

# Seeing Touch and Touching Sight: A Reflection on the Tactility of Vision

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... *the eyes want to caress.*

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (quoted in Pallasmaa 2005, 14)

## Abstract

The article explores the reciprocal relationship between images and viewers by considering the relationship between the senses of sight and touch. I argue that images touch viewers at the same time that viewers touch images. Taking Casilda Sanchez's video work, *As Inside as the Eye can See* as a point of departure, this article explores the ways in which a viewer's encounter with the work can be understood as tactile rather than merely visual. Precisely because the work is visibly obsessed with the sense of sight it provides an intriguing entry point into discussions around the tactility of visual experience. Even though a person does not physically interact with this video by means of actual touch, our relationship with it is fundamentally tactile. In order to make this argument, I draw on theoretical positions that deal with the embodiment of perception, phenomenology and haptic visuality. Finally, with reference to Merleau-Ponty's theories on vision as touch, I show how a viewer's embodied response to the video contributes to its critical potential which unfolds from this rich experiential and tactile encounter.

Keywords: vision, touch, phenomenology, video, empathic projection, haptic visuality  
Merleau-Ponty

## Introduction

Over the past decade or so, Spanish-born artist, Casilda Sanchez, has produced artworks that show an almost obsessive interest in the human body, its urges, feelings and desires. Since 2005 her digital prints and large-scale video projections reflect on the nature of intimacy, the relationship between inside and outside, personal and private worlds, the self and the other, and the politics of vision. Extreme close-ups of skin, feet, fingers, faces, and particularly eyes

and eyelashes, draw attention to the relationship between the viewer and the images he or she beholds. In her works *Sight* (2008) (Figure 1), *Ojos Que No Ven* (*What the Eye Sees Not*) (2009) (Figure 2) and *As Inside as the Eye can See* (2009) (Figure 3) the viewer, caught in the act of looking at the subject/s on screen, is explicitly put on display. It could be argued then that one of the prominent themes in Sanchez's work is a philosophical reflection on the nature of sight.



Figure 1: Casilda Sanchez. *Sight* 2008. Video still.

<https://www.casildasanchez.net/works/#/sight/>



Figure 2: Casilda Sanchez. *Ojos Que No Ven* (*What the Eye Sees Not*) (2009). Video still.

<https://www.casildasanchez.net/works/#/ojos-que-no-ven/>

For a long time, visual perception has fascinated artists, psychologists, neuroscientists, philosophers and, more recently, art historians and film theorists interested in how images are experienced. More specifically, the relation between vision and the other senses is

increasingly gaining attention in all of these fields. There is some disagreement, however, over how visual perception operates and which parts of the body are involved in this process. For instance, Nicholas Wade (2011, 19), a researcher in the psychology of vision, argues that, in the context of art, the visual medium denies the viewer a more-than-visual experience. According to Wade, art can merely represent sensory experience allegorically. Similarly, writing from the perspective of multimodal ethnography, Bella Dicks, Bambo Soyink and Amanda Coffey (2006, 88) argue that “Photographs allow us to see modes that are visual: colour, shape, size, position, light. What they do not show us are modes that operate through the other senses – of touch, smell, hearing and taste – such as bodily movement, three-dimensional shape, sounds.”

Such narrow views of the potential of images to activate sensory modalities beyond vision has contributed to the predominantly visualist or ocularcentric approach to art which, as Francesca Bacci and David Melcher (2011, 1) point out, “has largely tended towards privileging the visual.” The result is that many accounts of art “suffer from a sort of tunnel vision” (Dumbadze 2010, 125) by focussing solely on the opticality of the works under discussion without acknowledging that other factors may affect a person’s visual encounter with art. Similar critiques have been raised against visual culture studies, a field generally assumed to correct many of art history’s shortcomings.<sup>1</sup> In analyses of art and visual culture, focus is usually given to semiotic, ideological and socio-cultural interpretations based on visual content, even as contemporary art practice increasingly incorporates multisensorial elements that appeal to a viewer’s whole body (Duncum 2012, 187, Halsall 2004). Taking Sanchez’s video work, *As Inside as the Eye Can See* (Figure 3) as a point of departure, in this article I ask: How can image encounters be understood as embodied rather than primarily visual experiences? What theoretical approaches enable a better understanding of a more-than-visual experience of a visual work of art? Based on this literature, how does *As Inside as the Eye Can See* evoke an embodied and, more specifically, tactile experience in the viewer? Finally, how might paying attention to image encounters from the perspective of embodiment, enrich the critical analysis of this artwork?

