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Rhetorics and Technologies

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Unfitting Beauties of Transducing Bodies

Anne Frances Wysocki

It matters, of course, the understanding of "persuasion" one has in mind while discovering the available means thereof—and my understanding in this essay depends on the last roughly half-century of attentions to means of shaping behavior and identity that are non-linguistic and that appeal, usually quietly and without direct address, to bodies and feelings rather than articulated logics. It is persuasion that follows not from a decision made inside one's mind but rather from a sinew or pulse shifting, and perhaps staying shifted, in response to something meant to shift it. I could point here to recent rhetorical analyses of specific spaces—such as pulpits, battlefields, or a Starbucks store—that explain how each space is a "physical representation of relationships and ideas" and so encourages those moving within toward particular attitudes and relationships (Mountford 42; see also, for example, Halloran; Dickinson; Blair, Jeppeson, and Pucci; Fleming). My focus is instead on experiences meant to shape our senses of our selves by shaping our senses themselves, such as when Debra Hawhee considers the "network of educational and cultural practices articulated through and by the body" in the ancient Greek overlapping of rhetorical and athletic training (6).

Here I look to more recent practices and technologies. How might some digital texts—some presented as art—impel us toward particular sensuous engagements with the world and each other? What are possible theoretical takes on those engagements—and what are implications of those takes? These questions are worth asking, I think, because—given recent shifts in technologies of production, distribution, and consumption—the texts we and the people in our classes consume but perhaps also produce (documentary videos, instructional Web pages, games meant to persuade us to become soldiers) can make questions of aesthetics more present than research papers traditionally have. When typewriters and college-ruled paper engaged our hands, we might have discussed (for

example) the ways and roles of emotional appeals in academic writing; if we ask people in our classes to produce Web pages or to weave photography or even simple typography together with words, questions of how color, shape, movement on a page, or visual representation appeal become unavoidable. We could consider such appeals aesthetic in a loose sense—"Is that arrangement of colors pretty?"—but the concern here is a focused, temporally specific notion of aesthetics. This is aesthetics as a perspective for discussing embodied, sensuous responses to objects (including texts), for determining how and why some objects encourage us to judge them beautiful or otherwise; this is a perspective that became strong starting in the eighteenth century and that made aesthetic concerns inseparable from the ethical. In this essay I argue that, although we may want to hold a connection between the aesthetic and the ethical, we cannot if we act as though our bodies still fit eighteenth-century understandings of perception. By highlighting current aesthetic possibilities of our texts—digital as well as nondigital—we might practice having bodies that can alertly convert sensuous experience into ethical practice.

The art discussed here is less amenable to photographic representation than most painting or sculpture and so requires that I start with several long descriptive quotations. The quotations are meant to entice you, as an indication of the art's persuasively sensuous pull even in description; that pull—with its direction toward internal pleasure or toward external connection—motivates the arguments that follow concerning current theories about some new digital art.

Sabrina Raaf, a Chicago artist, produced the artwork *Saturday* in 2002. In her artist statement about *Saturday,* Raaf describes how she

> used walkie talkies, CB radios, and various other forms of consumer spy (or "security") technology in order to actively harvest [wireless] communication leaks. *Saturday* forms . . . [an] intimate portrait of the community of Humboldt Park, Chicago through a composite presentation of conversations stolen on Saturdays in the park. . . .
>
> The transmissions included communications between gang members on street corners nearby and group conversations between friends talking about changes in the neighborhood and their families. There were raw, intimate conversations and often even late night sex talk between potential lovers. . . . During the series of Saturdays, I also recorded the sounds of my neighborhood. . . . These are the sounds that are mixed in the piece. And these are the sounds that literally drip from participant's fingertips in *Saturday*.
>
> *Saturday* is presented in the form of an interactive glove. In order to hear the audio, participants *magically* just press their fingertips to their forehead and they hear the sound without the use of their ears. The glove is outfitted with leading edge audio electronic devices called

"bone transducers" which make this possible. These transducers transmit sound in a very unusual fashion. They translate sound into vibration patterns which resonate through bone. This is the same process as the natural hammer and anvil system inside our inner ears which allows us to perceive sound. Since the bone transducer does all this work artificially, it allows you to hear crisp audio without it being played out loud or through headphones. So, even if a user covered their ears and then placed their fingers to their temples, they still "hear" the sound.

