

**Hearing, Smelling, Tasting,  
Feeling, Seeing: The Role of the Arts  
in Making Sense Out of the Academy**

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Some Notes on Integrative Theory

Our bodies provide keen metaphors for the predicament of the disciplines and the pharmakon (both remedy and poison) provided by interdisciplinarity. Each human body is single, complex but unified, whole. Yet we have come to experience our bodies as composed of parts (like machines) and to fetishize some of these parts (particularly primary and secondary female parts) as separable, distinguishable from the whole not only abstractly and analytically, but practically and in terms of value.

Our "environments," the ecosystems in which we participate and on which we rely for our existence are, as we call them, systems, complexly interrelated in every place and at every moment. There are no "parts" in them, only participants. Yet we have come to experience them not as webs of mutual belonging but as domains of paradoxical dominion and subservience.

We live in our bodies in the world. We live as our bodies in the world. It could be said, perhaps, that we live our bodies in the world. The "mind" the academy disciplines and enacts is never instantiated at any time except in bodies, never manifest except physically—in words, books, computer programs, paintings, and so forth. There is no "mind" apart from "body," nor can the notion of "pure mind" be expressed except physically.

Yet our senses do bring us diverse and separable information about the world. The spectacle of nature is not the same as its symphony, the resistance of the saw in my hand not identical to the smell of the sawdust pouring out of the wood with each cut. We inhabit a single world which manifests itself to us as at once whole and divided, simultaneously indivisible and divided, by means of those bodies which we experience as similarly whole and divisible, unified and separated.

Every body is disciplined: to sit, to stand, to walk, to run, to urinate and defecate on schedule and in appropriate locations, to speak, to be courteous, to concentrate, to sing, to dance, to think. Every discipline is of the body; sociology as much as etiquette, physics as much as basketball. Every body must integrate disciplines to survive: sitting, thinking, concentrating courteously. Are there, somewhere in the intimate experience of our bodies, keys to the singleness of each discipline and the discipline of integrating them?

## Our Shared Self-presence and Mutual Absence

We are not face to face with one another, you and I, meeting only distantly in the medium of this book, which marks our bodily absence from one another. Your body is not here and mine is not there. Nevertheless, we can engage, together with one another and, in a sense, with other readers, in a brief meditation on our embodied senses.

Inhale deeply. I smell coffee, my after shave, the cinnamon buns warming in the oven, and wool. I am also aware of my diminished scent universe, due to the lingering effects of a bad cold. This lack is a smell experience, too. What can you smell? Among the Gnau of New Zealand diviners diagnose illness through smell (as Western doctors did until early in this century), while among the Umeda the aroma of a bundle of herbs guides a hunter's dreams, and these dreams, in turn orient the course of the hunt through space. Among the Ommura, it is the nose which is the "window on the soul" and not the eyes (Howes, 1991b, pp. 179-180).

Perhaps in your reading environment you can smell nothing noticeable at all, for scent is often suppressed in our culture. The radical simplification of the olfactory spectrum in the West coincided with the rise of our experience of separate and discrete individuals. David Howes suggests the two are not entirely disconnected (1991a, pp. 144-145).

Now listen. What can you hear? Your own breath and heartbeat? The buzz of fluorescent lights? The hum of a computer, or of an HVAC? Or are you reading while you travel, hearing the sound of your conveyance and, perhaps, of conversations around you? Are you at home, hearing the (pleasant or disturbing) sounds of your household? According to Ellen Basso, among the Kalapalo of the Amazonian basin sound is:

a truly ecological representation of the universe. Through sound symbols, ideas about relationships, activities, causalities, processes, goals, consequences and states of mind are conceived, represented, and rendered apparent to the world. It is through sound that cosmic entities are rendered into being and represented . . . not as object-types but as beings causing and experiencing action in a veritable musical ecology of spirit. (1985, p. 311)

I hear the hum of the fan in my computer, the breath passing through my slightly swollen nostrils, a van passing by on the street outside.

Taste is, in a way, our most restricted sense, with only five elements and their combinations possible, although, mixed with scent, taste can be infinitely subtle. There is also another sensory system in the mouth carried out through the trigeminal nerves which registers oral gratification of the kind produced by activities like sucking, chewing, smoking. This is the system that makes the texture of food so important. (Rivlin and Gravelle, 1984, p. 16).