It is tempting to ask why an artwork that is so clearly obsessed with the sense of sight would be used to argue that viewing art is a more-than-visual experience. Moreover, the video does not incorporate the other senses in any obvious way or even solicit a viewer’s bodily movement. Based solely on its subject matter then, Sanchez’s work might even be considered

an artwork “for the eyes only” in the Greenbergian sense (Greenberg 1992, 758). There are many other works that more obviously engage a viewer by requiring bodily participation and immersion. Obvious examples include Carsten Höller’s experiential works (see O’Donoghue 2015), Sissel Tolaas’s explorations of odour (see Lockard 2013) and the participatory and interactive artworks produced by contemporary artists.<sup>2</sup>

Paradoxically perhaps, it is precisely because *As Inside as the Eye Can See* is so clearly obsessed with the eye that I want to show that looking at the image on screen far exceeds a visual experience only and can, more aptly, be described as evoking a bodily and, more specifically, tactile experience in a viewer. For, even though a person does not physically interact with this video, by means of actual touch, he or she is nevertheless somatically engaged when viewing it. In order to make this argument, I review a body of literature that deals with the relationship between images and viewers in tactile terms. Thereafter, I discuss the relationship between vision and touch from a psychoanalytical and philosophical perspective. This theoretical foundation allows me to explore how a person’s visual-tactile encounter with the video might contribute to the production of its meaning. My aim is not to discount semiotic, ideological, narrative and socio-cultural interpretation; rather, I want to show that the video’s critical potential unfolds precisely from a rich somatic experiential encounter with the work. In order to achieve the aims set out above, I first closely describe the video. This guarantees – or at least commits to – the specificity and particularity of the argument thereby avoiding vagueness and generalisations. From this rich descriptive foundation, I explore how the video may affect a viewer viscerally. In these discussions I refer anecdotally to my own and other people’s responses to this video. This kind of hermeneutic approach is often used by art historians writing about the experiential dimension of image encounters rather than analysing an image’s representational content (Fried 2002, Halsall 2004, 103, Van de Vall 2008, 1, 50-51, 71 and Esrock 2010, 231-245).

## Seeing touch



Figure 3: Casilda Sanchez, *As Inside as the Eye Can See*, 2009.

<https://www.casildasanchez.net/works/#!/sight/>.<sup>3</sup>

The video, which plays for seven minutes, begins with a blank (white) screen. After a few seconds, what appear to be enormous fine hairs (depicted in extreme close-up) hesitantly enter the left-hand side of the screen and move slowly and jerkily toward the right. When an eyeball enters the screen we realise that these are eyelashes. However, a few seconds before the eyeball and eyelid come into full view, another set of hairs has already entered the screen from the right-hand side. A few seconds later, two huge eyes are looking hesitantly at each other, slowly blinking and gently moving closer together as they hover uncannily on the screen. Although these floating eyes do not provide any information about the bodies that hold them, it does not take much effort to imagine that the shiny skin of the eyelids and the moist eyeballs they protect, belong to two separate, living, breathing bodies now intimately – if somewhat uncomfortably – close to each other.

As the video progresses, the eyelid on the right is closed for approximately ten seconds, during which time the eyeball on the left looks fixedly at the closed eye(lid) opposite it. When the eyelid on the right slowly opens, the eyelid on the left closes for approximately fourteen seconds – which feels like an eternity – whilst the eye on the right looks intently at it. After another one minute and sixteen seconds – during which time each eyelid slowly,

hesitantly, and jerkily opens and closes – the two eyes, still shown in extreme close-up, are now so close together that their eyelashes touch.

The two people remain this close together for another five and a half minutes during which time their eyelashes stroke each other. As each person's eyelid gently opens and closes, their eyelashes even stroke each other's eyeballs and eyelids. At this point the eyes blink as if in pain and a few seconds before the end of the video, the eyes slowly move away from each other and we are left looking at a white screen again.

It does not take much persuasion (or imagination) to conclude that Sanchez's video is fundamentally about intimacy, love, and, more specifically, the nature of looking at, and being in close contact with another person. Before exploring what the work might have to say about such looking and touching, I want to try to put my finger on the ways in which the video activates the sense of touch through the sense of sight.