This piece permits a new way of listening. The user places their fingers to their forehead—in a gesture akin to Rodin's "The Thinker" or of a clairvoyant—in order to tap into the lives of strangers. Pressing different combinations of fingers to the temple yields plural viewpoints and group conversations. These sounds are literally mixed in the bones of the listener.[1]

Another digital art piece, *Osmose*, was conceived by Char Davies and first exhibited in 1995.[2] A participant engages with *Osmose* by wearing a head-mounted display and vest of sensors and other digitalia. Media critic and theorist Mark Hansen describes experiencing the piece, how

a forest clearing centering around a great old oak tree appears. Everything in your visual field seems to be constructed of light: branches, trunks, leaves, shimmer with a strange luminescence, while in the distance there appears a river of dancing lights. Leaning your body forward, you move toward the boundary of the clearing and pass into another forest zone. You are now enfolded in a play of light and shadow, as leaves phase imperceptibly into darkened blotches and then phase back again, in what seems like a rhythmic perpetuity. Exhaling deeply causes you to sink down through the soil as you follow a stream of tiny lights illuminating the roots of the oak tree.

Soon you sink into an underworld of glowing red rocks that form a deep, luminous cavern beneath the earth. Exhaling again, you sink still further, encountering scrolling walls of green alphanumeric characters that (you will later learn) reproduce the 20,000 some lines of code upon which the world you are in is built. Longing for the vivid images above, you take in a deep breath and hold it, waiting to ascend. After passing once again through the clearing, you enter another world of text, encountering quotations from philosophical and literary sources that seem to bear directly on your experience. "By changing space, by leaving the space of one's usual sensibilities," one passage informs you, "you enter into communications with a space that is psychically innovative . . . we do not change place, we enter our Nature."

> The attention you have been lending to your breathing makes you feel angelic and fleshy: while you float dreamlike, unencumbered by the drag of gravity, your actions are syncopated with your breathing in a way that makes your bodily presence palpable, insistent. Meanwhile, you find yourself floating back down to the clearing, no longer driven to explore, but meditative, content simply to float wherever your bodily leaning and breathing will take you. (107–9)

From Hansen's description one can see that "navigation" through *Osmose* depends on breathing: inhaling and holding your breath "moves" you up in the piece's world; exhaling moves you down. (Davies is a scuba diver, and she drew on her diving experiences in shaping how someone moves through *Osmose*.) Oliver Grau, who writes about new media art, lists how participants in *Osmose* described their sense of being immersed in a "contemplative, meditative peace" and of feeling "gently cradled" (199). Grau writes that *Osmose*'s "physically intimate design of the human-machine interface gives rise to such immersive experiences that the artist speaks of reaffirming the participants' corporeality; Davies even expresses the hope that a spatio-temporal context is created 'in which to explore the self's subjective experience of "being-in-the-world"—as embodied consciousness in an enveloping space where boundaries between inner/outer, and mind/body dissolve'" (199). Grau ends by noting that "Prerequisite to the attainment of this goal is immersion experienced in solitude, a subjective experience *in* the image world" (199).

Both *Osmose* and *Saturday*, as their creators hopefully describe in their quoted words, draw participants into unusual sensuous engagements with their environments and so are set up to encourage participants to attend to their hearing or breathing (in these particular cases) as they probably would not amid the distractive normalities of daily activity. Such attention to a body's sensuous perception characterizes many art pieces that rely on digital processing, such as *Ephémère*, another piece by Davies, or Paul Sermon's *Telematic Dreaming* (see Grau 274–75), Thecla Schiphorst's *Bodymaps: Artifacts of Touch* (see Hansen 64–67), or Elizabeth Diller and Ricardo Scofidio's *Blur Building* (see Hansen 178–83). By experimenting with art that is not experienced by a person sitting still before a monitor, digital artists can ask us to attend to senses other than or in addition to sight, to experience those senses so as to "extend the domain of sensibility for the delight, the honor, and the benefit of human nature," as Wordsworth wrote several centuries ago (qtd. in Abrams 395).

The theorists of new media art discussed here—Hansen, Grau, Anna Munster—give extensive descriptions of *Osmose* as they write about digital art that grows out of the visual tradition of European art—even if the art they are describing is no longer primarily visual in its appeal. Each draws on—overtly or not—traditional eighteenth-century notions of aesthetics to discuss the art. It is that focus that gets them—and digital art (because digital art is a highly

academicized and intellectualized area right now, with theory being read by artists who in turn make art that moves the theorists)—into potentially awkward situations. These are the situations noted in the introduction, in which aesthetics and ethics break apart, situations we have been warned about at least since Walter Benjamin.

Part of the project for each of these writers is to legitimate digital art *as* art. As mentioned, the kinds of art discussed here—*Saturday*'s bone transducers and *Osmose*'s breath responders, for example—do not look like traditional two-dimensional or even three-dimensional visual art. Such art does not equate with an object like a stretched canvas or shaped stone, as a painting or a sculpture does; instead, as with *Saturday* or *Osmose*, the art is what one experiences while wearing mediating objects like gloves or vests. This art is highly technologized, requiring considerable time (and, often, space) for installation and testing before it can be shown—and such art certainly cannot just be hung on a wall or placed on a pedestal and left to the oversight of long-standing museum guards.

