

'Getting Messy With Clay, Paint & Charcoal: An Abject Argument for Creative Embodiment'

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My paper concerns the effects of digital culture upon contemporary society: how the relentless technological drive towards a screen-based culture privileges sight over other, more subtle and varied senses such as the haptic (our sense of touch). My argument is that art-making - specifically the pure physicality of using one's body to work with expressive materials such as clay, paints, oils and chalk - is a potent antidote to an increasingly cerebral approach to communication. The elevation of the ideal body in today's mass media, and the digital manipulation of imagery, creates an unreal landscape divorced from the messy, abject reality of our corporeal bodies. I will draw upon philosophical arguments about the nature of the physicality of the body, from Bakhtin's idea of the grotesque and Kristeva's concept of the abject, to put forward the idea that creativity lies in these marginalised zones; in the messy, transgressive, ever-changing realm of a human body engaged in an act of thinking and playing with materials.

Our lives and our cultures are dominated by images. We are bombarded with up to 1000 images every day (Virilio and Degener 2005, p. 10); essentially flattened, dematerialized doubles of reality. Society is in the midst of a profound transformation wrought by the Internet, digital culture and communication technologies. The 21st century fusion of telecommunications with the computer has intensified the drive towards this disembodied existence. We are surrounded by virtual presences, phantoms, hauntings and doubles; in the airwaves, in the electronic eyes we carry in our hands in the form of mobile phone cameras, in our discarnate reflections played out in real-time footage of ourselves on CCT cameras while waiting at the Post Office, RTA or Medicare branch. Under this electronic dazzlement through which we conduct our lives, where even our social relations are saturated with digital images - think of the fast-growing use of Facebook - technology has come to structure our lives in such a way as to give dominance to the visual side of things. Digital cameras and mobile phone cameras have increased exponentially the quantity and location of images circulating in society today. Digital cameras essentially dematerialize images and disengage the visual information from the physical world our bodies inhabit. In this digital screen culture of weightless, ungrounded pictorial representations, philosophers such as Paul Virilio are describing a shift in experience which volatilizes the real and 'obliterates the object of lived experience into technological modes of representation', causing a 'derealization and dematerialization of the object' (Armitage 2000, p. 116).

Our electronic communication medias are populated, according to communication philosopher John Durham Peters, by 'spectral beings who look and sound human but offer no personal presence and possess no flesh'. He points out that while our bodies know fatigue and finitude, their effigies - once recorded, can circulate through media systems indefinitely, across 'the wastes of space and time' (Peters 1999, p. 140).

This proliferation of digital screen culture and the ramifications upon the human body is now being researched by a growing number of interested academics, working across a variety of research fields, from Internet and media/cultural studies, to neuroscience, sociology and art theorists. This paper argues for a recognition of the value of a multi-sensory way of being, and particularly a haptic or tactile mode of perception. I will also argue that, following on from media philosopher Marshall McLuhan's theory of sensory ratios and his notion of the electronic media as an extension of humankind's central nervous system, that the growing tendency to privilege the mind over the direct lived experience of the body comes at a price. This price is a narcosis, a numbness at the point of the extension of the body, or, as he puts it, an 'autoamputation'.

Media studies theorist Roger Silverstone argues that the vividness of everyday life - grounded in bodily experiences - is being reduced by the 'technological intrusion into the conduct of everyday life' (Silverstone 2002, p. 761). Our everyday lives are full of paradox and ambiguity, they contain their own vivid smells, desires and refusals of what Silverstone calls 'the antiseptic orderings of high culture' (Silverstone 2002, p. 764). By contrast, he argues that the illusion of connectedness within the network of Twitter, or bulletin boards, or social pages, is grounded in the refusal of otherness. Yet relationships depend upon the recognition of difference. French philosopher Paul Virilio believes the proliferation of new communication and computer technologies are taking us out of this world, 'beyond the limits of space and time, outside of nature and the matter world' into a new world with its own temporality, spatiality and modes of being' (Armitage 2000, p. 110). In this disembodied cyber-space, with no fixed co-ordinates, we are like astronauts, Virilio maintains - cut off and disorientated and may experience an intense vertigo. The fact that communication and interaction takes place instantaneously on the internet removes the usual anchorage to one's own body, nature and social community. Virilio also argues we are being confronted by a 'pathology of immediate perception' due to the proliferation of what he terms 'seeing-machines' or 'vision-machines' - photo-cinematographic and video-infographic apparatuses. These machines are increasingly seeing for us, but ultimately they constrain our vision. 'Machines that by mediatizing ordinary everyday representations end up destroying their credibility.' (Virilio 1997, p. 90).

