





MASTERS OF ARTS // DISSERTATION

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PERMEABLE BODIES:  
AN EXPLORATION INTO ART  
ENCOUNTERS

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Dedicated to the memory of my Grandfather, Peter  
Garwood.

Thank you for always supporting me, I really wish you  
could have read this.

&

Thank you Chamin for always being my spell check.

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## PROLOGUE

Realities narrated by our bodies form each individual experience.  
Corporealities merging into one another, like spatial magnets of  
dimension, an osmosis of flesh and corpus; bodies upon bodies.  
Containers navigated by bodily encounters; each atom bound to  
another to reach synergistic interactions. Tangible and detached, real  
and virtual, immersive narratives emanate through a vortex of art,  
philosophy, biology, and ontology.

*In the skin, through the skin, the world and the body touch, defining their  
common border. Contingency means mutual touching: world and body meet  
and caress in the skin*

– Michel Serres, *Les Cinq Sens*.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Serres, Michel, *Les Cinq Sens* (Paris: Hachette, 1998), p. 97.

## INTRODUCTION

Permeable bodies are seen as intensely symbiotic organs at the intersection of encounters, whether that is to other bodies, or to the spatial surroundings, both organic and technological. Dualistic thinking has restricted the parameters of experience and has built a perception that bodies are autonomous objects, self-contained entities, who are translucent. A simplistic understanding of our complex forms that diminishes our embodied experiences and pillars normative hegemony. Consumed by the blood-ties that link our human body with experience, I reflect on the role of the body within the consideration of art, identifying how art is born out of the intersection between it and the observer, and therefore examining how the experience of art comes about in this temporal exchange.

Much of what bonds the membranes between art and the body can be attributed to the unseen sensorial exchange. The feeling of meeting eyes, the aural faculty, skin touching, the inhalation or the tasting of each breath; the elemental foundations of each experience. It is the skin of art, which evokes the body's dynamic materiality and the vessel that art is that operates as a passage for the self through the flesh. Over time, our bodies have been dislocated from the artworks, the experiences dictated by the situation, the vertical and horizontal, the space put between us and it. Whilst the defined self is fertile ground for experience, it would be wrong to disregard society and culture that shape each individual perception of art and to attribute only corporeality to said experiences. This body of writing considers the connection between our fluid bodies, the spatial containers, and the interactions within the surroundings. Manifesting the physical, intangible, social, political, and philosophical forms of viewing art.

Throughout the writings that proceed, I will address the following questions, discussing the realm of interactions, sensory perceptions, reception aesthetics, and the role of technology within this fundamental phenomenon. What occurs at the intersection of the spectator and artwork encounter? What role does our biological and architectural body play in these encounters? In what ways do we

experience the meaning of art? In her recent book, theorist Janneke Wesseling<sup>2</sup> seeks to clarify this encrypted moment of encounter between observer and artwork. Citing Susan Sontag<sup>3</sup>, Wesseling believes that the traditional way of connecting with art relies heavily on the content, understanding, and stated meaning of each artwork, discounting sensory experiences. In my view, and as Wesseling magnifies, the reverse framework should be considered; we should reflect on our senses and question the ways we physically experience the meanings of artwork.

An extensive collection of both biological and phenomenological philosophies of art have led to an increased appreciation of the vital and dynamic role of the body in its contemplation and experience. Mapping several of the contemporary perspectives of such influential theorists as Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Jacques Rancière, Edmund Husserl, Michel Serres, and others, this discourse will centralise their mutual interest into the appreciation of art as a self-reflective, non-discursive means of understanding, experiencing, and existing. To enter a new theoretical context of contemplating art, the realisation that each embodied experience is based on an equal encounter between two active participants is essential. By highlighting that the meaning isn't formed by the art, the artist, or the observer, but by the interaction between the spectator and the artwork, I will study these ties, entanglements, and overlaps, delving into the skin that binds our bodies with these objects.

Throughout this exploration, I will investigate artworks that are concerned with constructing human experiences, that establish encounters between the spatial fabric and the body, artworks that not only visually but completely physically expose the unity of the body with its surroundings. Interactive, immersive, and participatory artworks reinforce how the experiences, understandings, and matters of the body are traditionally untold, but by encouraging bodily sensations, knowledge, and individual perceptions, the matters of the physical world are revealed. The artists who I discuss all establish circumstances that reinforce, disrupt, and change the perception and behaviour within our complex interactions. I go

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<sup>2</sup> Wesseling, Janneke, *The Perfect Spectator* (London: Verso, 2017)

<sup>3</sup> Sontag, Susan, *Against Interpretation* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1966)

on to propose that the digital innovations give art an added ability to intervene and question, not only the structure of bodies and ideologies but the evolving forms of embodiment.

This thesis elucidates that the permeable, bilateral and intangible nature of our bodies is integral to each art encounter. I propose that art can operate as a catalyst for new ideologies around understanding embodiment and transcend the constraints. I question how the body can be active, provoked, and interpreted throughout the process, experience, and possible disturbance in contemporary art. By overcoming this Cartesian dualism<sup>4</sup> and realising it is impossible to isolate the subconscious from the sensual body, especially in regards to the reception of art, we see that art illustrates how our innate sensorial body and the affected body become the central focus of experience, knowledge, and understanding.