Some in arts institutions do resist this work: there are mainstream arts magazines whose writers do not discuss this art (for example, see *Art in America*); "museums have only begun to open their doors hesitantly to the art of the digital present" (Grau 10); and there are schools that refuse to teach its production. Such art cannot be sold as singular objects.

But this art is, of course, taught and displayed, often in new or expanded institutions; as Oliver Grau wrote in *Virtual Art* (2003), there are "new media schools in Cologne, Frankfurt, and Leipzig and the Zentrum für Kunst und Medientechnologie in Karlsruhe, Germany, is a heartland of media art, together with Japan and its new institutes, such as the InterCommunication Center in Tokyo and the International Academy of Media Arts and Sciences near Gifu. More recently, other countries, such as Korea, Australia, China, Taiwan, Brazil, and especially the Scandinavian countries, have founded new institutions of media art" (10). These institutions (as their technically oriented names suggest) are all fairly recent, however, and it is—in part—the work of writers such as those discussed here to publicize this work, create (understanding) audiences for it, and show that it fits or ought to fit within existing arts institutions with, if necessary, only slight modification to institutional practices.

And, of course, to show that something new is not really so new, one shows how it fits into tradition—which could be one reason the writers included here discuss such digital artworks in parallel with traditional aesthetic theory. This, of course, requires reshifting in the logics of the traditional—and so leads to the problems mentioned in the introduction. To flesh out these problems requires showing these writers' aesthetic turn.

For most people in the early twenty-first century, aesthetics cannot be understood except as historicized. As theory about evaluative judgments about art or

other cultural productions, as theory about one's taste for Rembrandt or Thomas Kinkade, Mozart or Mariah Carey, aesthetics is, at best, considered descriptive of how particular people in particular temporal and geographical contexts feel pleasure in their engagements with certain kinds of objects. Among others in the twentieth century, Raymond Williams ("Taste is for Williams a name for the habits of the dominant class rendered as inherent qualities" [Shumway 104]) and Pierre Bourdieu (for whom "the 'aesthetic point of view' was the surest mark of class distinction" and "largely reducible to ideology, a form of political dominance" [Harkin 185]) have done much to establish current theories about "the business of affections and aversions, of how the world strikes the body on its sensory surfaces, of that which takes root in the gaze and the guts and all that arises from our most banal, biological insertion into the world" (Eagleton 13); they encourage us to an understanding that such theories can make no universal, eternal claims about bodies and senses.

In aesthetics' eighteenth-century origins, however, those who developed theories of aesthetics believed they *were* discussing universals and eternals. Aesthetics, as a named discipline, began (in most tellings) with Alexander Baumgarten's work in the mid-eighteenth century. Baumgarten took *aesthetics* from the Greek *aisthesis*, which (in the words of Martin Jay) "implied gratifying corporeal perception, the subjective sensual response to objects rather than objects themselves" (6). Questions of aesthetics were originally, then, questions about how we make judgments about our sensory relations to the worlds in which we move: Why do we judge something to be beautiful, sublime, disgusting? Kant argued that aesthetic judgments result when we understand how universal reason can resonate in our particular, individual sensuous takes on the world, through conceptual understanding. Under this telling (to quote Cassirer's interpretation of Kant), the Beautiful is a "resonance of the whole in the particular and singular" (318). Similarly M. H. Abrams describes how, with the rise of Romanticism in the late eighteenth century, "writers testified to a deeply significant experience in which an instant of consciousness, or else an ordinary object or event, suddenly blazes into revelation; the unsustainable moment seems to arrest what is passing, and is often described as an intersection of eternity with time" (385). In such tellings, aesthetic judgments are possible precisely because it was believed, first, that something universal or timeless inhered in what we judge to be beautiful or to be art and, second, that each person's bodily sensibilities gave the person visceral and so cognitive access to that universal or timeless thing.

At least three originary stories have been proposed for the appearance of aesthetics as a named field in the eighteenth century, as a named approach to thinking about certain kinds of experience. There are perspectives like M. H. Abrams's development of Carlyle's concept of "natural supernaturalism." Abrams describes how the eighteenth into nineteenth century:

> Romantic era was one of technical, political, and social revolutions and counter-revolutions—of industrialization, urbanization, and increasingly massive industrial slums; of the first total war and postwar economic collapse; of progressive specialization in work, alterations in economic and political power, and consequent dislocations of the class structure; of competing ideologies and ever-imminent social chaos. To such a world of swift and drastic change, division, conflict, and disorder, the inherited pieties and integrative myths seemed no longer adequate to hold civilization together. (292–93)

The result, for Abrams, is that Romantic writers "undertook, whatever their religious creed or lack of creed, to save traditional concepts, schemes, and values which had been based on the relation of the Creator to his creature and creation, but to reformulate them within the prevailing two-term system of subject and object, ego and non-ego, the human mind or consciousness and its transaction with nature" (13). To use Martin Jay's phrasing of this genealogy, aesthetics—aesthetic feeling—became for the Romantics a way of "infusing the natural world with all the numinous meaning that had hitherto been reserved for transcendent spirit" (16).