Right now I taste the bitterness of coffee and the slightly sour taste of my saliva. And you? What do you taste? Your own saliva, the reminiscences of lunch? Do you taste good? Among the Weyéwa of Indonesia, literal experiences of bitter and bland govern subtle and important social communications (Kuipers, 1991, pp. 114-117), and the metaphoric of bitter and bland pervades the entire ritual corpus (pp. 121 -124). We should not confuse this with the occasional metaphoric use of taste with which we are more familiar, for example the use of bitter herbs in the Passover meal. For the Weyéwa, these sensual taste elements permeate

daily and sacred life.

What do you feel (not metaphorically, emotionally, but tactually)? How does your clothing feel? Is your chair comfortable, neutral? Are you aware of the sense of touch except in your hands? Where is there tension, discomfort or pleasure in your body? I feel breath passing in and out of my mouth and lungs, my belt around my waist, my heavy sweater weighing on my shoulder, my tongue in my mouth, my buttocks and upper legs resting on the chair, whose coolness I also feel. When I move I feel the rub of my undershirt on my trunk, as I type I feel the plastic solidity of the keyboard.

Luce Irigaray, a French feminist critic and philosopher, suggests that men in the contemporary West prefer sight, with its potential for dominating a scene with a single glance, whereas women prefer touch, with its particularizing, individualizing and localizing tendencies (1980, p. 101). It is interesting to notice the infrequency with which colleagues or teachers and their students touch one another. What could we learn from being "present together" if we touched one another? Mutual touch is nearly taboo in the Academy, except in theater and dance classes and in "physical education." Is it too intimate, too linked in our experience with sexuality, too immediate? Among the Wolof of Senegal, eye contact is dangerous and to be avoided, while social interchange is begun and facilitated through touch exchanges (Howes, 1991b, p. 183-185).

Finally, sight. We say "seeing is believing," (Imagine what the Wolof might feel about that?) Sight and its concomitant, "light," provide our predominant metaphors for knowledge: insight, enlightenment, seeing the light, vision, lucid: the semantic string linking sight with knowledge and sound judgment is endless. I see the computer screen with its printed text, the window of my home office (mostly covered by the drawn blinds), multi-colored books and papers and disks strewn on my desk, a mouse and mouse pad, my hands and arms and the sweater which covers my forearms, and, in my peripheral vision; the printer on one side and my wife's desk chair and desk on the other. Beside this text, what do you see? (Or perhaps you are blind, reading the text through touch or sound.)

For the Suya (and apparently the Dogon, as well), sight is an anti-social, or at best pre-social, sense (Howes and Classen, 1991, p. 276). Among the Suya, to learn something is "to have it in one's ear," even when what is learned is as visual (to us) as a weaving pattern (Howes, 1991b, p. 176).

Our division of the sensorium into these five is arbitrary. The Hausa identify two senses, while the five senses of the Javanese include talking and exclude tasting when compared with our five. In *Deciphering the Senses*, published in 1984, Rivlin and Gravelle contend that contemporary neuro-physiology recognizes seventeen senses.

Moreover, isolating senses abstracts from their most important characteristic—their all-at-onceness, for "[t]he senses interact with each other first, before they give us access to the world ..." (Howes and Classen, 1991, p. 258).

This book you hold, medium of both our presence and our absence to one another is, of course, sensory. It has a weight, colors, and odors. The paper of the pages have a feel, different from that of the cover, and they make a sound as you turn them; the typeface is distinct and visible and significant (chosen by the designer of the book from countless options). Probably, neither you nor I will taste it, but some books in some cultures may be consumed. Under some circumstances a page from the Qur'an may be taken from the book, ground into a powder, and dissolved in water for medical purposes. In our culture, too, the sensuality of books carries a certain significance. Some books are only published in cheap, tacky paperback editions, while others appear as glossy, colorful "coffee table books." Any

new religion seeking authenticity for its writings will publish a volume resembling, in its sumptuous weightiness, the Bible.

We are sensory, sensual, creatures, and our sensuality, although built on a species-specific (and therefore universal) physical base, is neither universal, immediate, nor insignificant. Where will it lead us, to take seriously the significance of our sensualities?

## A Cultural Economy of Sense

In the dominant culture of the cultures deriving from Europe, sight is the preferred and predominant sense. Our primary metaphors for truth and knowledge are visual metaphors—in fact "vision" is itself a key metaphor for profound "insight"—we are "scopotropic"—centered around the sense of sight.