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<sup>4</sup> Wee, Cecilia, and Michael Pelczar. 2008. "Descartes' Dualism and Contemporary Dualism", *The Southern Journal of Philosophy*, 46: 145-160  
<<http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.2041-6962.2008.tb00073.x>>

## THE VESSEL

The corporeal and temporal nature of spectating art mirrors that of the body's temporality. As a visible entity, the body is most commonly seen as a set of fixed apparatus, and not so much as the tactile, moving, breathing, feeling, intangible, physical body that art is known to consider. What may be concrete in our own mind and body can become unbound, revealing a deeper and ever-shifting perception of our fleeting existence. Like a collective flesh, creating an environment where experience can be defined, corporeality can be mapped, and our senses merge, overlap, interact, and react with each other. For many years, art has been widely regarded as an experience that rendered the body vertical. Frames existing on walls, at a fixed eye-level; art was accustomed to addressing the spectator in the conventional perpendicular, talking only to the visual, the eyes, and the mind, in a world that "presupposes the viewer has forgotten their feet in the dirt. Art, according to this view, is a sublimatory activity that separates the perceiver from his or her body."<sup>5</sup> This fixed set of apparatus is typically defined in relation to the human body, the material structure of humanity, perceived as a biological being. While the word body is also often used to refer to the main component of an animal or entity, it could also be used to refer to a collection of entities, objects, persons or in fact artworks. Throughout history, the human body has also often been compared to a building or a spatial structure, perhaps because the body both forms the subject and defines the scale, and in turn the bodily experience.

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<sup>5</sup> Krauss, Rosalind E., and Yve-Alain Bois, *Formless: A User's Guide* (Princeton: Zone Books, 1997), p. 25.

The structural language has been influenced by the tectonic and symbolic syntax of biology;

*rib,*  
*atrium,*  
*column,*  
*spine,*  
*pillar,*  
*frame,*  
*vessel,*  
*arch,*  
*cavities,*  
*chambers*

All part of a bodily architecture. This compartmentalisation of the body is an ancient understanding yet remains within our conscious appreciation of the more physical mechanics of the body. These corporeal terms that have been perpetually used throughout history, and are now so familiar to us that there is no dissonance when we hear our own fleshy, aqueous bodies compared to hard, solid, abiotic structures. The mapping between the human body and architecture is a metaphor that has been used in both the ancient writings of structure such as *Vitruvius' De Architectura*<sup>6</sup> and later enforced by the writings of Renaissance scholar Leon Battista Alberti<sup>7</sup>. Vitruvius identified a notion of symmetry as a practice of correct architectural design, a mapping that was translated from the indications of quality in the human body. Vitruvius went on to consider buildings to be literal bodies, addressing them in the same way we address our own bodies in terms of protection and health, particularly from the natural elements<sup>8</sup>. Likewise, Alberti, expanded the features of a human body as the centre of significance, specifically in

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<sup>6</sup> Vitruvius, Cesare Cesariano, and Carol Herselle Krinsky. *Vitruvius De architectura* (München: Fink, 1969)

<sup>7</sup> Alberti, Leon Battista. *On the art of building in ten books* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1988)

<sup>8</sup> Vitruvius, Cesare Cesariano, and Carol Herselle Krinsky. *Vitruvius De architectura* (München: Fink, 1969)

relation to using the body to reference architectural components. Alberti referred to the architectural structure of roofs to be the “bones, muscles, infill panelling, skin, and crust”<sup>9</sup> and employed similar anatomical terminology for vaults, suggesting that “with every type of vault, we should imitate nature throughout, that is, bind together the bones and interweave flesh with nerves running along every possible section”<sup>10</sup>. The body’s physical and organic form is generally known to be the intention for some of the most ubiquitous metaphors found throughout architectural history, binding the physical structures in which we view art to the natural being of our bodies in which we experience art.

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<sup>9</sup> Alberti, Leon Battista. *On the art of building in ten books* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1988), p. 79.

<sup>10</sup> Alberti, Leon Battista. *On the art of building in ten books* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1988), p. 86.



