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## **Multimedia Art and Multisensory Experience. Towards an “Epistemology of Multimedia”**

Multimedia performative forms of art challenge the traditional notion of ‘art’ in many ways, especially within the context of new media art. But their impact reaches far beyond the pure aesthetic realm: multimedia art demands multisensory perception modes and models for interaction that still lack theoretical foundation.

The dominant epistemological theories in Western cultures are mainly influenced by a separation of the senses in emphasizing their different functions and hierarchizing their meaning. Western cultures have historically developed towards a mainly visual culture, at least also, as Marshall McLuhan pointed out very clearly, because of the overwhelming importance of printing technology (McLuhan 1964). Therefore the development of epistemological models and the establishment of certain cultural dominant media can be seen as inherently interrelated. In this context it seems to be consequent that the multimedial digital technologies challenge the monosensory epistemologies of Western culture, although the eye’s cultural dominance can still be observed in discourses around the ‘iconic turn’ and in the characterization of the ‘digital culture’ as a visual one.

The dominance of the visual neglects current tendencies in interactive media and performance art which increasingly turn to the other senses, especially the ear and the kinaesthetic proprioception, as Derrick de Kerckhove calls it (Kerckhove 1995). Interactive media installations often demand the immersion of the user’s whole body. But what does this ‘holistic’ perception mode mean in terms of an epistemological theory?

### New Media Art's Predecessors and Connected Philosophical Models

Experiencing immersive artistic environments with the whole body means that the dualism of the subject-object relation becomes questionable because we are moving within a surrounding that forms a part of our proprioception and to which we are connected through sensual perception as well as affective and reflective processes and mostly also through action. Such environments have historic predecessors: At the beginning of the 20th century the avant-garde movements began to transcend the established borders between the separated arts music, literature, painting and sculpture and headed for new multimedia art forms. Interestingly enough this is also the time when philosophers like Helmuth Plessner, referring to the phenomenological thinking of Edmund Husserl, aimed to give sensual perception and with it the human body a new meaning for intellectual insight – corresponding to the general increasing attention for a more complex concept of the human being as constituted by intellectual, psychological and physiological components. In his essay “The Union of the Senses” (1923) he not only criticizes the subject-object-division and its neglect of the body but also the implicit epistemological premise that sensual perception is something that can be thought without considering the individual condition of the perceiving subject. He states that there is no sensual sensation as such – our perception is always connected to our momentary situation, related to specific memories, to our affective condition etc. (Plessner 1923, 271). Plessner distinguishes between the physical body (Körper) as something that can be objectively examined and reflected on, and the feeling/perceiving body (Leib) which is an inherent part of our proprioception. This concept of the twofold character of the human body may still serve as one component of a fruitful methodological approach to the experience in immersive multimedia environments. Those are sensed with the whole body while – as we are conscious about moving in an artificially created space – we are able to reflect on our sensation. But this is only a starting point for more complex questions that need to be answered as Plessner for example does not reflect on the possible effects that different sensual sensations might have for our proprioception and what they might have to do with our way of acting.

### Multisensory Experience as Contemporary Challenge

So we still lack an elaborate multisensory perception model – neither aesthetic theory nor the cognitive sciences are yet able to explain the interplay between the senses. Additionally both have yet failed to model the interrelation between multisensory perception, conscious mental activity, emotion and bodily action, which often characterize interactive installations and environments. These different but inherently connected processes form nothing less than our ‘experience’ – not only in the aesthetic realm, but also in our multimedia daily environment. Shopping malls for instance are very complex compositions of visual, acoustic, olfactoric, sometimes also gustatory and tactile sensations that aim to increase our desire for consumption. This example shows that such strategies of manipulation are very often linked

to complex sensual sensations that work subconsciously – they constitute a specific atmosphere, a phenomenon that also transcends the subject-object-division as Gernot Böhme pointed out (Böhme 2001, 45). As multi- or intermedia art forms often play with our modes of perception and create certain atmospheres, they can lead us to a more adequate epistemological model that goes beyond the subject-object relation and approaches the different sensual, emotional, reflective processes in combination with action that altogether constitute our experience.

### References

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