Coupled with the valorization of sight has come an emphasis on textuality—the visual representation of speech, as the overarching metaphor for meaning and processes of meaning-making and interpreting at all levels of culture and experience. We are verbocentric.

What are the implications of our scopo- and verbo-centrism for our quest for knowledge, meaning, truth and wisdom—the charge of the academy? By and large we do not know, for we have yet to seriously engage the problematic, and our other senses are so meager, our extra-textual means so paltry that we are ill prepared to engage it. We will need remediation. One thing we know—when we want to learn from or about people who are not primarily verbal or textual, we are profoundly handicapped. As David Howes remarks, we make literal non-sense of them, because what they sense is not sensible to us. By virtue of this we overlook (both ignore and dominate with our gaze) not only a wide variety of cultures rooted in Africa, the Americas and Asia, but also those within "the West" who do not share its dominant paradigm. The cultures of women, those of the poor, and of all centers of ethnicity (and thus of ethos and ethics) outside the mainstream dominated by the vision and writing of European men are "invisible," not only because we do not look at them, but because they do not exist predominantly in the visual arena, but require gustation, listening, feeling, smelling, and other sensory attention to become evident.

Engaging in such noticing is not a simple matter. We cannot simply and at once become attuned to modalities of experience we have long since abandoned. Perception is a learned skill, developed in infancy and early childhood, after which the acts through which perception is achieved are habituated and lost to consciousness. An analogy may be made to language acquisition: a babbling infant makes all the sounds of which a human is capable, but as it begins to signify meaningfully in its linguistic context, it begins to suppress those sounds that carry no meaning in the language(s) it is learning, until finally the ability to make at least some of those sounds disappears. Similarly, as a child begins to develop the sense ratios and sensory significances of its culture, she forgets, or does not develop other perceptual capacities.

Moreover, people are not mono-sensory beings, nor do we operate our senses one at a time. We are simultaneous and synaesthetic, and it is the operation of our senses (of our bodies) wholly and at once that brings us our experience of the world. In this all at oneness, the ratios between and the interactions among the senses are of critical importance. Just because two cultures place priority on, for example, sight, does not mean that the world appears in the same sense-ratio, or, in fact, that it appears in a similar manner at all. For example, the men of the Shipibo in the Amazon are highly visual, a visualty

aided by the systematic use of psychedelics. But the designs they envision during their trances represent songs, and in healing rituals they sing over the patient the designs they have seen. When the sounds reach the patient's body, they become designs once more, and these designs enter the patient and heal (Howes and Classen, 1991; p. 265-266).

Recent evidence in cognitive neuropsychology indicates that knowledge is coded in the brain according to the modality of experience. "It follows that insofar as different cultures emphasize the development of different modalities, their ways of thinking will also differ..." (Howes, 1991b, p. 173),

Actually the situation is far more complex even than this, for "the" world varies in its directly perceived character according to the learned sensuality of culture. The world literally looks and smells and tastes different to people from other ethnicities and cultures, and, more important, the sights and tastes and smells are put together into different arrangements and significances, creating a very different structure to life. Culture indicates where to draw the line separating one thing from another—including reality from fantasy. These lines are somewhat arbitrary, but once learned and internalized they are experienced as real (Hall, 1977, p. 230). As anthropologist Edward T. Hall has spent his life demonstrating, people from different cultures "inhabit different sensory worlds" (1959, p. 2). Not only do people with different sense ratios think differently about the world, people with different sense ratios have different worlds about which to think!

## Art

Recent traditions in the West encourage us to think of arts as "elsewhere". "Art" is in museums, or in galleries, or in the homes of the wealthy. It is made by the creative few, "geniuses", specialists with inborn talent, mystical inspiration, or bizarre impulses. Art is "avant garde": hard to understand, fundamentally critical, and difficult. It belongs to the intellectual elite: one must take special classes to have any hope of "appreciating" art.

To the ordinary woman or man in Eurocentric society art is not where I am, it is elsewhere. Art is not what I make, it is other people's activity. Art is not what I understand, it is other people's concern. Depending on the individual, the response to this may be a sense of inferiority, apathy, anger, or alienation.

Yet, in fact, art is where I am, for art is endemic to human life. Art—including architecture and design—is the organization of material to create and communicate meaning. Put another way, art is the meaningful organization of matter. Art is everywhere, made by everyone, concerns and affects us all.