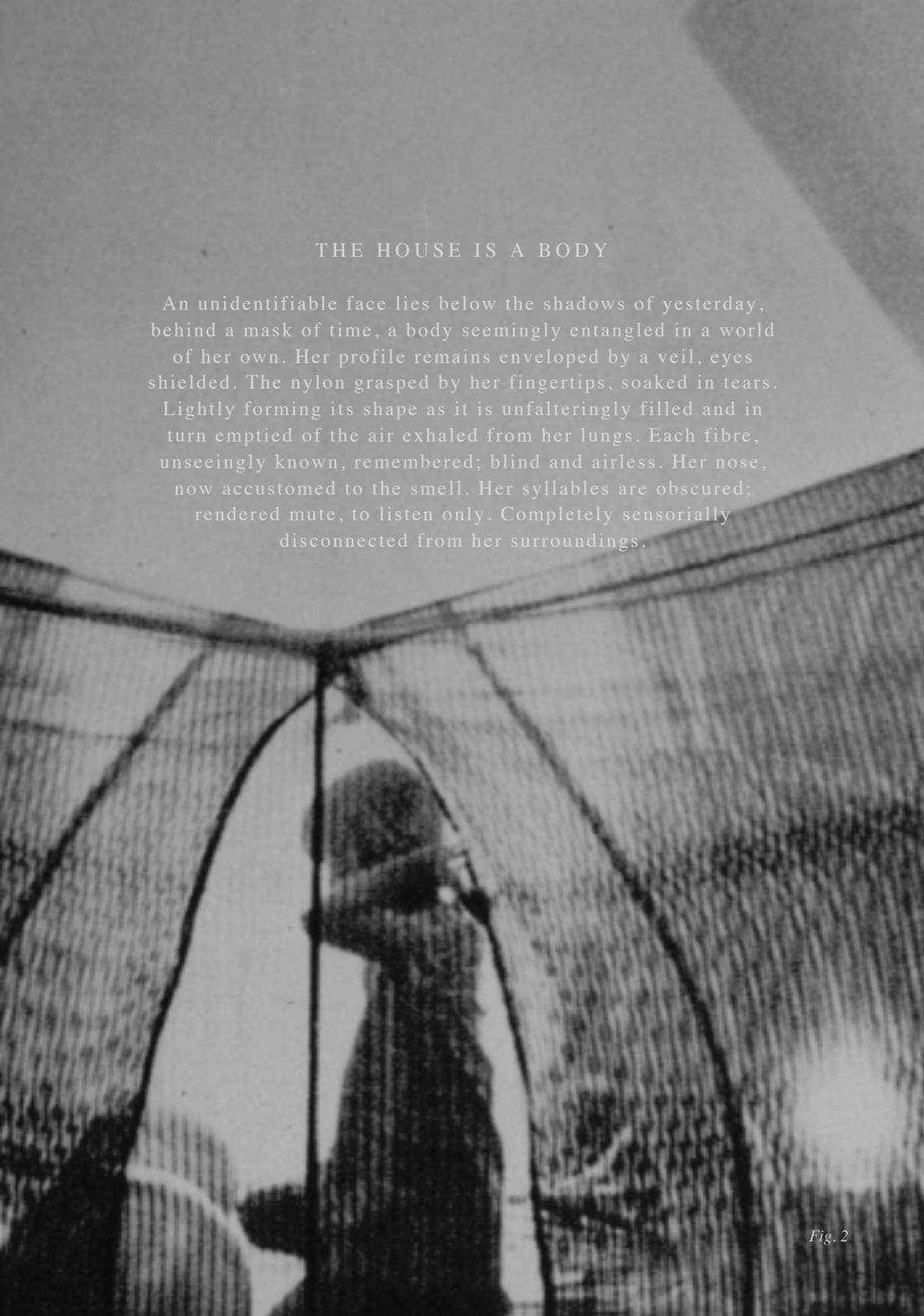
*Fig. 1*

## MY OWN PALE RITUAL

The body itself encompasses a void  
Walls of cartilage and skin  
The vessel, although formed, is not fixed  
Our architecture, our bodies, and our minds are in a continuous transition  
A shared paper pallid skin dissipates  
Visceral and clammy  
A measured embodiment with an invaluable and invisible depth  
A commitment to permanence  
My solidity, my own pale ritual  
A compound of a body, composed of flesh and skin  
Emanating  
A covering that maintains and restrains  
A trace of skin, rhetorical, and endless  
Laminating layer upon layer  
Filtering through, room to room, fluid-like  
Pulsating  
The permeable and tidal  
Into liquefied chambers  
Past the cavernous openings that absorb the echo of the blood passing through  
your ears  
Within its galleries, footsteps are swallowed as though the ground is made of flesh  
The passages exceed endless passages, a vacuum that is continuously  
disintegrating into itself  
Encircling, bleeding, longing, belonging  
Edging both in and out  
Through recollection, the architecture becomes physical yet a distant familiarity,  
only then to fall away into vestiges  
A spatial container of displacement, and impossible return,  
guiding us over this conscious and fragile terrain

## THE HOUSE IS A BODY

An unidentifiable face lies below the shadows of yesterday, behind a mask of time, a body seemingly entangled in a world of her own. Her profile remains enveloped by a veil, eyes shielded. The nylon grasped by her fingertips, soaked in tears. Lightly forming its shape as it is unfalteringly filled and in turn emptied of the air exhaled from her lungs. Each fibre, unseeingly known, remembered; blind and airless. Her nose, now accustomed to the smell. Her syllables are obscured; rendered mute, to listen only. Completely sensorially disconnected from her surroundings.



*Fig. 2*

The body was fundamental to the work of the Brazilian artist, Lygia Clark<sup>11</sup>, through which she encouraged the spectator to completely and utterly *feel* the work instead of merely presenting it as a visual experience. The intention of these encounters between the art and the body was to allow for the spectator to experience an enhanced sensory and embodied experience through their own body and their interactions with the surroundings. Whilst Clark's work heavily revolves around the body, she doesn't use the body as a mere medium for communication, but as interactive works that are more typically deeply intimate and purely internal sensory encounters, involving just the spectator and the subject or objects with which they interact. Moving beyond the mind/body and subject/object dichotomies, her work is seen more as body-to-body interactions, meaning the illusory nature of these phenomena only deepens this concept of aesthetic perception. Clark's 1968 work *The House is the Body*<sup>12</sup> was made at a later point in her career, a point at which she was creating participatory works that required and relied on the interaction of the spectators, and which dealt with our perception of our bodies and ourselves. The participants navigate through multiple dark and suffocating chambers, each providing unique sensory stimuli and deprivation experiences. The spectator is almost forced to be resurrected or reborn through this womb-like installation, undergoing an isolated physical experience and sequence of physical encounters, returning at the other end expelled from the sculpture's body or, in some ways, from their own body. *The House is the Body* is often seen as a structure of resistance, referring to the cultural and political environment in which the work was conceived, a structure under which the body experiences some form of repressive and oppressive conditioning from which the body emerges, swollen by the metaphors of the enclosure, emancipating the body: a corpus, from chrysalis to birth.