Think of a satellite navigation system in your car, or using Google maps. Our experience with the landscape is more and more being mediated by these devices. The direct first-hand experience, using our body and all its senses, is being increasingly subsumed by a more narrow, vision-based perception via technologically-mediated experiences. Why is there such a compelling desire to saturate our environment with moving images - with representation of reality? Literary critic and author Terry Castle has described this process as the spectralizing or ghostifying of our mental space, essentially a 'compulsive need ... to invent machines that mimic and reinforce the image producing powers of consciousness' (Castle 1995, p. 137). She also argues that the direct corporeal experience of other people, the messy touching, smelling, tasting, seeing and so on, has started to become emotionally intolerable, thanks to modernity's repression of death and an overwhelming fear of loss and separation (Castle 1995, p. 136).

To understand what happens when the sense of sight is isolated from our haptic and other senses, it's useful to examine what media philosopher Marshall McLuhan has to say on the subject. He saw all tools and technologies as extensions of the human body. They amplify and extend our powers. The wheel was an extension of the foot; the knife, our teeth. He described the electronic media as an extension of our central nervous system. But these extensions come at a price, for his argument is that the senses need to be in balance. I quote:

More and more it has occurred to people that the sense of touch is necessary to integral experience. Our mechanical technologies for extending and separating the functions of our physical beings have brought us to a state of near disintegration by putting us out of touch with ourselves (McLuhan 2006, p. 117).

He argued new technologies diminish sense interplay and consciousness, precisely in the new area of novelty in which they arrive. Because they isolate that sense, they tend to hypnotize society in that particular area (McLuhan 1962, p. 272). Drawing upon medical research into stress and its effects upon the body, McLuhan proposed the concept of 'autoamputation'. In the physical stress of superstimulation, the central nervous system acts to protect itself by a strategy of amputation or isolation of the offending organ, sense or function, he argues. The extension of the body is an attempt to maintain equilibrium. But the shock of the amputation declines recognition. These thoughts are echoed by media theorist Douglas Kellner, who proposes technological idealism generates concepts increasingly distant from common sense, the body and the material world and lived experience (Armitage 2000, p. 117). I'd like to draw your attention to the phrase 'common sense' in this context, as it has a very telling history and highlights the issues being examined here. The expression 'common sense' derives from the Latin *sensus communis*. It goes back further, to Ancient Greeks and Aristotle, to the notion of an 'internal sense' which served to unite or interpret the impressions of the five senses. Aristotle uses the phrase 'common sense' to mean the sensory capacity of the soul to combine the perceptual and imaginative (Gregoric 2007). In other words a 'consensus' - essentially a faculty of 'common sense', which McLuhan explains as conferring consciousness on humans (McLuhan 2006, p. 117). It's been traditionally assumed that we have five sense (vision, hearing, taste, smell, and touch), but scientists are discovering the senses are not independent, but instead are integrations of many different perceptual fragments (Gregory 1979, p. 56). Touch, for instance, includes kinaesthesia - the sense of movement, as well as perception of temperature and pain. And new research shows that synaesthesia - where two or more senses are connected - might be more common than formerly understood. Research into phantom limbs helps explain this. Almost anyone who has had a limb amputated will experience a phantom limb, researchers say (Ramachandran and Hirstein 1998, p. 1622). For some, it's also very painful, for many years afterwards. Sometimes people report they can't control the phantom limb, as it has become stuck in an unnatural position, or that the muscles are frozen in the wrong spot. Using mirrors, researchers in California were able to trick the body of sufferers into controlling the sensations of their lost limb. They created a 'virtual reality box', a cardboard box lined with mirrors, in which the person inserted their good arm. When they watched it in the mirror, it created the illusion of two hands. When the patient was instructed to move both arms, the visual input told them that in fact both arms were moving (Ramachandran and Hirstein 1998, p.

1620). The patients were astonished and in fact regained control of the phantom, and in many cases the phantom disappeared altogether. As brain researcher Vilayanur Ramachandran stated: ‘... these experiments suggest that there must be a great deal of back and forth interaction between vision and touch.’ (Ramachandran and Hirstein 1998, p. 1622).

