

Lost in Translation?: haptics, the studio based arts and the distancing of Covid-19

Introduction

The image is no doubt a powerful thing. As a child the image came to me through books, magazines and limited choices of television. Images of the shadow of a human burned into stone steps when the Atomic Bombs were dropped on Japan and one of a line of living skeletons in the camps of the Holocaust have stayed with me. But access to these images was not common 50 odd years ago. They were not the wallpaper of my daily life. Today, we are inundated with images both in quantity and subject and at previously, unimaginable speeds. This is an invaluable resource to all of us, no less the artist, and along with other modes of lived experience has expanded our well of consciousness and therefore the ways we experience the world.

However, the sudden unleashing of COVID-19 and the unforeseen consequences of its mandatory physical distancing and isolation has created an imbalance whereby the image has come to dominate as a conduit for experience. The necessity of these changes has also meant sudden and drastic shifts in how art education can be delivered during this pandemic. Delivery, if it has not been suspended, has centred around remote learning through the screen image. Educators have scrambled to find ways to deliver content and facilitate a meaningful student experience. For some, these adjustments have seemed relatively smooth, while for others it has meant a total rethinking of what and how they teach. This paper will briefly examine some of the educational alterations that have been made, the immediate consequences for studio based learning and potential outcomes in the near future for contemporary art. It will only consider two aspects of art education delivery – the studio experience and the viewer's experience of the artwork.

The visual art disciplines of painting, photography, printmedia and film have, arguably, suffered less in terms of new delivery modes because they produce predominately two dimensional outcomes and therefore the gap in translation to onscreen image is smaller. Indeed, film's media, which has no physical object, is the screen. But this does not take into account the nuances of gesture and materiality in painting, the selection of the grain of the paper for a print or photograph, the

collaborative nature of film production and cinematic viewing nor the delicate and precise handling of tools and equipment needed to create artworks within these disciplines. While these aspects of the artist's process are essential to any experience of an artwork, the conceptual language of these disciplines has tended to background or ignore these elements of practice. The post-object emphasis has been with us since the 1960's and accelerated with the advent of the personal computer and digital image. While I acknowledge that the image was already dominant before COVID-19, the last two decades has also seen a rising, (perhaps reactionary) interest in the notion of agency and the handmade, and the articulation of a haptic aesthetic.

What is a haptic aesthetic?

A haptic aesthetic is based on touch being the foundational sense for our understanding of lived experience. All experience leads back to one's being in the world and as Maurice Merleau-Ponty claimed, we touch and are touched by it.¹ A haptic aesthetic in the arts provides a holistic art encounter, one that 'democratizes' the senses and through a non-hierarchical evaluation, brings a richer and fuller experience to the art encounter. This encounter fosters a response inclined towards empathy and intimacy. It is founded on the recognition that physical movement and gesture through space and through material interactions creates consciousness and therefore generates the fullest experience for art's audience.

The restrictions of COVID-19 and resulting moves to remote learning might be set to dampen or erase this haptic emphasis.

Students' education in studio-based disciplines such as jewellery, glass, ceramics and to a lesser extent sculpture is reliant on these disciplines' haptic histories of materiality and methods of manipulation. In order to accumulate this knowledge, the learner needs to be consistently exposed to this in a physical space.

¹ Maurice Merleau-Ponty *Phenomenology of Perception*. (trans. C. Smith), London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1962.

The nature of studio- based learning

The notion of the studio has also expanded in the last twenty years; for some it is a series of nomadic locations where different processes are carried out, for others a laptop, for some it is still an architectural space where one goes to physically make art. Within the contemporary art school's studio-based disciplines, a physical space is still considered optimal.

Students working alongside each other in a physical studio promotes community – conversations unfold, peer feedback is naturally shared, over time they watch and learn from their fellow artists' processes. The formal studio class allows the teacher to respond immediately to what is happening for the individual, for the group; to gauge commonalities of ideas when they occur in the present moment, to respond to formal imbalances or inadequacies of the work in progress such as in scale, weight, textural surfaces, pressure, temperature, colour, placement, object relationship through multiple viewpoints, sound in actual space. A nuanced awareness of these qualities in an artwork requires the presence of a fleshed body. A simple example of this requirement in the ceramics studio is the act of throwing on the potter's wheel. When I demonstrate students can move around to see how my hands are positioned from different angles, they can see and feel the subtle changes in tension and timing in my gestures and even in my breathing. When I observe students working on the wheel, I can literally 'see' (because of my accumulated tacit knowledge) when they are applying incorrect pressure. It is not enough for me to say, 'apply more pressure'. But how much more? And so, I can briefly place my hand over theirs and do not remove it until I sense their physical realisation of what is needed. This cannot happen online. I can watch endless YouTube 'how-to' videos of wheel throwing, but if I have not physically experienced the act, watching a video will be little more than mesmerising. When instructing an online course in clay hand building methods for beginners, I find myself unconsciously attempting to put my hands through the screen and repeating verbal instructions with different phrasing to give further clarity. While preparing this paper, I asked my colleagues Dr. Karin Findeis (jewellery) and Cobi Butcher (glass) about their thoughts on remote learning. Findeis said it was problematic, particularly for students with no prior learning and while Butcher thought it had value in the conceptual development of a student's work through one on one discussion, both were in agreement that it lacked the dynamics of a body's physical presence in the studio where dialogue between teacher and student involves immediate responses to gestural and material investigations.