In *Marxism and Literature*, Raymond Williams gives aesthetics its ground in (as one would expect) changing conditions of production and consumption; he argues that "it is clear, historically, that the definition of 'aesthetic' response is an affirmation . . . of certain human meanings and values which a dominant social system reduced and even tried to exclude. Its history is in large part a protest against the forcing of all experience into instrumentality ('utility') and of all things into commodities. This must be remembered even as we add, necessarily, that the form of the protest, within definite social and historical conditions, led almost inevitably to new kinds of privileged instrumentality and specialized commodity" (151).

Artwork, that is, is moved from church walls and windows onto easily transportable (and so marketable) frames, to be consumed in particular, subjective ways, as Williams describes in *Keywords:* "It is clear from this history that *aesthetic*, with its specialized references to art, to visual appearance, and to a category of what is 'fine' or 'beautiful,' is a key formation in a group of meanings which at once emphasized and isolated subjective sense-activity as the basis of art and beauty as distinct, for example, from *social* or *cultural* interpretations" (28).

Terry Eagleton understands the appearance of the notion of aesthetics as coinciding with a change in disciplinary practices: at a time when institutions of power were changing—as a merchant class took on decision-making facilities outside the realms of kingly disposition and governmental structures became

civil instead of monarchical—the externally applied disciplinary constraints of monarchy could not hold. Aesthetics becomes a way for those constraints to become internalized and personal so that

> a vision could be projected of a universal order of free, equal, autonomous human subjects, obeying no laws but those which they gave to themselves. . . . What is at stake here is nothing less than the production of an entirely new kind of human subject—one which, like the work of art itself, discovers the law in the depths of its own free identity, rather than in some oppressive external power. . . . Power is now inscribed in the minutiae of subjective experience, and the fissure between abstract duty and pleasurable inclination is accordingly healed. . . . Kant retains the idea of a universal law, but now discovers this law at work in the very structure of our subjective capacities. (19–20)

Bringing oneself in line with the aesthetic tastes of the time was thus a way to bring oneself in line with "universal law" and order, with no applied external compulsion.

As mentioned earlier, I am not arguing for one genealogy over another, as though the genealogies were mutually exclusive. What matters here is the three qualities the writers I quote similarly note about the aesthetic theories of roughly two centuries ago: those theories directed attentions to intensified or heightened sensuous bodily perceptions—to aesthetic experiences, that is—as what connected particular bodies with something larger, ineffable, or at least inutile; as a result, in being so connected, one was to experience—viscerally—one's place in the ethical world, in the world of universal law governing how one was to live. In formulating such connection, the theorists made aesthetic experience "into an intense but solitary experience of the relationship between self and external nature" (Harkin 174), as the quotations from Williams and Eagleton suggest. Although neither the digital art nor the theories about it described at the beginning of this essay seek relationship between self and the ineffable, they draw on the other two aspects of the older theories: first, they can encourage the solitary, ahistorical, nonparticular, engaged experience at the core of eighteenth-century aesthetics—as with Davies' words about *Osmose*—and, second, current art and theories do attempt to tie aesthetic experience to the ethical, to one's relationships with others. These two aspects of earlier theories do not and cannot be made to fit back together when brought to bear on current understandings of sensing bodies in their worlds.

From the time of Kant, those who have studied aesthetics have tended to direct their attentions in three directions: toward the object conceived of as being worthy of aesthetic judgment, toward the judgment itself, or toward the aesthetic experience that links the sensation of the object with the judgment about it. As mentioned earlier, the digital art discussed here is problematic as

object, and the case has to be made for these digital pieces to be worthy of judgment as art. And so it makes sense that the writers discussed here would focus on aesthetic experience—a heightening or intensifying of day-to-day perceptual experience—in any attempt to use aesthetic theory in legitimating digital work such as *Saturday* or *Osmose*. In so doing, they, like the eighteenth-century aesthetic theorists, hope to use aesthetics to make perception ethical.