Just as all of us run, although some ran faster than others, all of us make art, although some (not necessarily the authorized specialists) do it better than others. Just as all of us speak, gesture and dress with communicative intent, all of us both create and interpret perceptual, material meaning. And, of course, art occurs in all media and can be perceived through all the senses.

What we require is a critique and transformation of the basis on which discussions of and teaching about art occurs and of the contexts in which it takes place. Historically and cross-culturally, artmaking is often a sacred act, as important in itself as the artifact. Navajo sandpainting, for example, is not made to be "viewed" at all, but to be experienced, in a healing context in which the "artist" paints the painting around the "patient" in order to restore a harmonious balance in the world, both exterior and interior. Once the healing is complete, the sandpainting is destroyed. A contemporary Canadian scholar of religion,

Maureen Korp, conducted a survey of working artists, a vast majority of whom reported that they make art because of the trance states they enter when in deep concentration of the act of creation, and not because of the "work" which is the evidence of this trance/act (1991).

We know that in appropriate contexts artmaking can be a healing experience; we know that artifacts, activities and events can have power—degrading power, alienating power, healing power, transforming power. We know that over spans of cultural time art can transform the norm of acculturated experience. Yet today these insights rarely permeate our discussion of art, much less of biology, sociology, anthropology or psychology. Art is intimate, integrated into our selves as gestures, postures, habitual tensions, habituated rhythms, and customary images, including our self-images. Art is not elsewhere, but as close as our bodies.

## The Question of Rigor

It is at this point in the discussion that my colleagues often object, "Yes, all you say is true. The case can be made stronger, for we have become in effect voyeurs of the world, whereas in fact, through our bodily existence, we are really participants in it. But language disciplines thought, and writing disciplines language. Only through the discipline of language applied by logic and the careful use of language can we be saved from the projections and distortions of our unconscious desires, hopes and fears. Rigor is the responsibility of the academy, and text is the best assurance of rigor that we have."

This is a serious question and deserves a serious answer. First it needs to be said that the purported rigor of the text has been greatly overrated. This is perhaps the greatest contribution of the work of Foucault, Derrida and others—to show that absence, desire, projection, repression, elision and evasion are inevitable aspects of textuality as of all other human communication. We do not cease to be human when we write, and the opportunity to rewrite offers, in effect, a chance to cover our tracks.

Moreover, it could be argued that the sciences have been profoundly misled precisely by the scopotropism that underlies their cultural foundations. In biology, for instance, our understanding of species and individuals has, until quite recently, overlooked their interconnection in ecologies. What we can see are individuals (imagined along the lines that we imagine an individual person) and their resemblances that link them into species. The patterned interaction we know as ecology more closely parallels musicality. Indeed the appearance of traces in bubble chambers confuses some physicists, too, into believing that electrons are "things" whereas they are explanatory concepts relating to presumed causes of observable effects (the bubble traces among them)—in that respect not unlike Medieval angels.

Perhaps, though, I have misconstrued the objection. Perhaps what I am being told is not that textual or mathematical rigor is the only possible rigor, but that academics are unable to ascertain and evaluate other rigors, and therefore cannot incorporate them into their classrooms, no matter how valid they may be. As one friend put it, "How would I grade a dance?"

The issues I have sketched do implicate our whole educational system—beginning in preschool. There is no simple path to sensory sophistication in these areas, and, as I have suggested above, there will be limits to the development possible in a single generation. This means not that a rigorous investigation of the world is impossible outside words and

texts but, on the contrary, that we are distanced from the rigors of other explorations whose means and methods we need to learn.

The Western arts are not without their own forms of rigor and discipline, nor are they unrecognizable: Western disciplines of sound, sight, form, movement and event might be approached through art theory and criticism and through collaborative teaching and evaluation with artists, designers and critics. Academics might also consider remedial education in at least one material discipline.

In a broader cultural view, the Kalapalo rendering of being in musical terms, or the Hindu expression of meaning in gustatory terms, or the regulation of serial wholeness through calendrical succession in South America (see Sullivan, 1988) are intelligible, meaningful and fully rigorous in their own contexts. Indigenous participants in these contexts, and those who have respectfully and attentively learned from and about them know full well how to interpret these contexts, how to extend and discover within them, and how to recognize "nonsense" when it occurs. These concerns might be approached through an anthropological history of material culture, a historical anthropology of materiality, and a multi-cultural classroom where indigenes from various cultures provide both instruction in alternative meaning systems and critical evaluation of their application. Asking students to work, for example, with sound in the manner of the Kalapalo, is no less appropriate than asking them to write a dialogue in the manner of Plato.