### **Touched by Images**

It has been argued that the relationship between images and viewers is one of reciprocity, to the extent that images touch viewers at the same time that viewers touch images (Didi-Huberman 1997; Barker 2009). Georges Didi-Huberman (1997) maintains that images can palpate, penetrate or devour their viewers. He demonstrates this by describing people's responses to Jacques-André Boiffard's illustration entitled *Papier Colant et Mouches* (*Fly Paper and Flies*) (Figure 4) which was published in the French Surrealist magazine, *Documents* in 1930. In this photograph, fly feet are enlarged to the size of the reader's fingers holding the paper. Didi-Huberman (1997) argues that the image of the fly "was there to stick to us: appearing too close, almost making our flesh prey to the image." Didi-Huberman (1997) suggests that "for the image to truly *touch* us, they must no longer be the soothing physic that beauty deceitfully promises." Following this argument, perhaps it is precisely because Sanchez's image does not soothe, that it grips and 'touches' us.

In *What Do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images* (2005) William Mitchell evocatively suggests that some images may seem to be alive or even possess a kind of agency and will of their own. This view is shared by John Krois (2011, 278) who maintains that the affective character of images, or their expressive impact, can elicit emotions to the extent that

some pictures may have “a visceral effect on the viewer”. Although the extreme close-ups of two eyes in Sanchez’s work may not disgust in the same way that Boiffard’s flies do (or perhaps, for some viewers, they do), the video shows intimate details of the moist and hairy bodies of the subjects and in high-definition. Attention is thus drawn to the distinct materiality of their bodies – specifically eyeballs, eyelashes, and moist skin – which are shiny and constantly moving. Owing to this proximity, viewers might even notice fine body hairs on the eyelids which are normally invisible to the naked eye. As a result of their affective character and expressive content, the images onscreen solicit a visceral response from deep within a viewer’s body. Our eyes move around the eyeballs, eyelashes, skin and white background, and in so doing, our distance from the faces on the screen collapses, or was – perhaps from the start – already denied. ‘Devoured’ by the gigantic eyes onscreen, viewers may blink uncontrollably, or even hold their breath, as massive eyelashes scrape moist eyeballs.

For some people, looking at eyelashes touching an unblinking eyeball is utterly unpleasant, resulting in irritation and discomfort. Many of the audiences to whom I have shown the video have found the experience unbearable, their faces visibly displaying their agony and disgust. Such responsive viewers have merged with the image on-screen empathically and imaginatively; their reactions show that some images evoke intense discomfort and even physical pain. Following Didi-Huberman, Mitchell and Krois, these spectators have been touched by the image.

Empathic reactions to art, such as those I described above, are corroborated by empirical research in neuroscience which has made it possible to explain what is happening in the brain when we look at pictures. The mirror neuron system, discovered in the late twentieth century by neurophysiologists working at the University of Parma in Italy, shows that when watching someone executing an action, the same neural circuitry is activated in the (passive) viewer as in the person performing the action (Gallese, Fadiga, Fogassi and Rizzolatti 1996, 593–609). Linking different empathic experiences of visual art (such as the responses we might have to Sanchez’s video) directly to neural mechanisms, art historian David Freedberg and neuroscientist Vittorio Gallese (2007, 197, 199) argue that the general feeling of empathic engagement or “bodily resonance” with artworks that some spectators experience is a “pre-rational” operation which has “a precise and definable material basis in the brain.” Apparently, the empathic reactions experienced by viewers of Sanchez’s video, can be

located in the pre-motor and parietal cortices of their brain. Using a wide range of examples from works by Michelangelo to Pollock, Freedberg and Gallese (2007, 197) conclude that the physical empathy experienced in the observer's brain "easily transmutes into a feeling of empathy for the emotional consequences of the ways in which the body is damaged or mutilated ... [e]ven when the image contains no overt emotional component." In other words, even though there is no obvious emotional interaction between the two people in the video, a viewer's brain simulates the actions he or she observed into a personal experience of the same action, in this case, extreme pain and irritation felt in one's own eyes. Freedberg and Gallese (2007, 199) term such physical reactions to visual images "embodied simulation".

