melt into one another ...each to be tinged with the *colouring* of all the others." (ibid. p164). This suggestion is echoed in Damasio's notion of 'background emotions', or 'background feelings', which Damasio argues underpin our sense of 'selfness'⁹. Damasio considers the self not as static, resistant to the 'ravages of time', but a constant process of renewal, "Our sense of self" he argues, " is a state of the organism, ... a vulnerable pattern of integrated operations..." (2000 p 145) which are both continuous and everchanging.

Damasio suggests that the self has several modes of 'being', from the protoself (which is constituted by the deepest level of physiological and chemical responses) through to the autobiographical self of reflective consciousness. He makes similar distinctions with respect to emotion in his discussion on the role of 'feeling' in forming and reforming consciousness. He distinguishes between primary emotion (sadness, joy, disgust), secondary, or social, emotions (embarrassment, pride, jealousy) which are the province of the autobiographical self, and background emotions (calm, tension, well-being, dis-ease) which are generated by physiological responses initiated in the province of the protoself. He notes that background emotions are diffuse in comparison to primary or secondary emotions, which tend to have an 'object', and are difficult to access consciously, for their physiological manifestation is sited in the internal milieu and the viscera. Consequently they are spread through our body state (our sense of being), rather than locatable as having an identifiable 'cause'.

But let us return to the notion that 'deep consciousness' affects our modes of thinking. Bergson claims that

"...the beliefs to which we most strongly adhere are those of which we find it most difficult to give account...in a certain sense we have adopted them without any reason, for what makes them valuable in our eyes is that they match the colour of all our other ideas..." ibid p135.

Edelman & Tononi similarly take the position that "...value systems and emotions are essential to the selectional workings of the brain that underlie consciousness." (Edelman & Tononi; 2001, p

⁹ Damasio considers the self not as static, resistant to the 'ravages of time' but a constant process of renewal. "Our sense of self is a state of the organism, ... a vulnerable pattern of integrated operations whose consequence is to generate a mental representation of a living individual being. The entire ...edifice...is always on the brink of partial and complete collapse should the process of rebuilding and renewal break down." FWH p 145

209). JJ Gibson (1968), too, in his analysis of perception, argues that our perceptual responses are formed in response to needs determined by our value systems (physiological, conceptual, socio-cultural and emotional). From their different perspectives all acknowledge that there are responses and processes taking place beneath the level of 'reflective/extended/higher-order'¹⁰ consciousness which affect our conscious thoughts, and may even colour the way we think. If this is the case, then art works which address directly the multiplicity of interweaving, perceptual and physiological responses which underpin our state(s) of being-in-the-world, and which are in a continual state of 'becoming' can contribute to a more discriminating understanding of our interactions with the world. That those fine discriminations between the qualities of the sensations which underpin our state of being might not rise to the level of reflective consciousness does not deny their significance to the way we understand the world we are inhabiting at a given moment.

And it is here that the rationale for my work, and that of some of my colleagues¹¹, lies. **SHOW MOVIE 7** The installations set up the conditions for attending to the play of corporal (or primary) consciousness, without the overriding distraction of the workings of extended consciousness have been established¹². In installations such as these liminal visual images, textures and sounds emanate from all around the space, behind, in front of, above, even below, the visitor. The frontal (third person) perspective which underpins the sense of sight is dislodged. Visual images might initially be glimpsed as a flash of movement out of the corner of the eye, their presence sensed rather than seen. In most immersive installations sound emanates from speakers placed all around the room. This calls attention to the world which lies out of the line of sight, to the world 'behind' or 'beyond' the viewed. In the 'active' space in *Sensuous Geographies* sound alone was used to draw attention to the senses as a mode of understanding. The visitors who entered this space were blindfolded, requiring that they used other senses to navigate the environment....not only hearing but also the somatic systems which detect proximity to objects.