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<sup>11</sup> Pérez-Oramas, Luis, and Sadia Shirazi. 2018. "Lygia Clark: If You Hold a Stone | post", *post* <<https://post.moma.org/part-1-lygia-clark-if-you-hold-a-stone/>> [accessed 31 December 2020]

<sup>12</sup> Lowry, Glenn, and Connie Butler. 2018. "Lygia Clark. A casa é o corpo: penetração, ovulação, germinação, expulsão (The House is the Body). 1968 | MoMA", *The Museum of Modern Art* <<https://www.moma.org/audio/playlist/181/2410>> [accessed 31 December 2020]

In his essay *The Emancipated Spectator*,<sup>13</sup> philosopher Jacques Rancière demonstrates these polarities through the dissolution of the friction between spectator and participant as the process of emancipation. The dichotomy of a passive spectator and active participants indicates a structure that prohibits a union from being developed. In reference to the active nature of participating, Rancière proposes to erase the negative notion that looking is a passive action, in favour of seeing the interaction between spectators and participants or artists and beholders, as equal. In a similar light, Clark endeavoured to remove this gap between spectator and artist, through an idealistic view that art can be universally experienced without hierarchies, but she was not always able to accomplish such equality. Through her pursuit for a universal understanding, Clark extracted the diversity of her audience by utilising her own body to become the subject for her *Nostalgia for the Body*<sup>14</sup> compositions. Instead, Rancière suggests that we preserve diversity and distinctions, and reflect on dismantling the hierarchies. The distance put between the subject and the spectator relies on their own individual perceptions, and not on hierarchies of knowledge. Rancière goes on to propose that it is only by recognising this notion of equality that we can truly emancipate the spectator and establish a more cohesive unity, a body that ties us together through equality whilst retaining our position as entities, by allowing spectators to be emancipated, the active participants can construct their own narratives. By reorienting the participant in the role of control and power, Clark's *Sensorial Masks*<sup>15</sup> pressured her spectators to acknowledge the political angle whilst simultaneously encouraging them to flee it. It is because of her crucial interaction with the political sphere that her work succeeds in emancipating the viewer. It is Clark's urge to metamorphose the spectator into both active participants and in turn escapists, that become interconnected with the political context of her surroundings; a nation of militarised governing and male-dominated societies.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Rancière, Jacques, *The Emancipated Spectator* (London: Verso, 2009)

<sup>14</sup> Clark, Lygia, and Yve-Alain Bois, *Nostalgia of the Body*, *October*, 69 (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1994)

<sup>15</sup> Clark, Lygia, *Sensorial Masks* (1967)

<sup>16</sup> Hahner, June E. 1982. "'Women's Place' in Politics and Economics in Brazil Since 1964", *Luso-Brazilian Review*, Vol. 19: 83-91 [accessed 31 December 2020]



*Fig. 3*

Through embracing the conventional conflict of passive spectatorship and active participation, Clark was the passive subject she was considered within society, stripped of her agency. Rancière's notion of the emancipated spectator enables us to see things in a new light. As an emancipated observer, we must acknowledge Clark's fundamental role in perceiving her spatial surroundings, as Rancière says, "she participates in the performance if she is able to tell her own story about the story that is in front of her, Or if she is able to undo the performance—for instance, to deny the corporeal energy that it is supposed to convey the here and now and transform it into a mere image".<sup>17</sup> It is because of this, that Clark's masks expose the capacity of a political agency beyond the duality of observation and intervention.

Throughout the history of Western philosophy, the mind has often been placed over the body; the mind is considered as a determining entity whilst the body is solely the executor of the mind.<sup>18</sup> In comparison, phenomenology considers that the spectator is an entirety composed of consciousness, perception, and body. Recognising that our human existence is built upon experience, operating within the framework of spatiality, corporeality, temporality, and relationality.<sup>19</sup> Anytime art is experienced, it is encountered by a body in a distinct moment, in a specified space, and in an ongoing interaction with any other object surrounding it. It is only within these settings, that we are able to make sense of what we perceive of our surroundings. By viewing the body as both a lived and experiencing entity, it is clear that the existence of the body is an integral component of any experience. The encounter spectators have when viewing art is therefore considered an embodied experience. As Karl Polanyi noted, our body is also a knowing body, "the ultimate instrument of all our external knowledge, whether intellectual or practical. In all our waking moments we are relying on our awareness of

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<sup>17</sup> Rancière, Jacques, "THE EMANCIPATED SPECTATOR". *Artforum.Com*, 2007 <<https://www.artforum.com/print/200703/the-emancipated-spectator-12847>> [Accessed 11 February 2021]

<sup>18</sup> Pollio, Howard R, Tracy B Henley, and Craig J Thompson, *The phenomenology of everyday life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997)

<sup>19</sup> Van Manen, M. *Researching Living Experience: Human Science for an Action Sensitive Pedagogy* (London, Ontario: The Althouse Press, 1997), p. 102.