### **Touching Images**

In discussing the way in which images touch viewers, I have already (and unavoidably) slipped into a discussion of the role of the viewer in this reciprocal relationship. In other words, I have begun to explore how viewers touch images. Since the 1990s the embodied subject has come to occupy an increasingly important place in research in the humanities and social sciences with many such studies following a phenomenological approach. In particular, phenomenological film theory has shown that cinema can be experienced haptically (Barker 2009; Marks 1999, 2008).<sup>4</sup> Laura Marks (1999) coined the term "haptic visuality" which is a mode of looking that is more concerned with the surface texture of an image than with its spatial effects.<sup>5</sup> In film a haptic experience can be produced in at least two possible ways. On the one hand, the effect of the film itself – including the composition of its frames, camera techniques and filmic devices, the integration of sound/s and the soundtrack for instance – may produce this experience. On the other, it may be produced via the "viewer's predisposition" (Marks 2008, 399) to see haptically which may result from their "individual or cultural learning" (Marks 2008, 399). In other words, the extent to which a film is experienced haptically or optically has just as much to do with the viewer's inclination to see it in that way as with the character of the film, or its expressive content.<sup>6</sup> This helps to explain why not all viewers experience Sanchez's video as unbearably painful, and also provides a more nuanced understanding of the extent to which Freedberg and Gallese's neurological tests can adequately account for all viewers' responses to art. Nevertheless, if a viewer is open to an image's invitation to perceive in a different way "a more embodied and multi-sensory relationship to the image" (Marks 2008, 400) may be generated in that instance.

Writing more specifically on art, Ellen Esrock (2010, 238, 245) shares Marks' view that spectators can become more aware of their embodied relationship to an image. Her research is informed by phenomenology and empathy theory and focuses on what a viewer's body may bring to pictures. Empathy theory gained momentum in Germany in the late nineteenth century. Initially closely associated with philosophy and experimental psychology, theories on empathy were quickly transformed into a theoretical method by the art historians Heinrich Wölfflin and August Schmarsow.<sup>7</sup> By the mid-twentieth century, empathy theory was largely rejected by many art historians who questioned the reliability of emotional responses to art. Esrock, however, demonstrates that embodied experiences of art "are not simply vague, romantic turns of phrase" but that empathy can be reconceptualised as a more "vital concept" for the visual arts (220). Based on Michael Fried's compelling investigations of empathy and embodiment, Esrock (2010, 223) describes empathy as "a particular kind of embodied operation that involves a projection of some aspect of one's body or self into objects and others in the world." When applied to art, this projection of the self takes place when a viewer visually explores an artwork imaginatively through the sense of touch. Even though we may not be aware that this is happening, viewers can become attuned to what is spontaneously taking place in their body, thereby allowing the experience to become even more intense. When this occurs, "an unconscious sensorimotor image might appear to consciousness – the feel of [an object], the movement of reaching into the painting," and so forth (Esrock 2010, 227).

Esrock refers to this process as empathic projection, which, in some ways, appears to resonate with the neuroscientific claims for embodied simulation I described above.<sup>8</sup> Even further than this, it is not only the visual areas of the brain that are stimulated when observing images, but also the motor areas that are involved in executing the actions being observed, that are activated. Even if we are not moving, or even if the object we are watching is not moving, looking at objects that can be moved activates the part of our brain – the ventral premotor cortex – that is involved in performing that action (Freedberg and Gallese 2007, 200). This means that all the varieties of reactions, including feeling drawn to, touched or irritated by, and/or awkwardly intimate with the image on-screen, derive from a person's somatosensory system which is affected by what is seen and automatically simulates what it feels like to be in a particular bodily state. Moreover, when viewers 'feel' themselves 'into' an aesthetic object/event, kinaesthetic sensations including muscle tensions and even the way in which they breathe (Esrock 2010, 237-246) are engaged in that experience. The whole

physical body is therefore an *active* participant in the experience of images, at the heart of which is the sense of touch.

That a viewer's imaginative empathic responses take place physiologically somewhere in the body goes some way to explain why he or she may feel as if they are actually touching what is represented in an artwork and, in a sense, "penetrating the picture" (Esrock 2010, 227). And, following Didi-Huberman, it is equally a matter of the picture penetrating and touching a viewer. Our pained reactions to seeing eyelashes scraping gigantic eyeballs in Sanchez's work demonstrates rather well the affective, empathic, and tactile connection between people and what they see. Thus, when observing two eyes touching on screen, a viewer's own eyes, or rather their entire bodies, are touching what they see. Seeing becomes touching both in the literal sense seen onscreen as well as on a far deeper visceral level. Looking at the image is thus far more than a merely visual experience; the image itself, combined with the viewer's predisposition to empathise with what they see, has led to a tactile encounter with the work. This bodily encounter has brought to light the realisation that vision holds the promise of touch. Moreover, our embodied engagement with the work has brought us to the brink of its potential meanings.

