

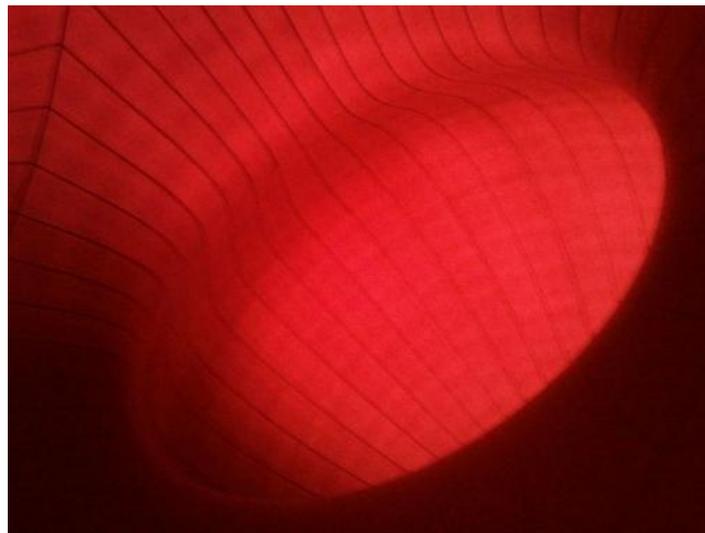
# UNMEDIATED EXPERIENCE? RE-MEDIATING PHENOMENOLOGICAL APPROACHES

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The paper discusses the theoretical tension between the desire for unmediated experience formulated in some contemporary media philosophical approaches, and the evidence, that our experience is inherently related and maybe also formed by media. How can this tension be solved? And what are the necessary theoretical approaches for a model of perception that meets the demands of our multisensory and multimedia environment?

Processes of perception / Theories	Traditional Philosophy (Body/Mind-Dualism)	Phenomenology	Anthropology/ Sociology	Cognitive Sciences	Media Theory
<b>Sensory perception</b>	<i>Neutral standardized process with limited contribution to intellectual insight</i> Dominance of the visual as the most distant and therefore analytical sense	<i>Basis for our relation to the world - no neutral sensory input, because those data are always already interpreted</i> Dominance of the visual as paradigmatic sense	<i>Models of sensory perception are culturally different and depending on processes of communication within social communities</i> Culturally different hierarchies of the senses	<i>Biological and chemical processes of data processing in the brain based on standardized models</i> → topography of the brain's sensory areas Focus on visual perception (Semir Zeki)	<i>Sensory input is formed by the cultural dominating media</i> → co-evolution between media and perception (Marshall McLuhan) Dominance of the audiovisual
<b>Intellectual</b>	<i>Pure Insight/cognition comes from a priori knowledge that is solely preformed in the brain</i> (Descartes, Kant) → guarantee of rational and comprehensive realization of the world outside	Principle of <i>Intentionality</i> (Husserl, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty) → Objects are part of us as they exist only the way they are given to our perception – no strict subject-object-division	Dominance of the observer-object-relation → <i>distant analytical processes of insight</i> (although critically reflected in models of participating observation in anthropology)	Consciousness as <i>complex process of world construction in the brain</i> → the constructivist power of the brain to create its own world questions the subject-object-division	<i>Standardized cultural techniques</i> (reading, writing) are developed in co-evolution with the dominant media of a culture → intellectual processes are media-driven and not supercultural
<b>Emotional</b>	<i>Excluded from the intellectual insight</i> → Kant puts emotions to the subjective side of the faculty of judgement, the aesthetic experience as like/dislike-reaction	The <i>holistic psycho-physiological model of man</i> (Merleau-Ponty, Schmitz) includes also emotional reactions on the perceived → <i>sensory perception and emotion are bound together</i>	Reflection of <i>different cultural and historical models of emotion</i> (e.g. Norbert Elias), social meaning of emotions (e.g. Niklas Luhmann), but: sociology relies on <i>concepts of rationality</i>	<i>Differentiation of emotion/feeling</i> (Antonio Damasio), the first is 'natural', instinct-driven, the latter culturally formed → <i>unity of mind and body</i> , but: no concept of sensory perception	<i>Media cause emotion and trigger emotion</i> – but: Focus on film/literature → no reflection on the <i>cultural formation of emotions</i>
<b>(Re-)Action</b>	<i>Action is not part of traditional philosophical reflection</i> – unless it is mental action → e.g. processes of decision (ethics)	<i>No model of action</i> – the concept of intentionality might be seen as a kind of proposal but resembles more the mental models of traditional philosophy	<i>Models of action mostly concerning rituals or standardized social action</i> driven by rational motives and excluding emotion and subconscious processes	<i>Action as result of complex neurological processes</i> triggered e.g. by hormones, but also by other cognitive processes → basic emotions in oscillation with rational thinking	Different concepts of action: - <i>interacting with technical media</i> - <i>acting within media</i> (e.g. strategies of self-marketing)

Table 1: Overview of different epistemological concepts from different disciplines (© by the author).