Munster, in her 2006 book *Materializing New Media: Embodiment in Information Aesthetics*, uses the first four-fifths of her book to discuss what I would call the epistemological functions of new media art; in her last chapter she claims that "the aesthetics of technologically inflected, augmented and managed modes of perceptions is also about relations to others in the socius" (151), about, that is, our ethical relations with others. Here is Hansen's take (from his 2006 book *Bodies in Code: Interfaces with Digital Media*) on what digital arts can do: Because they engage our senses, but in unexpected or new ways, as *Saturday* or *Osmose* engage with our hearing or our breathing, such digital art pieces can

> broaden what we might call the sensory *commons*—the space that we human beings share by dint of our constitutive embodiment. This is because digital technologies:
>
> 1) Expand the scope of human bodily (motor) activity; and thereby
> 2) Markedly broaden the domain of the *prepersonal*, the organism-environment coupling operated by our nonconscious, deep embodiment; and thus
> 3) Create a rich, anonymous "medium" for our own enactive co-belonging or "being-with" one another; which thereby
> 4) Transforms the agency of collective existence . . . from a self-enclosed and primarily cognitive operation to an essentially open, only provisionally bounded, and fundamentally motor, participation. (20)

Similarly, Grau ends his 2003 book on virtual art by arguing that the "processes of digitization create new areas of perception, which will lead to noticeable transformations in everyday life" (347): "The roles that are offered, assigned, or forced on the users when interacting are an essential element in perception of the conditions of experience—experience both of the environment in a world transformed by media and of the self, which is constituted as never before from a continually expanding suite of options for actions within dynamically changing surroundings" (347).

Munster, Hansen, and Grau each make this eighteenth-century move: They use aesthetic experience as what enables us to move from perception to ethics. The writers ground ethics in epistemology through this way of teasing out aesthetic experience. They argue that what we know about the world through

our senses (not necessarily at the level of the discursive) becomes the ground for opening up the potentials of how we live together, socially, ethically. Each starts with our individual perceptual engagement with the world and acknowledges that there are then social relations to follow—but how are we, in action, now, really to use intensified individual epistemological experience with digital art to then build or ground ethical relations with each other?

Hansen gives the fullest account of this move by mixing the phenomenological perspectives of Maurice Merleau-Ponty with Bernard Stiegler's considerations of technics. From Merleau-Ponty he takes the distinction of "body image" and "body schema." For Hansen, "body image characterizes and is generated from a primarily visual apprehension of the body" (39), the sense of body we have from seeing ourselves and others in mirrors or represented in photographs or film; as do other writers (see, for example, Shusterman's discussion of "representational aesthetics"), Hansen argues that conceiving of our bodies only or primarily through sight extenuates our potential as sensing beings. For Hansen, however, to open this potentiality is not simply a matter of giving the other senses the same weight as sight. Instead, Hansen argues, we need to reconceive of—learn to reexperience—ourselves through a body schema, which gives "priority to the internal perspective of the organism" (39) and which is therefore necessarily already embodied, already active within an environment; this is therefore a body "always in excess over itself" because it—its senses, including of itself—is not separable from but is instead constituted within (and constitutive of) its environment, "coupled to" its environment. Drawing on Stiegler's conceptions of technics, Hansen argues that "because such coupling is increasingly accomplished through technical means" (39) the digital art he discusses in *Bodies in Code* can help bodies experience their environmental coupling and so move us toward the "essentially open" ethical relations he describes.

> During Queen Victoria's state visit to France in 1855, there was an outcry at court, where the sensitive noses of the ladies thought they detected her wearing perfume containing a little musk. (Vroon, Amerongen, and De Vries, ch. 1)

This is, then, finally, where I focus on problems with trying to understand new digital art under two-centuries-old conceptions of perception and aesthetics. I question how Hansen's formulations might work, how we might get from perception to ethics, from experiencing *Osmose* or *Saturday* and enhanced "organism-environment coupling" to a transformed "agency of collective existence."

At the originary time of the notion of aesthetic experience, the link between epistemology and ethics was precisely what aesthetic experience explained. If your conception of ethics meant learning to understand and shape private experience in tune with universal patterns, then an aesthetic experience—an intensification of a day-to-day sensuous perception—was what made that linking possible: it made

perception available for reflection and so helped you understand that your feelings were a microcosmic reflection of that universal order and that through your feelings you could unite yourself still more with that order. It did not matter that aesthetic experience was an isolated, solitary experience, because the experience was understood, precisely, to be what enabled you to experience the larger within you.

But given that our understanding of ethics does not now involve our learning to live with universal patterns, that possible aesthetic link between epistemology and ethics is broken. In addition, at the time of the development of the originary notions of aesthetics, sense experience was considered both private and natural: your individual sensing could link you with Nature because your individual sensing resulted from your natural being. Not long after the origins I have described, however, Marx argued that "the forming of the five senses is a labour of the entire history of the world down to the present" (qtd. in Stewart 59); more recently, much research in anthropology (think, for example, of the writings of Peter Stoller, Constance Classen, or David Howes) works to demonstrate that senses develop culturally and that different cultures and, within cultures, different social classes (think of Pierre Bourdieu's work) have different sensory regimes—and that our sensuous perceptions of the world do not just happen "naturally" but come to their shape in our varying, complex, and socially embedded environments.