contact of our body with things outside for attending to these things.”<sup>20</sup> One might be under the illusion that during the act of viewing art we only use our sense of vision. But according to this phenomenological theory, the encounter involves our entire body. By taking a step closer or a step back to view the piece from a distance, the way we move around the other artworks to get a better perspective, depending on the scale, we might be required to lean in, look up, or even down to our feet. Everything from the floorboards we walk upon to the temperature of the space we inhabit affects the way in which we experience and perceive the artworks. As Joyce Brodsky argued, the spectator is not a disembodied eye, “whether placed in a gallery or museum, site-specific, in performance spaces inside or on the street, in the mass media or in an electronic space, intended for political, social and/or aesthetic response, the viewer moves in a complex fashion sometimes, in, around, on top of and beneath the work stimulating the synergism of hearing, smelling, feeling, as well as looking.”<sup>21</sup> As Claire Bishop argued, the most important component of art is its ability to confront the spectator front on, “presupposing an embodied viewer whose senses of touch, smell and sound are heightened as their sense of vision, rather than imagining the viewers as a pair of disembodied eyes that survey the work from a distance”<sup>22</sup>. Like Clark’s work, the completion of art can somewhat depend completely the spectator’s participation, becoming integral to the relationship between the work and the spectator. As Julie Reiss explored, “there is always a reciprocal relationship of some kind between the viewer and the work, the work and the space, and the space and the viewer”<sup>23</sup>. It may also be considered that 3D or installation types of art can never be completely comprehended since there is no particular perspective from which the body views the work. The work invites the viewer, and yet at the same moment confines them by limiting them to one perspective at a time. A notion that the French phenomenological philosopher, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, touches on through his analysis of

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<sup>20</sup> Polanyi, M, *The Tacit Dimension* (New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc, 1966), p. 15-16.

<sup>21</sup> Brodsky, Joyce. 2002. "How to "see" with the whole body", *Visual Studies*, 17: 101 <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1472586022000032189>>

<sup>22</sup> Bishop, Claire, *Installation Art, a Critical History* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2005), p. 6.

<sup>23</sup> Reiss, Julie H, *From margin to center* (London: MIT Press, 2001), p. xiii.

perceiving a cube<sup>24</sup> As the body navigates around the object you are never able to see all faces of the cube simultaneously, despite this, the notion of a cube maintains its significance and defines how the experience is born. However, the interpretable form, that we all know so well, enables the experience and confirms that all the squares successively add up to a cube.

“from my body’s point of view, I never see the six faces of a cube as equal. To the extent that as I move around the cube, I see the front face, lose its shape and then disappear, while the other sides appear and each, in turn, become square. But the unfolding of this experience is, for me, nothing but the opportunity for the conceiving of the total cube with its six equal and simultaneous faces, that is, the intelligible structure that makes sense of this experience.”<sup>25</sup>

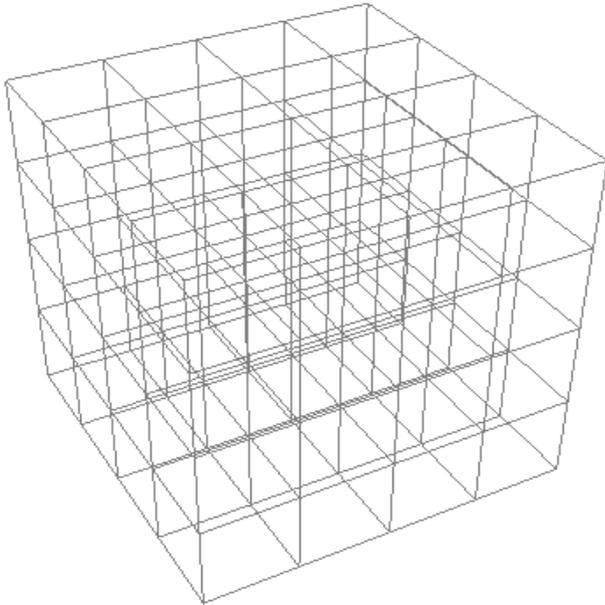
The cube is not defined subsequent to the body’s experience, but instead, it’s from the pre-reflective consciousness of the body that the cube is perceived. The cube is not built but embodied as a body itself.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Merleau-Ponty, Maurice, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. by Donald A. Landes (London and New York: Routledge, 2012)

<sup>25</sup> Merleau-Ponty, Maurice, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. by Donald A. Landes (London and New York: Routledge, 2012), p. 209 – 210.

<sup>26</sup> McBlane, Angus Alexander James. 2013. "Corporeal Ontology: Merleau-Ponty, Flesh, and Posthumanism" (PhD, Cardiff University)



*Fig. 4*

By reflecting phenomenologically, it is clear that we have always been immersed with our surrounding entities, entities that transcend us but nevertheless “speak to us of ourselves”<sup>27</sup>, as Merleau-Ponty identifies. The bodies of the spectators with their perception are seen as the nucleus of phenomenological experiences within the body; a body that, by moving beyond itself, can only then become its own, a body that should not be seen as a single set of organs that simply addresses its surroundings, but instead, as an eternal dualistic conversation between object and subject. In the chapter entitled “The Intertwining - The Chiasm”<sup>28</sup>, Merleau-Ponty introduces the ontology of ‘the flesh’ (*la chair*), in which The Chiasm becomes a mutual exchange between the body and objects that enables a conversation into the flesh of entities, and it is this relationship between the sensing body and the perceived elements that allows for this communication. Within this context, the flesh is considered, a universal component between the bodies and the knowledge, a component that doesn’t conform with any traditional philosophies, but it may be considered similar to the traditional concept of ‘elements’.<sup>29</sup> Merleau-Ponty goes on to oppose this rather subjective or reductionist interpretation by proposing that a “carnal being, as a being of depths, of several leaves or several faces, a being in latency, and a presentation of a certain absence, is a prototype of being, of which our body, the sensible sentient, is a very remarkable variant, but whose constitutive paradox already lies in every visible.”<sup>30</sup>

This concept of flesh acknowledges an element of intercorporeity<sup>31</sup>, a concept proposed by Merleau-Ponty that expresses an intangible connection illustrated through respective bodies, illuminating social cognition in a new light. Like Edmund Husserl’s notion of double sensation, just as two hands touch each other through a body’s spatial

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<sup>27</sup> Evans, Fred, and Leonard Lawlor, *Chiasms: Merleau-Ponty's Notion of Flesh* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2000), p. 3.