Anish Kapoor: *Leviathan* (2011), Interior (photo by the author)



*Anish Kapoor: Leviathan (2011), Exterior (photo by the author)*

During the last few years – and very obvious for example in some panels of last year’s ISEA – one can observe a somehow paradox tendency: Theorists coming from the philosophy of media tend to dream of a sort of “unmediated experience” as the Canadian philosopher Brian Massumi called it, [1] and media artist and theorist Christopher Salter spoke of “felt meaning” as a form of insight which lies beyond the traditional concept of language driven consciousness. [2] Another example: Mark Hansen, author of the book “New Philosophy for New Media”, [3] re-animates a concept coined by Henri Bergson in the 19th century: the bodily affection which Hansen describes as holistic psycho-physical perception mode and confronts with contemporary audio-visual media. In his explicit concentration on the perceiver Hansen neglects the anthropological dimension of technical media which Marshall McLuhan had pointed out: that human perception has always developed in co-evolution with a culture’s preferred media. Furthermore, Hansen’s (and the Bergsonian) concept of “bodily affection” remains rather vague, just like the other concepts of an unmediated, embodied experience: Mainly they don’t distinguish between the different sensual perception modes – the body appears as a homogenous whole that is constructing its own experience of the world, and they assume that there could be a primordial experience without any preformation by nature or culture.

This longing for an unmediated experience which is based on an unspecified unity between body, mind and environment refers to phenomenological approaches in philosophy, which developed at the beginning of the 20th century: As already mentioned, Mark Hansen refers to Henri Bergson, who had significant influence on the founder of Phenomenology, Edmund Husserl, and later also on Maurice Merleau-Ponty; Brian Massumi in turn refers to 19th century psychologist and philosopher William James, who on his part influenced Husserl and Deleuze. James introduced the concept of “pure experience,” [4] an experience which lies before any subject-object division and – this is the logical consequence – seems to be pre-medial; a non-mediated physico-emotional way of experiencing the world before it becomes a separate part of oneself.

Phenomenology developed during a time where daily life in European countries at the beginning of the 20th century underwent deep changes: There had been an accumulation of technical developments like the steam engine, electricity and the new media photography and film – all significantly changing our

perception modes. Phenomenological approaches like those of Edmund Husserl (1913), [5] Helmuth Plessner (1923) [6] and later Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1945) [7] opposed to the traditional epistemologies that had emphasized intellectual insight as independent from the body and equated sensory perception with visual perception. The changing epistemological environment proved the contrary – and the traditional dualistic mind-body separation seemed to come to its limits in facing the acceleration and multisensory appeal of the electrified cities and technologized perception modes.

It also might be no coincidence that the revival of phenomenological approaches is correlated with the diversification of our self-experience we currently undergo. The paradox, that theorists and practitioners who have been moving within the universe of new digital media, now call for a pre-conscious, non-intellectual, unmediated and primarily physical and emotional experience of the world, might even be a logical consequence facing a world that becomes more and more complex and where we are confronted with a multimedia environment that challenges our current models of perception and the dominance of intellectual insight.

In our every-day life we have to play multiple roles in different medial environments: communicating with friends in social networks like facebook, managing our daily real life environment, proving our intellectual capacities in our jobs, being active in our leisure time with sports, cultural events etc. All this also means managing multiple media like TV, Radio and Internet, but also diverse sensory, affective and intellectual inputs of places that are part of our daily life: be it the sensory appeal of shopping malls or wellness environments or cultural sites. The longing for an unmediated experience might be a logical reaction to this intersensory and intermedia overload. But is the current tendency to turn away from the media and praise an unspecific holistic bodily experience that ignores media theoretical acquirements really a solution for the problem that we need a more complex model of perception? I doubt this – and would like to illustrate the demands of a model that reconciles concepts of embodiment with media theory in turning to an example of a work of art:

In 2001 the Mexican artist Teresa Margolles presented her work “Vaporización” – “Vaporization” in Berlin. It seemed to be a quite simple work: The visitors entered a room which was filled with a fog-like substance. Their sight was limited, but they felt the humidity of the fog on their skin and of course inhaled it by normal breathing.