The research into mirror neurons by scientist, Vittorio Gallese and his collaborator, art historian, David Freedberg, would suggest that mine and my colleagues' observations of the diminishment of the studio learning experience through the online classroom is accurate.² Mirror neurons are the 'basis for the capacity of primates to recognise different actions made by other individuals: the same neural motor pattern that characterizes the action when actively executed is evoked in the observer.' These same neurons are also connected to emotions and sensations and they are also not reliant on sight, for example, a sound of an action can produce the same neurological response.³ Gallese's and Freedberg's 2007 research found that there is a changing degree in the strength of our empathic response dependant on whether the action/object is physically present or simulated through video or image.⁴ And they proposed that, 'even the artist's gestures producing the art work can induce an empathic engagement of the viewer'.⁵

The value of the real in the experience of art

Art educators also place a great emphasis on students going to galleries/events to view art. While to provide survey of art histories and movements, they most often use images, it is considered critical to the development of an artist's practice that they experience the 'real' thing and as often as possible.

In 1992-3, the installation work *Women of the Revolution* (1992) by the German artist, Anselm Kiefer, was shown in the Biennale of Sydney.⁶ It is a pivotal work for me, fundamental to my own experience of art and the way I process that experience as an artist and a viewer. It is important to note here that most Australian artists and art theorists, for a great deal of the twentieth century, experienced the art of their peers through the second-hand image. This affected the ways in which they made and read art. I had, until viewing

² Vittorio Gallese, "Mirror Neurons and Art" in Francesca Bacci and David Melcher, eds, *Art and the Senses* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

³ Ibid., 455-6.

⁴ Ibid., 458.

⁵ Ibid., 460.

⁶ This work is now housed in The Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art in the USA on loan from collectors Andrew and Christine Hall.

For image see

<http://4.bp.blogspot.com/dHiIMWOeVY/VdVhSqRAdeI/AAAAAAAAAN04/x9t80XRaGYk/s1600/Women%2Bof%2BRevolution1sm.jpg>

this work in the physical, only experienced Kiefer's work through images. Here is an account.

The entrance to *Women of the Revolution* was perhaps half the width of a normal doorway and this in itself immediately established a heightened body awareness in me and indicated an abrupt transition from one space (the AGNSW's architecture) to another (the enclosed space of the artwork). Stepping into the work's interiority, the temperature dropped considerably, a deep sense of coldness made my skin contract before I could even focus on the dense forms that I was about to encounter. This response lingered as I made my way through the installation. On either side of me was a row of old hospital beds, each covered with a heavy quilt of lead sheeting indented by the trace of an absent body. A small pool of water (sweat, urine, bodily fluids?) in each bed's indent was possibly responsible for the air's coolness and now, as I write, the coldness, the pooled water, and the solidity of the beds' rectangular forms merge. I feel them as I felt them then, a deep heaviness, estrangement and melancholy. This feeling grew as I passed down the aisle between the beds, and was joined by an odour of earth and decay that grew pervasively as I walked. Strangely, a photograph that is evident in the documentation of this work, I cannot recount. Reaching the end of the aisle, the odour was thick in the air; it had become my inhaling breath. The room opened up to the right into an alcove that one could not see from the original doorway. Here, hung like lynched bodies, was the source of the odour, a glorious row of uprooted sunflower plants with clumps of earth still attached where they had been ripped from the ground. The yellow of the sunflowers' centres appeared like soft, warm lights after the line of greyness I had followed. Yet, their pungent state of decay seemed to belong to the beds' absent occupants – women of a long past revolution.⁷

This account of my physical experience with Kiefer's work serves to highlight the sensorial limits of the image of his work and in turn, the ways a holistic understanding of art has been restricted during this pandemic through gallery viewing options and the cancellation of art events. Viewing art online through virtual

⁷ Women of the French Revolution who were the instigators of the physical revolution. One could say that Eugene Delacroix's 'Marianne' in *Liberty Leading the People* (1830) was more than a symbolic woman.

gallery platforms and Zoom artist's talks limits our experience in several ways – unable to move through the actual space compromises our visceral and therefore conceptual and poetic comprehension of the work; spatial relationships are distorted in terms of scale and how the artist has directed the architectural space to hold us; the online environment does not as yet have the capability to carry the nuances of temperature, odour or materiality. Virtual reality headsets and sensor-wired suits might eventually bring us closer, but sensory load is still restricted at this point and cost is still prohibitive. It will be a long time before the individual art student has such a device in their toolbox and it will still be a simulation.