### **Close encounters**

As Jennifer Barker (2009, 23) argues in her phenomenological analysis of the tactile experience of film, "it is in the meeting of the film's skin and the viewer's skin that the film becomes meaningful." Barker (2009) grounds her analyses of film in theories of embodied perception. Investigating the ways in which "[...] meaning and significance emerge in and are articulated through the fleshy, muscular, and visceral engagement that occurs between film's and viewers' bodies", Barker (2009: 4) avoids conventional analytical approaches employed by film theorists who aim to interpret films as texts. Instead, she turns her attention towards the sensuous relationship between viewers' bodies and films. In the same way, in the embodied encounter between a viewer and an artwork a variety of meanings unfold. But how can image analyses that are based on sensuous experiences that may vary from person to person remain critical and avoid "slid[ing] into a morass of emotion and desire" as David Howes (2005, 6) puts it? Renée van de Vall's (2003) approach to sensuous and experiential encounters with art is helpful here. She argues that an experiential encounter with art can only become critical when "its appreciation is in some way or another self-conscious"

(Van de Vall 2003, 10). The experiential encounter with art must therefore become self-reflexive or be related to the self in order to appreciate an artwork's critical potential. Relating *As Inside as the Eye Can See* to the self must, thus, first reflect on the experience of what is being experienced – that is, seeing human faces. Looking at human faces is extremely evocative and complex, and quite unlike looking at any other object. As Van de Vall (2008, 50) notes elsewhere, “not only do faces attract our attention more strongly than everything else does, but in our visual worlds there are no items that we see with so much alertness, discrimination and responsiveness.” A viewer's empathic response to the faces in Sanchez's work may therefore be greater than if he or she were looking at any other object. Furthermore, the awkward interaction between the two faces in the video suggests something about the complex exchange that takes place, not only when a viewer looks at an image of a face (and eyes in particular), but when two people look at each other. The ways in which the eyelids close reflects our tendency to look away when we realise that we have been caught looking at another person. This is because sight is reciprocal: “one cannot take through the eye without giving at the same time” (Simmel [1907] 1997, 112). In such situations, and as a result of another person seemingly touching our very core, we quickly avert our gaze.

These, and presumably many other ideas about looking at another person, emerge when we reflect on our embodied encounter with the video. The work invites the experience of vision as a close relation of touch, both literally shown – eyelashes touching eyeballs – as well as ‘virtually’ experienced – an imagined touch, following Esrock (2010), deep within the body. Critical reflection on an artwork's possible meanings is thus not circumvented when analysing a person's embodied engagement with art. Instead, working from the somatic encounter enriches the analysis of how images might work on their viewers. It is precisely from the embodied/haptic encounter with the video that ideas relating to the very nature of seeing and the relation between seeing and touching have surfaced.

It seems, however, that in this work vision must be overcome in an effort to have a close relationship with another human being. For, when they are at their most intimate, the two people no longer see, but touch each other instead. When they are close enough for their eyelashes to touch they are too close to clearly see the other. One might surmise that the two people onscreen are now blind. In a curious paradox, whilst viewers see the intimate connection between the subjects onscreen, they are actually seeing their inability to see. Does

this video then show that vision fails to bring people to deep and intimate understandings of each other? Is touch then more successful in achieving such closeness?

### **Vision's failures**

The alleged failure of vision to afford us an intimate understanding of another person – as well as ourselves – has a complex philosophical history. This supposed failure has led to what Martin Jay (1993) describes as the “denigration of vision” in French philosophy and theory. For example, in their respective accounts of the formation of self-consciousness, philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre and psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, denigrate vision, arguing that this primarily alienating and hostile sense is a ‘necessary evil’. Sartre’s account of ‘the look’ in *Being and Nothingness* ([1943] 1956) and Lacan’s account of the formation of the subject under ‘the gaze’ in *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* ([1973] 1981) both demonise vision. For both theorists, looking in general and, more specifically, looking at another human being, can be a troublesome affair.<sup>9</sup> According to this line of reasoning, coming to know and understand another person through the sense of sight requires distance which, paradoxically, results in alienation and separation from them. Understood in this way, vision is apparently not the most helpful sense in enabling close and intimate relationships.