<sup>28</sup> Merleau-Ponty, Maurice, *The visible and the invisible* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), p. 130.

<sup>29</sup> Merleau-Ponty, Maurice, *The visible and the invisible* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), p. 139.

<sup>30</sup> Merleau-Ponty, Maurice, *The visible and the invisible* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), p. 136.

<sup>31</sup> Tanaka, Shogo, Intercorporeality, Embodiedknowledge.blogspot.com <<http://embodiedknowledge.blogspot.com /p/intercorporeality.html>>

cohesion, you are able to touch and to be touched concurrently, “the handshake too is reversible”<sup>32</sup>. Sensible flesh, referred to as the visible<sup>33</sup> by Merleau-Ponty, is not all there is to flesh, as flesh is able to dissolve itself into an invisible element as well. The visible and the invisible, to touch and to be touched, or to see and to be seen can be understood as literary indications of dualisms, however, the intrinsic, malleable and divergent nature of flesh illuminates a “circle which I do not form, which forms me, this coiling over of the visible upon the visible, can traverse, animate other bodies as well as my own”<sup>34</sup>. Flesh is a component that aligns with the reciprocal pervading nature of the body on its surroundings, as Merleau-Ponty refers to it, the body’s flesh and the world’s flesh. This notion of flesh is essential to post-humanist corporeal ontology, opening new forms of experiencing art in a now hybrid society, allowing a view into the idea of the ‘other’ in terms of bodily interactions and senses, addressing bodies in a way that will not inherently reduce them to a set of apparatus, allowing for new levels of embodiment when it comes to experiencing art, that may not have been previously considered.



Fig. 5

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<sup>32</sup> Merleau-Ponty, Maurice, *The visible and the invisible* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), p. 142.

<sup>33</sup> Merleau-Ponty, Maurice, *The visible and the invisible* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968)

<sup>34</sup> Merleau-Ponty, Maurice, *The visible and the invisible* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), p. 140.

## SOFT BODIES

The act of living in the world is made up of a multi-layered accumulation of experiences. Experiences that are built from our translation of the input from our sensorial organs into a meld of embodied sensation. Because human bodies are more than just uninhabited shells, we are able to amalgamate a spectrum of perceptions learned from memories, to make sense of verbal and nonverbal experiences, to reflectively interpret what thoughts and feeling emerge from these sensorial experiences, and eventually becoming a self-conscious knowledge of thought, proving that our senses are integral to comprehend bodily experiences. As sensorial beings, we have a plethora of sensations, senses that have always been a significant topic for debate throughout history, as early as Aristotle and Helkiah Crooke's *Mikrokosmographia: A Description of the Body of Man*, as Crooke states "sense is a knowledge or discernment of the object received formally in the organ. In every sense, there be three things especially to be stood upon: The Object, the Medium, and the Organ"<sup>35</sup>. It may also be considered that our senses are a product of or faculty of bodies experiencing stimuli from both their surroundings as well as within the body.

Typically, humans are known to have five senses; vision, hearing, taste, scent, and touch. This is a common knowledge that can be traced back to Aristotle's *On the Soul*<sup>36</sup>. However, there are arguments for a sixth sense, which references a suggested ability to perceive something that isn't apparently there<sup>37</sup>. There is also the conversation regarding bodies that lack a sense. A notion that is commonly believed is that once one sense is lost, a heightened improvement can be seen in the remaining senses, this could be

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<sup>35</sup> Crooke, Helkiah. 1616. *Mikrokosmographia* (London: W. Iaggard) p. 722.

<sup>36</sup> Aristotle. 1996. *On the Soul* (London: Themistius & Todd, R. B.)

<sup>37</sup> Kirschner, Chanie. 2018. "What Is the Sixth Sense?", *Treehugger* <<https://www.treehugger.com/what-is-the-sixth-sense-4864078>> [accessed 7 January 2021]

considered a product of learned behaviour; with the absence of sight, the blind devote more attention to auditory stimuli and can then rely on vibrations and sounds to guide them. But there is increasing amount of evidence that suggests the those who lack a sense don't only learn to make better use of their remaining senses, but instead the subconscious is able to evolve from the loss. When one sense is missing, the regions of the brain typically assigned to processing the sensory input are almost rewired to interpret the other senses.<sup>38</sup> Perhaps we all exist in our own sensory environments and this rather reductionist notion of five senses could be refuted as many bodies exist in very unique sensory environments that contradict this. For example, Synesthetes experience perceptual sensations that unconsciously trigger a connection when encountering a specific sense. The word synesthesia is derived from the Greek word's 'synth' meaning together and 'esthesia' meaning perception, becoming a cross-section or an amalgamation of multiple senses; most commonly seeing sounds as colours<sup>39</sup>. Cyborgs<sup>40</sup>, on the other hand, are bodies who have chosen to add extra senses technologically, due to perhaps lacking one biologically, something I will explore further in the last chapter of this discourse.