An example of when remote learning works

However, I also found there are occasions when online learning can work. The work *Two Hours* by Sining Cao was created recently for an undergraduate minor project inspired by notions of the Expanded Field in a sculpture class at Sydney College of the Arts (figs 1,2 & 3). The class is a blending of face-to-face students and those learning completely online (due to remoteness or choices, both due to COVID-19 restrictions). The class is conducted mostly face-to-face with some Zoom classes. *Two Hours* involved a series of processes put in place by Cao to focus on specificities of absence, presence and the fluidity of time, and ideas around real and imagined space. The artist began with a selection of traditional sculptural materials such as plaster, clay, marble and glass and the virtual three-dimensional design of a modular element that could form a variety of reconfigured and stacked objects. Cao then had this form printed into a series of faux representations of her material selections. She packed all, but one of them and sent the box to one of her class peers with instructions for it to be opened for the group critique. Each element was wrapped as a gift for a class member and online Cao instructed us in its final construction. The final element, which had been cast in wax and set alight two hours prior, appeared on the larger than life screen in real time as it continued to melt. The two hours of the title represented the time difference between the class in Australia and her real location.

What did this work activate? Firstly, it created multiple shifts and collapses in ideas of substances and objects as either physical, virtual or imagined and related this directly to perceptions of time, distance and media through which the artwork

travelled. And secondly, it resisted and simultaneously emphasised the absence and presence of each participant's involvement by briefly creating a sense of shared community. Ultimately, this work suggests that what must be recognised is that lived experience can be constituted of multiple operations simultaneously and that contemporary sculpture must be considered in terms of difference and not a hierarchal valuing of forms, spaces, materials or methods.

Conclusion

Sining Cao's *Two Hours* was successful because it directly addressed the nature of her experience as a remote learner and artist, but also because it harnessed different kinds of space simultaneously, including physical space and relationships. For the class group, it was a case of blended experience and perhaps, this will be the future of studio-based learning – a permanent delivery of art education through blended learning.

However, if remote learning becomes the preferred platform of art education delivery than perhaps studio disciplines that are reliant on a full haptic experience will become irrelevant and fall away. But if this is the case, what art is capable of and its ability to shape consciousness will also be limited by the constraints of a virtual and isolationist studio. Gallese's and Freedberg's findings on mirror neurons that our empathy, attentiveness and engagement with the artwork and others is affected by the degree of real presence should be taken seriously when considering the pedagogy of art education; a virtual image is not always as powerful as the immediacy of the event. As J.J. Charlesworth states in his article "Holding on to art 'In Real Life' " for ArtReview, 'It turns out that a wholly virtual culture (and wholly virtual art) doesn't mean very much without a real material life in which to interact.'⁸ Our presence is not a concept, some things are lost in translation.

⁸ J.J.Charlesworth "Holding on to art 'In Real Life' " <https://artreview.com/holding-on-to-art-in-real-life/>

FINAL PROJECT

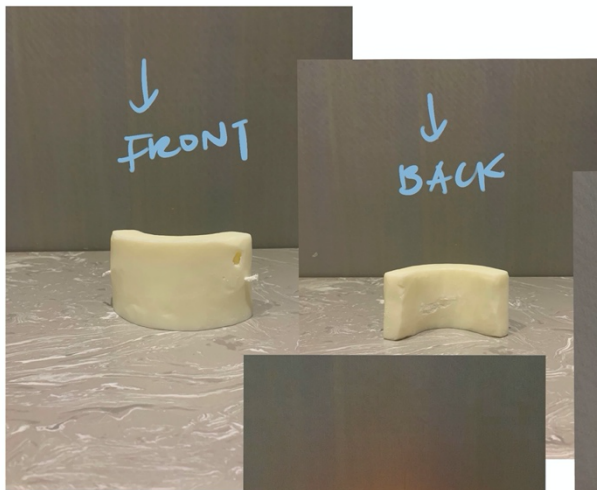


Make audience to imagine

Final Missing one part

Figure 1 Sining Cao *Two Hours* (2020) photo: courtesy of the artist

FINA ONE



MELTING



Figure 2 Sining Cao *Two Hours* (2020) photo: courtesy of the artist



Figure 3 Sining Cao *Two Hours* (2020) photo: courtesy of the artist