Besides the demonization of vision in philosophy and psychoanalysis, Claude Gandelman (1991, 151) identifies a long list of so-called “eye-artists” who were suspicious of sight’s alleged rationalising, objectifying and distancing nature.<sup>10</sup> Twentieth-century examples include the film-makers and visual artists of the 1920s, and movements such as Dada, Surrealism and Russian Constructivism. Instead of celebrating vision, as is the case with the ocularcentric bias of Western science and aesthetic discourse, in the modern period these artists produced works that reveal their scepticism of seeing and being seen. Therefore, the so-called denigration of vision in Western philosophy has a counterpart in Western art where an anti-ocularcentric outlook gave rise to the production of artworks that set out to challenge the dominance of sight in aesthetic discourse (Classen 1998, Lauwrens 2012). In *The Color of Angels. Cosmology, Gender and the Aesthetic Imagination* Constance Classen (1998, 154-160) discusses works by artists who bring the proximity senses of touch, taste and smell into the terrain of aesthetics. Classen (1998: 156) argues that “women, non-Westerners, and the blind [have] a special potential and motivation for making the ‘dark continent’ of the proximity senses part of the world of (Western) art”.

Classen (1998, 156) also identifies Filippo Marinetti's call for the invention of a new type of art based on the sense of touch as a prominent early example of an anti-ocularcentric attitude towards art. In 1924 Marinetti wrote 'Tactilism' in which he described how he had developed an acute tactile sensitivity by wearing gloves for several days and then touching objects in the dark. He then produced tactile artworks which consisted of tables covered with materials of different textures (Classen 1998, 157). According to Marinetti ([1924] 2001, 199), tactile art has "nothing in common with painting or sculpture" and therefore needs a completely new conception of aesthetic experience. Accordingly, someone schooled in the visual arts would not be an ideal candidate for developing tactile art since he or she would "naturally tend to subordinate tactile values to visual values" (Marinetti ([1924] 2001, 199). Marinetti thus opposed touch to sight, believing that tactile aesthetic experience is completely unlike visual aesthetic experience. Whether or not Marinetti was correct in believing that visual and tactile aesthetic experiences are unassimilable, cannot be answered here. Apart from some recent investigations into developing an account of tactile aesthetics, little attention has been given to the nature of tactile aesthetic experience (Gallace and Spence 2011).<sup>11</sup> As I have shown above, however, the complex relationship between vision and touch, or more specifically, vision *as* touch, has received attention by those theorists investigating embodied simulation and empathic projection. I will return to these ideas later when I look more closely at French phenomenologist, Maurice Merleau-Ponty's ideas regarding embodied perception.

It could be suggested that *As Inside as the Eye Can See* follows Marinetti's demonization of vision; in order to reach an intimate relationship with another person, apparently the eyes must no longer see, but touch instead, with the gazes overcoming the distance between the bodies by also relinquishing their ability to see. Presumably then, intimacy can only be achieved when sight is overcome and touch takes over. Similarly, in *Sight* (2008) (Figure 1), and *Ojos Que No Ven (What the Eye Sees Not)* (2009) (Figure 2) the artist seems to reflect on sight in negative terms. In *Sight*, for instance, the eye looking through a peep hole brings to mind ideas of voyeurism; a disembodied eye looms large, where it does not belong. Likewise, *Ojos Que No Ven (What the Eye Sees Not)* does not show eyes at all. Focusing on the soft skin between the eyes, touch is invited, but not sight. However, considered differently, these artworks, by their very materiality, and by the ways in which they work on viewers who respond empathically, show that vision does not necessarily detach or alienate us from what we see. As Barker (2009, 74) points out, "viewer's responses to films are necessarily physical, full-bodied responses, because our vision is always fully embodied, intimately

connected to our fingertips, our funny bones, and our feet, for example.” Thus, even though we see the seeing eyes from a distance, we are still deeply affected – touched – by what we see. Through our bodily encounter – our embodied simulation and empathic projection – we come to see that vision can be envisioned differently. Rather than being the sense that distances people from each other, and images from people, *As Inside as The Eye Can See* forces viewers to literally feel the connection, rather than separation, between sight and touch.

## **Vision and touch**

This self-conscious critical reflection on the experiential encounter with the video has brought to light an approach to vision already theorised much earlier by Merleau-Ponty. His theories on embodied perception underpin the writing of many of the theorists I have referred to in the above discussions (Freedberg and Gallese 2007, Van de Vall 2008, Barker 2009, Esrock 2010). Merleau-Ponty rejected the notion of disembodied consciousness, so evident in the rationalist strain of Western philosophy, as well as transcendental theories of subjectivity. Instead, he argued that we perceive through our immersion in the world of phenomena. Moreover, he describes the relationship between perceiving subject and perceived object as reciprocal. In *The Visible and the Invisible* Merleau-Ponty ([1964] 1968, 133) demonstrates that this reciprocal relationship is as much visual as it is tactile, by using the well-known example of one hand touching another. When our hands touch, both can be experienced as either doing the touching or being touched. Merleau-Ponty takes this analogy further to argue that in the chiasmic relationship between perceiver and perceived, not only are our bodies touching and being touched, but also seeing and being seen, active and passive, subject and object. And, in this seeing/touching relationship one body does not necessarily master or dominate the other.