In his introduction to *The Varieties of Sensory Experience* David Howes writes:

What if there exist different forms of reasoning, memory, and attention for each of the modalities or faculties of consciousness (seeing, smelling, speaking, hearing, etc.) instead of reasoning, memory and attention being general mental powers? (1991c, p. 10)

We need to learn new ways of characterizing the world. To begin with we can simply notice and begin to change the sense biases of our own language. We had best stop trying to "see what others mean" and be open to the sense metaphors and experiences of their wisdoms. We need to move beyond even "voices" whether of harmony or discord, recognizing that verbocentrism is not appropriate to all contexts.

Beyond this we need to find positive, rather than negative terms, with which to characterize those we consider to be "other" and the aspects of "otherness" we find in ourselves. Peoples whose cultures are rooted outside Europe are not "non-Europeans" or "non-Western"—they are Asians, Africans, Americans, and even Nigerians, Bolivians, Vietnamese, and even Ibo, Tarajumara and Hmong. People who do not read are not "illiterate", but oral, or possibly tactile, or musical, and so forth. The alternative is to begin to characterize ourselves, as, for example, a-tactile, un-sound, tasteless, and un-feeling.

## Conclusion

The academy wraps thought in words and has, for the moment, enthroned "text" as the ruling metaphor for understanding systems of meaning. Yet in studying people, we encounter sophisticated systems of thought and wisdom whose considerations are and have been carried out primarily in media other than words—in dance, plastic representation, music, liturgies, gastronomies and design. As we learn to understand some of these ways of thought, we may notice that our own material culture is meaningful and begin to apply our

newfound hermeneutic skills to our own environment, including the environment of the classroom.

People do live in linguistically mediated worlds. But people's worlds are also mediated by other forms of material cultures such as dress, calendars, food, architecture, and music. Language is one powerful medium of material culture; all the media together in dynamic interaction generate/manifest the world.

In *Icanchu's Drum: An Orientation to Meaning in South American Religion*, Lawrence Sullivan demonstrates the symbolic independence of "nontextual" modes of meaning and expression from textual modes. "Properly understood," he writes, "they should not be viewed as 'text,' . . . nor even should they be viewed as language" (p, 773). He suggests that many traditional cultures remain non-verbal (i.e., visual, aural and kinesthetic) systems of meaning in conscious and explicit critique of Western text-based systems.

Despite illusions to the contrary, the academy is not a-sensual, but embodied, and its body carries meaning buried within it. The structure of the lecture hall is derived from and carries significances borrowed from Protestant worship spaces. Its rectangular inferiority is rooted in the grid-system of Cartesian space and carries its own semiotics. The uses of the body and bodily space enforced by the academy's seating and traveling patterns signify as well, and are deeply offensive to students from some cultural backgrounds. In one lecture hall in which I work, chairs are bound together by swivelling rods which force students to sit with their personal spaces interlinked. Too close for comfortable isolation and too distant for intimacy, the students are forced to look away from one another in embarrassed mutual ignorance, pretending they are not there. The temporality of the academy, too, no less than that of the peoples of South America, can be decoded and interpreted. We treat time as substantial—to be measured, counted, saved and wasted. "Tardiness" is a vice and "being on time" a virtue. Students from birth cultures where "ripeness is all" have great difficulty leaving a profound conversation incomplete simply to get to another class on time.

Our willful unconsciousness of the academic body is literally senseless, and depicts a wishful fantasy of panoptical truth, of a "nowhere" where "truth" is not dependent on perspective or culture or psychology.

Texts and spoken language are actually elements of material culture; maybe the metaphor should be stood on its head. Texts may best be understood, perhaps, as sorts of textiles. The Greek Fates, after all, were weavers, threading the weft of consequence through the warp of time. As we follow the weaving of words in a text over the time it takes to read (remarking the time it takes to write), the pattern of the text (the meaning) emerges, woven by the writer/reader from intention, skill, and language.

We are material, and the world we inhabit is material, and the culture we shape and are shaped by is material as well. Sensoria are actual and relevant, and the academy is not non-sensical, but an arena of repressed sensuality. With the help of the arts (high, popular and folk) and with the help of our cultural compatriots from other sensory traditions, we can, and must, begin to make sense out of the academy.

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