We understand now that, within such environments, our senses are trained through repetition. Sensuous training happens simply through growing up: we are raised into the sensory patterns and habits of our culture, and the the training therefore seems to have never happened because it is simply part of the day-to-day of growing up or raising a child. As David Shumway, in "Cultural Studies and the Questions of Pleasure and Value," writes, for example, "Taste, it turns out, is learned, but, like language, it is easily learned at a particular age and as part of one's environment" (104). Sensory training, however, can also happen through aware and intensely repetitively patterned training, the "repeated, sustained engagement" that Hawhee, for example, demonstrates was the "shared trait of athletic and rhetorical training" for the Greeks (146) or that philosopher Richard Shusterman describes as accompanying the more contemporary body training of the Feldenkrais Method or Alexander Technique (154–81). Or consider, for example, the recent narrative of how young race car driver Colin Braun was taught by his father, a professional race engineer, "not only how to read" the data from heavily wired racing cars "but also how to correlate the traces with what he felt in the driver's seat" (Lerner 120). The younger Braun's "training regimen" "began at age 6, when he started analyzing data logged by a unit his father installed on his kiddie car. He learned to commune with his vehicles during tens of thousands of laps on a test track on the family's property. And he

has spent countless hours hunched over laptops, deconstructing multicolored graphs of racing data in an effort to 'see' what his car is doing. 'I look at squiggly lines and know what they mean,' he says. 'I don't remember learning it. It's something I've always understood'" (117). Think, too, of narratives about the intense repetitive physical work people who have had strokes must undergo to relearn bodily movements (see, for example, Kawahira et al. or Luft and Hanley).

The digital art that Hansen, Grau, and Munster consider is most often shaped to emphasize isolated, individual, private experience. These writers talk about a participant's sensuous perceptions of the art as though the perceptions result not from how the participant's repetitious and socially sensuous history shapes her to perceive but rather from a single technologized event experienced in isolation. This is to hold onto, and perhaps encourage, an eighteenth-century notion of bodies.

That such a notion of bodily experience cannot now lead to ethically enabling aesthetic experience becomes poignantly clear if we consider some writing about an already-existing—and quite widely used—digital environment that encourages our use of digital technologies to explore, socially and repeatedly, the potential fluidity of sensory formations. It is not art that matters here but rather the Nintendo Wii gaming device.

The Wii encourages both individual and social play and is readily available, all demonstrated by any search for photographs tagged "Wii" at the Flickr photo-sharing Web site.[3] The Wii controller is different from previous game systems' joysticks or mouse controllers, which ask players to sit still while moving only their wrists to affect what happens on a screen; instead, the company that makes the Wii, Nintendo, "reimagined the controller, introducing a three-axis accelerometer that transforms your hand motions into in-game action, so you really *play* the games. In *Wii Tennis*, for example, swing your hand just as you would a racket. In *Excite Truck*, hold both ends of the controller as if it were a steering wheel" ("The Console that Gets You in the Game"). Because of its availability, its possibility for social play, and its engagement of a broader range of senses than sight, the Wii brings to particular focus my concern about any turn to eighteenth-century, sensuously based notions of aesthetics to understand—and also to shape—our sensuous engagements.

Walter Benjamin's concern about the aestheticization of politics in "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" was a response, in part, to the work of the Italian futurist Marinetti, who found, and argued that others should also find, beauty in violent action, including, ultimately, war. Benjamin argued that Marinetti's encouragements toward particular kinds of violence diverted the proletariat's energies away from acquiring property and so concealed fascism's attempts at controlling property ownership: "If," Benjamin

wrote, "the natural utilization of productive forces is impeded by the property system, the increase in technical devices, in speed, and in the sources of energy will press for an unnatural utilization, and this is found in war." Benjamin understood Marinetti to believe, then, that war would "supply the artistic gratification of a sense perception that has been changed by technology" and that, therefore, humans "can experience [their] own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order."

Given the hours some will play computer games, we probably could discuss how gaming can distract from more than just distribution of property, but I am not going to try to connect the Wii gaming device—or *Osmose* or *Saturday*—with war or self-destruction, no matter how you judge current political structures and events. Rather, I want to take up a more general argument from Benjamin. Benjamin understood that Marinetti was attempting to move not from aesthetics to ethics but rather the opposite: he was shifting politics from being about ethical relations to being about heightened sensuous experience. For Benjamin, when ethics, epistemology, and aesthetics are weakly linked or even unlinked, such that political action is judged aesthetically just as readily as aesthetic experiences can be understood as having ethical weight, then any sense experience is worth intensifying and exploring aesthetically, even violence—with no grounding to connect it to any ethical placement or ramifications.