In this account of reversibility, Merleau-Ponty ([1964] 1968, 134) thus fuses vision and touch, arguing that “since the same body sees and touches, visible and tangible belong to the same world.” According to this vision-touch system, vision is dependent on tactility. An important foundation for this system is the recognition of the palpation of the eye on the “fabric of the world” (132). For the look “envelops, palpates [and] espouses the visible things” (133). Vision thus opens onto and opens up the tactile world.

Understanding vision as fundamentally tactile is only possible if the world is recognised as tissue, *chair* or flesh which, according to Merleau-Ponty's formulation means that the world is fully tactile. However, this flesh is neither matter nor material substance or spiritual being. Merleau-Ponty (139) prefers us to think about this flesh as an "element" in the sense of water, air, earth and fire, or as "the concrete emblem of a general manner of being" (147). Flesh is therefore a style or mode of perception. Our vision touches the flesh of the world and is part of this world, not somehow looking in from the outside, as in the Cartesian model of detached vision. Instead, Merleau-Ponty regards vision as corporeal, as that from which sensation and thought emerge. "Every visible" he argues "is cut out in the tangible, every tactile being somehow promised to visibility" (134). This means that "there is encroachment, infringement, not only between the touched and the touching, but also between the tangible and the visible, which is encrusted in it, as, conversely, the tangible itself is not a nothingness of visibility, is not without visual existence" (134). In other words, vision and touch operate interchangeably and simultaneously, which is so powerfully evident in the relationship between Sanchez's video and its viewers. If Merleau-Ponty's account of reversibility is considered in terms of the way in which the two people in *As Inside as the Eye Can See* relate to one another, vision can more fruitfully be understood from the perspective of vision's interlacing, or intertwining with the world, where "subjects and objects mingle but never lose their identity" as Barker (2009, 20) argues.

Following Merleau-Ponty's conception of the close relation between vision and touch as well as his nuanced version of vision's tactility and palpation, it is now possible to re-evaluate the contention that when Sanchez's two faces are too close together to see anything, they are blind. Perhaps it is at this moment that the two people, seeing blurrily, and therefore haptically, following Marks (1999), are indeed caressing the inner depths of the other. According to Marks (2008, 400), it is precisely when one is not able to distinguish forms clearly that a haptic relationship is achieved. Vagueness, and more specifically, the indeterminate, imprecise and indefinite character of what is being observed, produces a haptic effect. Vision has therefore not been overcome at all. It is simply the case that haptic visuality has made way for a deeply intimate and reciprocal exchange to take place between the two subjects onscreen, as well as between the video and its viewers.

I propose therefore that Merleau-Ponty's notion of vision's fleshy immersion in the flesh of the world provides the means by which to counter the idea that vision is primarily alienating and

hostile as supposed by Sartre, Lacan and anti-ocularcentric artists. I am not suggesting that vision is not capable of hostility, distance, alienation, and domination. But if vision is understood as embodied and tactile – based on the way viewers have experienced the work – then the two bodies in Sanchez’s video should be understood as being immersed in this tactile vision. Moreover, viewers have become intimately part of the bodies they observe, which are simultaneously touching and caressing each other *visually* even if this vision leads to both pleasure and pain. Far from being excluded, distanced and detached from the bodies on-screen (as supposed by the argument that posits vision in terms of distance and detachment), a viewer’s eyes wander over the surface of the work, visually caressing and touching the images on screen as the eyes they see appear to caress and touch each other. A viewer is drawn, not only into the image, but also into the intimate exchange taking place before them. This is akin to Barker’s (2009, 19) description of the film experience in which “we are in a relationship of intimate, tactile, reversible contact with the film’s body – a complex relationship that is marked as often by tension as by alignment, by repulsion as often as by attraction.”