From these compartments used to express our senses, a hierarchical arrangement exists, presuming vision to be at the top, followed by hearing. However, the more personal senses of touch, taste, and scent have provoked disagreements among those who have discussed the subject of senses throughout history. According to Aristotle, perception works in different ways, and the senses are split in terms of proximity; touching and taste need contact, but vision, sound, and

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<sup>38</sup> Bates, Mary. 2012. "Super Powers for the Blind and Deaf", *Scientific American* <<https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/superpowers-for-the-blind-and-deaf/>> [accessed 7 January 2021]

<sup>39</sup> Watson, Kathryn, and Dillon Browne. 2018. "Synesthesia: Definition, Examples, Causes, Symptoms, and Treatment", *Healthline* <<https://www.healthline.com/health/synesthesia>> [accessed 7 January 2021]

<sup>40</sup> The term cyborg was first coined in the early 1960s by Manfred Clynes and Nathan Kline, 'Cyborgs and Space', in *The Cyborg Handbook*, ed. by Chris Hables Gray (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), p. 29-33. It did not gain widespread prominence in parts of the humanities until Haraway's essay.

smell allow a distance.<sup>41</sup> Because of this, and in relation to viewing art, the difference between touch and vision is extensive, as Jacques Derrida writes, “We can only touch on a surface, which is to say the skin or thin peel of a limit.”<sup>42</sup> but it is Michel Serres who subverts this notion in his 2008 book *Les Cinq Sens*<sup>43</sup>. To Serres, the senses are nothing more than the merging of the flesh, the fundamental way in which the body coexists with the environment and within itself, flooding its walls.<sup>44</sup> Serres explores the multi-layered functions of the human body in contexts that fuse the senses together, breaking down the constraints of our objective manner of seeing. Instead of referring to the body as a stagnant house, perhaps we should use the metaphor of a city to describe the body. Rather than seeing terms as encumbered bricks of weight and context, we should appreciate them as transient indicators of vision, audio, touch, taste and scent.

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<sup>41</sup> Derrida, Jacques, *On Touching* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), p. 5.

<sup>42</sup> Derrida, Jacques, *On Touching* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), p. 6.

<sup>43</sup> Serres, Michel, *Les Cinq sens* (Paris: Hachette, 1998)

<sup>44</sup> Connor, Steven, *Introduction to Michel Serres, The Five Senses: A philosophy of Mingled Bodies* (London and New York: Continuum, 2008), p. 2.

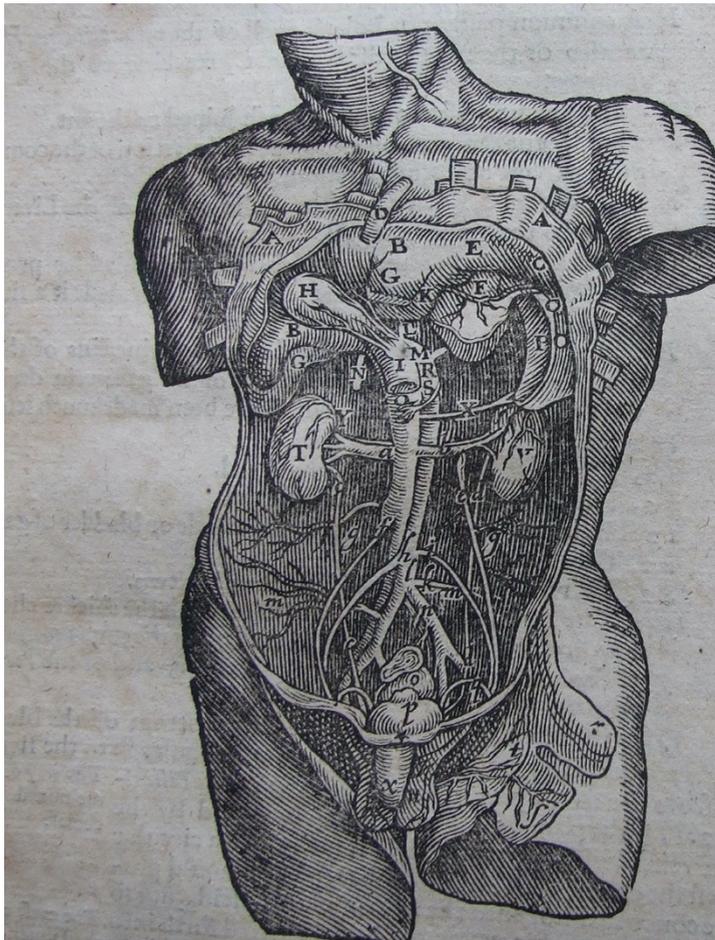
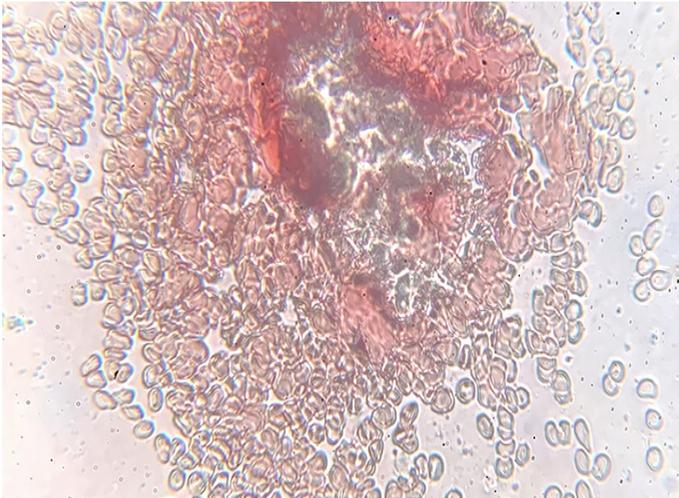