Another finding is that the senses continue to grow and make connections with your brain, throughout your life. According to Swedish neurophysiologist Matti Bergstrom, the fingertips have such incredible density of nerves that their discrimination is almost as good as that of the eyes (Mitchell and Livingston 1999, p. 9). If children don’t use their fingers sufficiently, if they don’t actively create with them and build forms, then the rich network of nerves will become impoverished and ‘finger blind’, which he says ‘represents a huge loss to the brain and thwarts the individual’s all-around development’ (Ibid, p. 9). Think of the paradoxical combination of the strength and incredible delicacy of touch evident when you examine photographs of sculptors and ceramic artists working with clay or throwing on the wheel. Haptic perception is the process of recognizing objects through touch. Researchers have found that we have an incredible memory in our sense of touch, to the extent that one experiment showed that when people are blindfolded, they have a 96 per cent accuracy rating in identifying 100 common objects, from keys, rings, teabags and scissors. And that 68 per cent of those tested guessed the objects within three seconds of the initial contact. Two objects created a high proportion of errors - rice and a T-shirt (Levine 2000, p. 63).

Contemporary culture lavishes an enormous amount of attention on the body. But this excessive attention comes from what philosopher Richard Shusterman describes as the corporate, cosmetic, dieting and media industries and focuses on a consciousness of how one’s body appears to others - not the actual bodily feelings, pleasures and capacities of our embodied experience.

Ideals of bodily appearance impossible for most people ... (are) distracting us from our actual bodily feelings, pleasures and capacities - such relentlessly advertised ideals also blind us to the diversity of ways of improving our embodied experience. (Shusterman 2008, p. 6).

Potter and author Paulus Bernsohn, who wrote an influential book in the early 1970s about making art from pinch pots (Berensohn 1972), has argued children need to have an education that re-imagines the senses. He says:

I think the craft arts isn’t about an alternative way of making a living and filling museums and galleries with gorgeous objects, I think it’s the clay and the fibre and the metals and woods saying ‘Listen, listen to me. Put your hands on me and you’ll make contact with a living world.’ I believe art is a behaviour and not a commodity. (Radio National 2003).

Working as an artist with material objects, in a studio, involves a strong interplay of all the senses. From holding the burnished wooden tools of the printmaking studio, or the associated smells such as linseed oil, to

the vast array of exotic odours in the painter's studio, to the subtle sensations triggered by drawing with a stick of charcoal in your hand, and the unique scratching sounds that creates, to the myriad ways of physically interacting with the material world in sculpture and ceramics: they share one thing in common -a demand for a full, embodied presence. Creating art may not always be the most comfortable of sensations: the lifting and carrying, the stained ink fingers, the washing of buckets, tending to kilns, setting up gallery shows and so on. But it's this direct lived experience and engagement of the body with corporeal materiality, that is essential to human nature. Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin explains this profound human need articulately in his writings about the culture of the Middle Ages and the notion of the carnivale. The carnivale was a medieval feast time where the usual rigid social norms were turned upside down.

The experience (the carnivale), opposed to all that was ready-made and completed, to all pretense at immutability, sought a dynamic expression; it demanded ever changing, playful, undefined forms. (Bakhtin 1965, p. 10).

During this creative time of carnivale, the body was presented as grotesque, as Bakhtin says, not severed from its material and bodily roots of the world, but connected to the earth, and to the lower stratum of the body, to the life of the 'belly and reproductive organs, it therefore relates to acts of defecation and copulation, conception, pregnancy and birth' (Bakhtin 1965, p21). Grotesque realism, enmeshed in the earthy bawdy humour of the body, also had a regenerating function, he argues.

Contrary to modern canons, the grotesque body is not separated from the rest of the world. It is not a closed completed unit; it is unfinished, outgrows itself, transgresses its own limits. The stress is on those parts of the body that are open to the outside world, that is, the parts through which the world enters the body or emerges from it, or through which the body itself goes out to meet the world. (Bakhtin 1965, p26).

The body itself is revealed to be a principle of growth, an ever unfinished, ever creating being, connected to the world around it. This robust bawdy humour during carnivale was a space for creativity and provided a sense of liberation from official seriousness and hierarchies. It disrupted ideals of what Bakhtin terms a 'closed, smooth and impenetrable body' (Bakhtin 1965, p. 317). Interestingly, by contrast, think of how most digital devices work with smooth, glossy, closed-off screens and impenetrable insides. They are mass-produced containers aimed at perfection, unyielding and invariant.