This was all – so what the visitors experienced was first of all the atmosphere of a quite dark and foggy room full of a humidity that not only enwrapped their bodies, but which also became part of their organism through the pores of their skins and through breathing in. Finally the visitors were informed that the humid fog consisted of water that was used to wash the corpses in the Mexico City morgue. Although it had been disinfected the experience of breathing water that had become part of nameless corpses and that now became part of the own body has something deeply frightening and might in most cases have caused the emotional reaction of deep disgust, and probably also the feeling of somehow being physically misused by the artist.

This becomes very obvious in a variation of the concept, a work called “In the air” from 2003 (En el Aire). I would like to quote a description I found in the World Wide Web (published under the author’s name or pseudonym “Lolla Moon”):

“In the museum’s soaring hall children play under bubbles that come from Teresa Margolles’ piece En el Aire (In the Aire 2003). Running, laughing, catching, they are fascinated by the glistening, delicate forms that float down from the ceiling and break up on their skin. A common motif in art history, the bubble

has long been used as a memento mori, a reminder of the transitory nature of life. The children's parents, meanwhile, studiously read the captions. Suddenly, with a look of disgust, they come and steer their offspring away. The moment of naïve pleasure turns into one of knowing repulsion: they have learned that the water comes from the Mexico City morgue, used to wash corpses before an autopsy. It's unimportant that the water is disinfected; the stigma of death turns the beautiful into the horrific." [8]

This example and the description show a further dimension of Margolles' two works: The visitor is not only concerned with her own body and the proprioception in realizing what has touched and somehow invaded her body, but also with the instinctive impulse of protecting her children from being confronted with death, and probably with the body of dead people one had not even known. The intimacy of getting touched by someone is combined with the covering-up of death in our Western cultures. So Margolles' work breaks multiple taboos:

- First of all she minimizes the distance between the material she uses for the installation and the visitor. The material finds its way into the organism of the visitor and somehow melts with parts of her because the perception organs are not the distant senses ear and eye but the skin and the nose, sense-organs which have long been aesthetically ignored and therefore somehow lack any aesthetic tradition and education. So the medium chosen (the fog), and the triggered sense organs are quite unusual and challenge our standardized perception habits – which is the epistemological dimension of the work.
- Secondly she confronts the visitor with her (the visitor's) own body and her relation to other - dead - bodies, which rises ethical questions. At least it confronts us with our culturally influenced attitude towards death and towards anonymous corpses from a country where for many people survival is a challenge which has to be faced daily anew in drug war and crime – this is the intellectual and cultural dimension.
- Both together – the transgression of perception habits and cultural taboos – lead to a deep psychophysical experience that shows that intersensory perception, intellectual and cultural knowledge, emotion (disgust) and feeling (horror), and finally also action (taking away the children) are inherently bound together.

This example is so interesting because it ignores one unwritten law of art: to leave the recipients in a state of autonomy where they can decide whether they want to participate or to draw back and stay an observer. This choice is essential to keep the playfulness of art, even in borderline cases. Just to name one example: The Austrian Artist Hermann Nitsch organizes every year what he calls "Orgien-Mysterien-Theater" ("bacchanal-mystery-theatre") where a lot of animal blood and bowels are spread among the participants. Nevertheless it is left up to the audience whether it wants to participate or not, and at least everyone knows in advance what expects her/him when visiting such an event. Margolles instead confronts us with a part of our real life we normally tend to push aside in minimizing the distance art normally builds up between itself and the spectator/visitor: She uses a medium, water, which stands for cleanliness and purity, and brings this together with the visitor's body as medium so that both merge through breathing in a process which happens beyond the visitor's control.

In table 1, which of course is not exhaustive but rather a scheme, I tried to sum up the main theses of different theories dealing with the problem of perception and experience from different perspectives.

The leading question for this overview is the topical demand for a combination of intersensorial and intermedia theories. The table will show that in most cases media are neglected – and with this the social and cultural aspects of perception/experience.