In order to discourage reliance on sight, in many immersive installations both visual and sonic images are often diffuse, (**SHOW HIDDEN MOVIE 8**). This is designed to draw attention to the textures of the images, rather than to their representational content. In my work all the images have their source in human movement of some kind, but are often barely distinguishable as representations of anything. (**SHOW MOVIE 9**) Although the visitor to the installation cannot necessarily detect the human figure, the traces of their sources remain, and affect the

¹⁰ Bergson refers to 'consciousness' as 'reflective consciousness, Damasio as 'extended consciousness', Edelman as 'higher order consciousness' Higher order consciousness "...requires at the minimum a semantic capability, and in its most developed form, a linguistic capability" Ed. P 102 It is also deeply implicated in a sense of self (of being conscious of being conscious) *ibid.* p.

¹¹ Gretchen Schiller, Susan Kozel, Thecla Schiphorst, Char Davies

¹² Visitors do not always achieve this state, although evidence has shown that for these individuals, repeated visits allow them to relinquish the desire to 'know' in favour of the sense of 'knowing'.

physiological responses of the somatic systems directly. Here again appeal is being made to the sensate intelligences, for if you cannot see the edges of an image, or distinguish the separation of sounds in a succession of sonic events, other modes of understanding must be brought into play. Further, in immersive installations the sounds and images tend to be in close proximity to the visitor, (SHOW MOVIE 10) which makes it more difficult for the perceiver to become a mere observer of the image. Thus, whereas the frontal viewing environment of the painting and the conventional (proscenium arch) theatre work has the potential to lay the spectator open to a more detached approach to a work, the immersive installation foregrounds a corporal mediation of the work through the 'background feelings' generated by the images and sounds which surround the participating viewer. Ideally the visitor doesn't try to understand what the images represent, but how they 'feel' in the context of its environment, as pure flow of motion, as vibration, as sensation. Perceptual 'distance' is diminished to almost nothing. ((SHOW MOVIE 11) Sight and hearing become intimate, rather than distant, senses.

In interactive installations such as *Sensuous Geographies* this experience is even more intense. Here the visitors' behavioural responses to the environment initiate and modulate the sensory qualities which are brought to presence in the installation. In *Sensuous Geographies* attention is very specifically directed to the sense the sound generates in the body, to the sense of being in the environment, and to the *sense* of proximity between visitor and visitor. This affects the way the visitors *feel*. In different sound environments the visitor might feel calm, playful, tense, even uncomfortable. Because the way they feel affects the way they behave, and the way they behave affects the tone and texture of the environment, a direct feedback system between visitors and environment is set into motion. The more time the visitor spends in the installation the more attuned they become both to the nuances of the installation and the responses of their physiological systems. The visitor develops an increasingly discriminating understanding of the nuances of the fluctuating, multimodal, dynamic space (both inner and outer) that they are inhabiting. 'Understanding' of the installation is gleaned not through a single sense, but directly through the subtle interplay between the senses. 'Understanding' gleaned through the 'mind' misses the more subtle knowledges the body affords. However, the experience of installations such as these might very well have an effect on the mind. This claim is supported by anecdotal evidence. One visitor to *Sensuous Geographies* returned the following day to renew his acquaintance with the environment. (SHOW MOVIE 12) He was convinced that the experience of *Sensuous Geographies* the night before had not only an immediate effect, but also a residual effect which lasted over several hours, indeed into the next day. He had a particularly difficult meeting scheduled for the morning of the day following his first experience of *Sensuous Geographies*. This, he said, he would usually have approached in a confrontational manner. However, his mood (state of being), that morning was such that he approached the meeting from a much calmer perspective, and adopted a more conciliatory mode of behaviour (with some

success). He attributed this change of behaviour to his experiences in the installation the previous day¹³

As such immersive installations are a means of countering the primacy of the verbal, and of regaining access to the sensation of 'being in the world'. And, if the experts o whom ~I have referred in this paper are correct, such access could make us more aware of the effect the corporeal has on the other modes we use to understand the multiplicity of environments, physical, social and conceptual, that we create for ourselves.

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¹³ I have anecdotal evidence which supports this. One visitor to *Sensuous Geographies* returned the following day to renew his acquaintance with the environment. He said that he was astounded to see how the experience the previous night had affected his behaviour on the following day. He had a particularly difficult meeting that morning, which he said he would usually have approached in a confrontational manner. However, he said that his 'state of being' that morning was such that he approached the issue in a far more conciliatory manner, which produced better results. He was convinced that the experience of *Sensuous Geographies* the night before had not only an immediate effect, but also a residual effect which lasted over several hours