That lack of grounding underlies, I believe, the ambivalence that appears in a discussion forum of the online magazine *The Escapist*, in response to an article titled "It's Only a Wii Bit of Violence." The article considers how violent computer games such as Resident Evil 4 or Manhunt 2, if they were to be ported from other gaming systems to the Wii, would ask players to use the Wii controller to mimic onscreen violent action. The article's writer asks, "Is this a lack of imagination, or a conscious decision to omit violent mimicry? More important, should graphically violent games with conventional control schemes be rated more leniently than games that are less graphically violent but offer a more tangible connection to the violence via the control method?" (MacInnes). The questions imply discomfort concerning what we might experience wielding the Wii controller as we would a knife or a bat to kill. One of the eight commenters in the magazine's forum responded to the article (with all the grammatical quickness that can characterize such online conversations) by describing using the Wii controllers in precisely that way: "court12b: I'm trying to imagine the scenario. You turn around, see some psycho coming at you with a knife, your pulse quickens, flight or fight instinct kicks in, you raise your baseball bat at the same time your heart rate skyrockets, you start bashing away with all your REAL energy. blood sprays from his head as he collapses to the floor, time decompresses back to normal as you catch your breath."

The two responses immediately following court12b's initial comment are ambivalent.

> Russ Pitts: I'm of two minds on this. On the one hand, I agree that once we've crossed that barrier between pushing buttons to create an on-screen action and actually mimicking that action, with the stimuli described, we've gone a step toward blurring the line between games and life. But the other half of my brains thinks this is awesome, and exactly what we've been clamoring for since we started playing computer games. And it thinks that we will still be able to tell the difference between games and life.
>
> Archon: OMG—When does this game come out? That sounds awesome. I know, I know, I'm missing the political ramifications. I can't help it. This is the immersion I've always wanted.

The comments demonstrate how, then, intensified sensuous engagements that happen to be violent can be desired, and desired precisely because they are viscerally intense and pleasurable—because they can be, for these commenters, *only* aesthetic experiences, separated out from other aspects of our lives. Or rather, perhaps, not quite "only," for the commenters are ambivalent: they show social discomfort with the imagined beating of others at the same time they seek its felt-as-an-individual-body pleasure.

Perhaps the commenters' ambivalence results from experiencing one's sensuous perceptions as natural, discrete, asocial, and unlearned yet also understanding, discursively or not, that sensation nonetheless shapes one's social actions. In other words, the ambivalence could result from holding on to the two aspects of eighteenth-century aesthetic theory I described Hansen, Grau, and Munster using, but without having the conceptual bridge—the belief in something larger or ineffable—that allowed one in the eighteenth century to make the two aspects fit together such that isolated sensuous experience was no obstacle to ethical connection. Given that I am not going to argue for a return of the ineffable, it seems—if we want to use aesthetic experience to help us link perception to ethics—we would need to learn to be bodies that somehow perceive not alone but socially. That is, we would need not only to believe that our sense experience is the result of being raised within a particular social regime but also to experience having such an unnatural, learned body.

If I am fair to Hansen, his arguments—the four steps quoted previously—do seem to be trying to explain how digital art might change our sense of our bodies, but I hope I have made the case that the art cannot do this if it does not allow for intense repetition of its experiences or if it is shaped to emphasize an isolated body. Hansen does discuss one piece of art that addresses bodies experiencing art together, but his discussion eventually leads us back to the same problem of how we get from the epistemological to the ethical.

In his book *Bodies in Code* (2006), the last artwork Hansen describes in his chapter focused on perceiving bodies is *Body Movies*, by Rafael Lozano-Hemmer,

a piece originally exhibited in 2001 in Rotterdam and since then shown in Lisbon, Linz, Liverpool, and Duisburg. Lozano-Hemmer describes the piece on his Web site: "*Body Movies* transforms public space with 400 to 1,800 square metres of interactive projections. Thousands of photo portraits taken on the streets of the cities where the project is exhibited are shown using robotically controlled projectors. However, the portraits only appear inside the projected shadows of local passers-by, whose silhouettes measure between 2 to 25 metres high, depending on how far people were from the powerful light sources placed on the floor of the square. A custom-made computer vision tracking system triggers new portraits as old ones are revealed." That is, participants on the streets or squares where this piece is projected must move between a series of lights and a wall to make the shadows into which the photographs of their fellow city dwellers are then projected; the participants' actions therefore control when photographs are projected. With *Body Movies*, Hansen describes for the first time digital art that has been designed for multiple participants; he writes that the art is "deployed in the service of a broader aesthetic aim—that of creating the possibility for a form of communion rooted in a technically facilitated kinesthetic space. . . . To this end, *Body Movies* expressly solicits collective participation and, through it, the emergence of unpredictable behaviors. As Alex Adriaansens and Joke Brouwer describe it, *Body Movies* invited people on the square, up to 50 of them at a time, 'to embody different representational narratives,' thereby allowing them to create 'a collective experience that nonetheless allowed discrete individual participation'" (101–2).