French philosopher Julia Kristeva's notion of the abject is very closely related to Bahktin's grotesque realism. She explains it as the feeling of loathing and disgust the subject has in encountering certain matter, such as that expelled from the body –blood, pus, sweat, vomit, excrement and so on. Paradoxically, the abject at the same time is fascinating – it draws the subject in but then repels it. What makes the abject so full of fear and loathing is that it exposes the border between self and other, and threatens to dissolve those borders (Young 1990, p144).

Canadian artist Paul Matthieu links the abject to working with clay, with his contention that the tactility of materials, so readily responsive to transformation and change, always imply a relation to body movements:

The kinesthetic manipulation of clay may give abstract forms, but these readily become heart and vagina, penis, uterus and belly, or again imitate other organs, ovaries, eggs and sperm. The use of ceramic processes, the oozing and running of fluid glazes for example, reinforces the connotations between bodies and clay, between ceramic objects and bodily activities, all potentially messy affairs, where abjection even is an ever present possibility. (Mathieu 2009).

According to the UK's TATE art gallery, the abject is simply those 'elements, particularly of the body, that transgress and threaten our sense of cleanliness and propriety' (TATE, 2011). In explaining the ideas behind Bakhtin's world of the carnivale, cultural theorist Peter Hitchcock makes the point that the body constantly contradicts pretensions and ideologies of perfection with its 'defecation, sneezing, farting, belching and bleeding' (Hitchcock, 1998, p. 78). The body's materiality conspires against codes of order and rationality issued by the head, he says. In its very abjectness, in its rejection of notions of fixed ideals, the ever-changing and becoming body is a site of renewal, a creative space that is never finished or completed. The medieval carnivale, a playful and festive feast, was a time of change and renewal. In this topsy-turvy world the usual rigid social hierarchies were overturned and images of bodily life were presented with exaggeration and abundance. (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 19). Bakhtin says the essential principle of grotesque realism - that of degradation and lowering of all that was spiritual, abstract and ideal, was a transference to the material level, bringing it down to earth - but most importantly - an opportunity for rebirth and renewal. In this messy, earthy, material realm lies the opportunity for creativity, for breaking down old established ways of thinking and enabling a transformative leap into fresh ideas.

In the fairytale *The Handless Maiden*, the young girl has her hands chopped off after her father, a miller, makes a pact with the Devil to mechanize his mill. She ends up with a pair of silver hands, but is unable to care for her baby with such artificial metallic hands. Jungian author Robert Johnson reads the story as reflecting the wider price society pays for the mechanized, material-based world, by cutting off the feeling values. He says it speaks on a psychological level, as well as a cultural level. '...no advancement in civilization can be made without some such bargain; to argue that civilization would be better served by staying with the hand-powered mill is to fall into the error of Mahatma Gandhi and Thoreau. But if we make a bargain, we must be awake to its terms.' (Johnson 1993, p. 75). French theorist Jean Baudrillard argues myths involving a Pact with the Devil have been the central myth of our society since the Middle Ages, representing a society engaged in the historical and technical process of a domination of Nature (Baudrillard 2005, p. 191). For Robert Johnson, there is nothing wrong with our mechanical devices per se, but a mechanical view of life is wrong and will extract a 'feeling price' (Baudrillard 2005, p. 69). I'm not arguing against using digital technology - I use all the latest technology at home and in my own art practice; at home we have three laptops, two computers, three iPhones and all the latest programs and apps. But I am arguing we firstly must be aware of the implications of transferring our communications with one another into a two-dimensional screen based world, and second, remember to seek out the joy our bodies can provide for us in

making art. In the plot of the fairytale, the Handless Maiden runs away to the forest with her child and spends a period of time gathering her psychic energy. The baby falls into a stream and she firstly calls for the servants to help rescue it, but there is no one there. Finally she plunges her silver hands into the stream to rescue the child, and when she pulls it out, the baby is safe and her hands are restored to flesh and blood. It is in the hands-on, direct and embodied existence; in the acknowledgement of our bodily roots and the regenerative power of the ever-unfinished, ever creating body, that we ground ourselves and escape the vertigo and pathology described by Virilio.

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