

*By the Light of the Body: the Somatic Senses in the Visual Arts*

Table of Contents

Preface

Part I Visible Dimensions

- 1 *Aesthetic Touch*
- 2 *Movement: The Light of Touch*
- 3 *Time and Memory*
- 4 *The Intelligent Hand*
- 5 *Tale of Two Senses*

Part II Invisible Dimensions

- 6 *Motion and Emotion*
- 7 *In the Mind's Eye and Hand*
- 8 *Sensible and Sensitive*

Part III Implications and Applications

- 9 *Call for the Body*
- 10 *Please Touch*
- 11 *The Sense of Connection*

Preface

*What I hear I forget*

*What I see I remember*

*What I do I know*

*Chinese proverb*

It began by digging a hole.

One summer, many years ago, I had a recurring image of a large round hole cut deep into the earth. I decided to enact this image of the hole, on a small scale, when I found myself house-sitting for a month at a friend's house in Vermont.

Shovel in hand, I walked the land and chose a spot in the upper corner of a gently sloping hayfield bordered by woods. I cut into the grass with the shovel, inscribing a circle three feet across. I peeled away the heavy mat of sod and staggered with large chunks of it into the woods nearby to leave the hole clear. What remained was a circle of raw, exposed soil. When I surveyed my handiwork, I realized I was moving too fast. My

purpose was not to *have* the hole I had imagined, but to *make* the hole. I laid down my shovel, found a small blunt stick, and began to excavate the dirt slowly, like an archaeologist, grain by grain.

For a few hours every day over the next month, I slowly dug down, revealing the delicate roots of the nearby trees criss-crossing the hole, removing stones, and inching my way into the earth. Each day I drew and photographed the hole as it changed and deepened.

I was vaguely aware that this painstaking excavation was an enactment of my desire to dig below the surface of things. I had grown up as an active, athletic child who loved the woods and mountains. But I had undergone the usual splitting of mind and body, human and nature, matter and spirit, that our culture inscribes in us. I spent the decade after college exploring ways to re-enter my body and restore a reciprocal, sacrilized relationship with the natural world. I undertook an intensive somatic education by attending workshops and classes in sensory awareness, gestalt therapy, movement exploration, Alexander, Rolfing, aikido and vipassana meditation. I learned how to pay attention to subtle bodily sensations; to differentiate mental states and qualities of attention; and to plumb imagery and sensation for meaning. I learned to respect and trust my body's intelligence.

All this brought me to digging a hole in the ground, literally enacting the need to engage with the natural world and my inner life.

That same summer, while looking at drawings by the Baroque Italian artist Federico Barroci, I was struck by the drawings' organic growth, like fungus or mold, from the colored, marked, stained paper. To mimic this fertile ground, I began laying sheets of white paper in the shallow waters of a beaver bog. Left for days at a time, the thick handmade papers, weighed down by stones, recorded the cumulative effects of the immersion: yellow, orange, rust-colored stains and layers of dirt adhering to the surfaces. I pulled the stained, mud-encrusted papers from the bog and dried them in the sun. Back in the studio I tore, cut and glued them into collages.

I turned to hand-papermaking as a medium that would allow me to bury the stained fragments of paper in the matrix of pulp rather than glue them onto flat surfaces. Papermaking provided a process that resembled the papers' sojourn in the mud. It let me

sink below the surface, into the body of the medium, the way I had dug the hole in the ground. My hands could submerge in the thick slurry of water, pulp and pigments, build the image from the inside out, and dig back down through the layers when dry. The pieces I made were thick and large, the surfaces bumpy and textured. They had a tangible, physical presence. People always asked to touch them.

Since books are made of paper, it was natural to make a couple of handmade books. I was struck by the fact that the contents of books are hidden, revealed only through hands, opening the covers and turning the pages—digging below the surface.

At this time, an artist friend gave a talk at a museum about her drawings, attended by a gentleman who was blind; afterward he told her he wished she had described the images she showed of her work. This anecdote captured my attention—the notion that someone who is blind might actually be interested in art. I began to wonder how to convey an artwork to someone who cannot see it. This question, along with my observation about handling books, led me to further wonder whether *touch* could be a way to know a work of art for a person who is blind.

I made a couple of small sculptures that functioned like books; they had to be handled and opened to be fully known. I took them to someone who had been a visual artist until he lost his sight to an inherited retinal disorder; I was curious to see what he would make of them. He spent hours with the two pieces, enthralled by the opportunity to touch an artwork to his heart's content. His reaction confirmed my intuition that touch could indeed be a way to know a work of art.

So I began to integrate my years of bodily exploration into creating a bodily experience for others. I decided to make sculptures that would work tactually as well as visually, that would integrate bodily, somatic ways of knowing into their making, and that people could touch as well as see. These sculptures would physically as well as imaginatively engage the people who encountered them.

To do this, I needed to learn a whole new language.