About *Body Movies*, Hansen notes that "in the words of one Dutch participant, there is a possibility for a 'strange kind of communication with people you've never met,' one where 'you're all together but you're also separate'" (101–2); as a result, Hansen argues that "Creating the possibility for such communion—for a truly impersonal communication or, better (following Walter Benjamin), for the 'communicability' that underlies and facilitates communication—is the ultimate aim, and the ultimate accomplishment, of Lozano-Hemmer's relational aesthetic" (102). Given that this is the last piece Hansen describes in the particular section of his book discussed here, and given that he describes *Body Movies* as "truly inspiring" (102), I assume that *Body Movies* must be the closest for Hansen to what makes possible the transformation of "the agency of collective existence" that he believes ought to follow from the digital art he describes. One implication of his approval of this artwork is that the ethical move he proposes must be made with art purposefully designed to emphasize social activity by engaging multiple participants together at once—which would seem to throw the ethical efficacy of art like *Saturday* or *Osmose* into question, since such art, as noted earlier, isolates participants both physically and experientially in their time with the art.

But, in addition, an apparent assumption behind Hansen's approval is that transformed agency will happen automatically, in simple response to the experience of social art like *Body Movies*. It is as though, for Hansen, strangers who move together to make shadows on a wall will necessarily understand something new and different about their sensuous engagement with the world and others. Is that understanding automatic visceral learning or is it discursive, encouraging participants consciously to choose to move differently with others ever afterward? In either case, the questions raised previously about the necessity of repeated experiences for learning new sensuous engagements still apply; in the second case, what in *Body Movies* would encourage participants to understand discursively—and in the terms Hansen wants—that their experience of the piece has given them awareness of the Benjaminian "'communicability' that underlies and facilitates communication"? Particular responses to sensuous experience depend on how one has been raised up into a sensuous body through sense training but in this case would also seem to require training about art—and, in the case of the Dutch participant Hansen quotes, it is the presence of documentary videographers, asking participants specific questions about their experiences, that resulted in the responses Hansen quotes, not the experience of the artwork alone. Without outside encouragement or training that prepared one to question the experience, any discursive link between the aesthetic experience and its ethical consequences cannot be presumed.

"To see things in a new way that is really difficult, everything prevents one, habits, schools, daily life, reason, necessities of daily life, indolence, everything prevents one . . ." (Stein, 43). What can we do, perceptually, to live well together? If we believe that how we understand—even experientially—our and others' skin, smell, or physical closeness affects how we live together, then perception always impinges on the ethical. My focus has been on whether aesthetic experiences—intensified or heightened perceptual experiences—can also affect how we live together by changing the structures of our sensing, by changing, therefore, even our understanding and so movements and uses of our bodies. Although I have questioned the efficacy of nonrepetitive aesthetic experiences, I do not want to dismiss the possibility that such experiences—like the transducing gloves described earlier—can be openings to reflection on or discussion about how our senses are shaped and so can be openings to critical understandings of how our senses shape our relations with others. I believe, however, that such openings are most likely to occur (like the comments about *Body Movies*) with encouragement, with the sort of questioning that comes with practiced and overt instruction.

We know that writing is always an effort with unpredictable effects—and nonetheless we study, teach, and apply rhetorical approaches. If we believe that our senses can be heightened and so perhaps changed by experiences composed

for that purpose—if, in other words, we believe that our senses are persuadable—then rhetorical considerations should apply here, as well.

Although my focus has been on art and gaming, any text we compose engages us aesthetically. Written texts may be shaped to dull bodily sensation, or to emphasize cognition over sensuality, but this is only one way among many that we teach bodies what they are or should be. As I mentioned in my opening, recent changes in the technologies of texts can make the aesthetic possibilities of texts more obvious and more available to our rhetorical ends, and so I hope that this essay has persuaded that how we engage each other sensuously through our texts, any text we make, is worth discussion in our research and teaching as we query how we might bind our bodily perceptions with our ethics.

Notes

1. For photographs of the gloves and how they are used, go to "Electronic and installation" projects at Raaf's Web site, www.raaf.org.

2. Screenshots of the piece are online at http://www.immersence.com/osmose/index.php.

3. As of December 2008, there were 640 groups at Flickr that include Wii photographs (http://www.flickr.com/search/groups/?q=wii), with at least 45 focused exclusively on the Wii and some having more than 900 members and more than 2,600 linked photographs.

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