This overview refers to approaches of very different disciplines and examines how they treat the processes which I consider to be decisive for the complexity of experience: Multi- or intersensory perception, intellectual and emotional processes as well as concepts of action. It is obvious that every approach has its blind spots – consequently setting up a model for ‘experience’ is an inherent interdisciplinary task. And it shows that nearly all approaches lack a notion of media, in first place Phenomenology which claims to explain the processes of every-day-experience – but its approaches prove to be incomplete without considering the multiple impacts of natural and technical media. I doubt the existence of an unmediated experience, although a pre-conscious “feeling” surely belongs to what we call experience. But, as Helmuth Plessner and Maurice Merleau-Ponty point out, there is no sensory perception – and, I would add, no unmediated experience – without interpretation: even if our interpretative mechanisms are based on biological and chemical processes in the brain, they are also culturally and socially induced. In concentrating so much on technical media we tend to forget that our experiencing senses and our feeling body are media as well, as Margolles’ piece “Vaporización” shows. Without our culturally induced neglect of death, without our instinct-driven, but also culturally formed scepticism that tells us to keep distance from everything which does not belong to our own bodies, the effect of “Vaporización” would not be this provoking as it has been proven to be. Margolles uses the human body as medium: first, the particles of the corpses are merged with the water so that they are transformed, then the bodies of the visitors become media in absorbing and again transforming the corpses’ cleaning water. In this constellation the visitor’s bodies are object and subject at the same time.

I want close this contribution with another example: Anish Kapoor was the invited artist for this year’s Monumenta in Paris. For the Grand Palais, a very light and beautiful architectural construction, he created a sculpture he called “Leviathan”:

“Leviathan” is the name of a beast which was created by God in order to reign over the sea. It was invincible and could only be defeated by God. According to the Babylonian Talmud Leviathan (who exists in Christian and Jewish tradition) studies the Tora, judges and nourishes the world and then plays with the ships on the sea. So Leviathan has become the synonym for a monster that causes chaos and is unrulable. Kapoor’s “Leviathan” does not move, but it swallows everyone who comes to visit: thus it has a monstrous inner and outer appearance (as the images show), but both work very differently: Within the monument one feels as if being swallowed by a whale like the biblical Jonah. The dimmed red light (which has a natural source from the glass roof of the Grand Palais, filtered by the red synthetic skin), the sticky air, the damped sound and the very round shape that branches into cave-like bulges evokes associations of being in the stomach or bowel of a beast or in an uterus (but without the protected feeling one should have there). Stepping outside the impression is completely different: One sees “Leviathan” as a sculpture from a distance, the light is natural again, the air fresh, the sounds have regained their resonance – it is an object again and can be treated as such.

“Leviathan” offers us at least two perspectives: One is unusual and challenges our sensory perception, our psychophysical proprioception, and our intellectual ability of evoking associations, the other offers us the far more familiar perspective on an object which can be experienced mainly visually as a sculpture (but also in touching its skin) and lets us feel much more comfortable because we can remain in our culturally acquired habits of perceiving art. Kapoor thus oscillates between the creation of an interior media arrangement causing an experience that differs from our everyday perception on the one hand,

on the other he creates an outside space that allows us to regain our usual perception modes – “Leviathan” changes between unfamiliar and familiar intersensorial and psycho-physical forms of experience. This indeed seems to me to be one of the most valuable qualities of contemporary (inter-)art forms and it makes obvious that the newly evolving desire for unmediated experience is somehow romantic, but not realistic and not necessary at all if a complex model of experience is adopted.

So consequently the complexity of multi- or intersensory experience is not adequately modelled in adopting only one concept, be it

- processing sensory data, even if multisensory perception is considered,

or be it

- experiencing a pre-conscious holistic bodily affection with its related emotional processes,

or be it

- biologically explainable cognitive processes

or be it

- ‘pure’ intellectual insight.

All of these approaches are complementary, and they are always related to individual and cultural experiences (emotions, knowledge, habits) and media, which means natural and technical media alike. The examples should have made clear that there might be no unmediated experience, and that intense experience is a complex combination of multiple factors that can only be treated in an interdisciplinary effort.

## References and Notes:

1. Brian Massumi, *What Makes an Event? Considerations for the Occurrent Arts*(Keynote at ISEA 2010 Ruhr, Aug. 20th, 2010).
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4. Joel McKim, "Of Microperception and Micropolitics. An Interview with Brian Massumi," in: *Inflexions* No. 3 (Oct. 2009): 4, [http://www.senselab.ca/inflexions/volume\\_3/node\\_i3/massumi\\_en\\_inflexions\\_vol03.html](http://www.senselab.ca/inflexions/volume_3/node_i3/massumi_en_inflexions_vol03.html) (accessed September 7, 2011).
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8. Lolla Moon, "Teresa Margolles Sierra," [www.lollaloves.com/post/90913758/teresa-margolles-sierra](http://www.lollaloves.com/post/90913758/teresa-margolles-sierra) (accessed August 26, 2011).