It is important to be reminded that tensions and alignments are always present in this relationship, for Merleau-Ponty’s account of human relationships, as briefly described above, might easily be understood as idealistic. As Catherine Vasseleu (1998, 35) puts it, however, this approach at least offers the possibility of connection or “human communion” through the sense of sight. In one of his working notes dealing with the chiasm, Merleau-Ponty ([1964] 1968, 215) remarks that in the looks exchanged between two people “there is not only a me-other rivalry, but a co-functioning. We function as one unique body.” This contrasts with Sartre’s understanding of the other’s gaze reducing me to a mere object, at the core of which is my nothingness. I am thus not merely reduced or alienated by the look of the other. Merleau-Ponty ([1945] 2002, 420) argues further that the other’s gaze can only transform me into an object if “both of us withdraw into the core of our thinking nature, if we both make ourselves into an inhuman gaze, if each of us feels his actions to be not taken up and understood as if they were an insect’s.” If, however, we both acknowledge the other’s existence, a mutual dependence and a co-operation between two people looking at each other is possible, resulting perhaps in a “look of love” (Oliver 2001) instead of a hostile or objectifying gaze. Finally, in Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy, looking at another person may lead to an enveloping vision; the subjects do not dissolve into other. Each is left in her or his place, each seemingly emanating from the visible with which and in which s/he participates

(Merleau-Ponty [1964] 1968, 130-131). In this sense, distance and proximity become complexly and simultaneously interwoven, in the same way as the visible and the tactile.

## **Conclusion**

In this article I have tried to extend the phenomenologically-driven close description of a person's encounter with a video work by delving into some of the possible meanings that may unfold when the bodily experience itself is analysed in a critically reflexive manner. In other words, by drawing attention to a viewer's experience of claustrophobia, irritation, disgust, connection, intimacy, shame, anxiety, comfort, discomfort, or simply being moved by, or feeling unsettled by the video not only opened the way to an analysis of their empathic relationship with the images on screen, but also into an investigation of the various, even paradoxical, modes of vision and visual touch occurring in that encounter. I have also argued that a viewer's encounter with this powerfully tactile work is a more-than-visual experience by showing how embodied simulation and empathic projection operate in the encounter with the work. Moreover, I have shown that understanding vision as embodied and immersive can be critical. Whilst I have applied the notion of embodied perception to a contemporary (visual) artwork the possibilities for exploring artworks and images of all kinds and from many different contexts are endless. This is only possible, of course, if one is willing to become attuned to the experiential encounter with art, and if one is able to acknowledge that this encounter is a catalyst for the emergence of multiple meanings. Recognising that aesthetic experience is an embodied and participatory activity or process means that we may need to learn to look at artworks differently. It means that, instead of denying our subjective responses to images, we pay closer attention to both how they work on us and what we bring to them.

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## Notes

1. Since visual culture studies emerged as an academic field in the 1990s, many theorists worried that it might over-prioritise the visual. This concern is evident in some of the responses to the famous *October* Questionnaire of 1996. See, for instance, the responses by Thomas Crow (1996, 35), Tom Gunning (1996, 49) and Sylvia Lavin (1996, 50). Similar concerns have continued to surface in writing on visual culture studies. See for instance, Francis Halsall (2004), Deborah Cherry (2005, 5) and Paul Duncum (2012).
2. For a host of interesting examples, see Caroline Jones (2006).
3. The video can be viewed at <https://www.casildasanchez.net/works/#/as-inside-as-the-eye-can-see/>
4. In the early days of cinema, a viewer's embodied response to film was of more interest to theorists such as Benjamin, Bela Balász and Vertov than analyses of the film's linguistic signification (see Marks 2008, 399).
5. In Greek, *haptikos* means "capable of touching," while in German *hapteln* means to seize or grasp (Gandelman 1991, 5).
6. In the late nineteenth century, Alois Riegl described two ways in which art can be looked at: optic and haptic. Optical looking amounts to scanning the outline of objects. Haptic looking focuses on surfaces. For a discussion, see Margaret Iversen (1993).
7. This brief discussion can merely gloss over empathy theory's complex and wide scope. For a cogent overview of its complex intellectual history see Koss (2006).
8. I use 'claims' here since some critics find the evidence to support these hypotheses unconvincing. See, for instance, Hickok (2009).
9. See Kelly Oliver's (2001, 5) thoughtful critique of contemporary perspectives on identity and subjectivity in critical theory and poststructuralist theory that continue to reflect the notion that we are subjects in a warring relation to objects and other people.
10. As Howes (2005, 6, 10) puts it, in Western intellectual history, sight has been constructed as "the most 'rational' of the senses" in contrast to the alleged "lower senses of smell, taste and touch."
11. Exceptions include Fayen d'Evie's and Georgina Kleege's (2018) recent attempts to "generate descriptive and conceptual vocabulary for a contemporary tactile aesthetics".

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