Fig. 6

It is because of

*the numbness,*  
*the goosebumps,*  
*the excreta,*  
*the saliva,*  
*the recoil,*  
*the pain,*  
*the rapture,*  
*the savouring,*  
*the irritation,*  
*the nausea,*  
*the flesh,*  
*the fluids,*  
*the pulse,*  
*the vibrations,*  
*the turmoil,*  
*the burning,*  
*the inhaling,*

that we are able to unveil an invaluable collection of everlasting bodily experiences. Echoing inside your head; retrieving, remembering, readdressing. Forming a malleable response, an emancipation, encapsulated with ingenuity and inspiration. By enabling the course of movement, we propose the sense of abstraction overcomes, taking us a step towards discovering new perspectives of our own lived experiences, a proposal premised on the reality that both body and senses are at the centre of experience.



*Fig. 7*

## TO TOUCH AND TO BE TOUCHED

The study of senses is such a deep and ongoing investigation, one I can only briefly touch upon within this discourse. So, I am going to focus primarily on the sense of touch, as the phenomena of touch plays a key role within my own praxis. It is again Merleau-Ponty's leading ideas into the philosophy of touch<sup>45</sup> that brings attention to the embodied experience, and these perceptions have since affected the way we think about experiencing artworks. An important aspect of the philosophy of touch is the asymmetry of the experience and the notion that touching is not about taking something as a possession or taking hold of something, but it is instead an approach to something that does not leave itself to be touched. Merleau-Ponty goes on to draw substantially from Husserl's investigation of the reflexive touching and touched relation.<sup>46</sup> Husserl's idea that touch has a reflexive motion; to touch one hand to another is to touch and to be touched concurrently a double sensation<sup>47</sup>. Husserl argues that the intentionality of reflexivity on the body is completely dependent on the distinct act of touch. In Merleau-Ponty's book *The Visible and the Invisible*<sup>48</sup> he wrote about the experience of a handshake and the double sensation of touching. He comments on the dual nature of the human body, as the spectated and the spectator or the touched and the one touching. He goes on to argue against Husserl, stating that the two experiences, being touched and to touch, are in fact not symmetrical. In terms of a handshake, even though both of the hands touch each other, they will always remain detached. However, I believe that we cannot touch without being touched, in both a physical

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<sup>45</sup> "Maurice Merleau-Ponty (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy)". *Plato.stanford.edu* <<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/merleau-ponty/>> [accessed 7 January 2021]

<sup>46</sup> Husserl, Edmund, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy: Second Book: Studies in the Phenomenology of Constitution* (Dordrecht: Springer, 1989)

<sup>47</sup> Husserl, Edmund, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy: Second Book: Studies in the Phenomenology of Constitution* (Dordrecht: Springer, 1989)

<sup>48</sup> Merleau-Ponty, Maurice, *The Visible and the Invisible*, (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), p. 130.

and philosophical sense as the double nature of touch, exposing yourself at the same time as experiencing, serves as an analogy for how we encounter works of art. As Teju Cole comments, “Of the five traditional senses, touch is the only one that is reflexive: you can look to without being seen, and hear without being heard, but to touch is to be touched. It is a sense that goes both ways: the sensitivity of one’s skin responds to and is responded to by the sensitivity of other people’s skin.”<sup>49</sup>

The chapter *Veils* in Serres’ *Les Cinq Sens* primarily focuses on the sensation of touch, opening with the ridicule of the Cartesian question of where the soul is located in the body. To Serres “the soul resides at the point where the I is decided”<sup>50</sup>. This offers the perception that the soul is found within the body’s contingencies and its interaction to its surroundings. This theory of contingency revolves around the skin, becoming a mediator, “the body and soul are not separate but blend inextricably, even on the skin. Thus, two mingled bodies do not form a separate subject and object.”<sup>51</sup> I draw on Serres to question these historical and ideological hierarchies that attempt to predetermine what the possibilities of embodiment and relational experience are. In my opinion, there are constraints to these traditional epistemologies in relation to the subject and the external. During the consideration of art, it is critical to instead contemplate René Descartes’ subject/object debate<sup>52</sup> as not a distinction, but an embodied connection between the subject and the object, a connection that allows for the unification of the perceiver and what is being understood. The embodied self is subjectively conscious of the surroundings, and concurrently objectively a participant in the surroundings as a body, object, or other entity.

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<sup>49</sup> Cole, Teju, *Known and Strange Things* (London: Faber & Faber, 2017), p.174.

<sup>50</sup> Serres, Michel, *Les Cinq Sens* (Paris: Hachette, 1998), p. 20.

<sup>51</sup> Serres, Michel, *Les Cinq Sens* (Paris: Hachette, 1998), p. 26.

<sup>52</sup> Wee, Cecilia, and Michael Pelczar. 2008. "Descartes' Dualism and Contemporary Dualism", *The Southern Journal of Philosophy*, 46: 145-160  
<<http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.2041-6962.2008.tb00073.x>>

“I touch one lip with my middle finger. Consciousness dwells in this contact. I start to explore it. Often consciousness conceals itself in folds, lip resting on lip, palate closed on tongue, teeth against teeth, eyelids lowered, tightened sphincter, the hand closed into a fist, fingers pressed against each other, the rear surface of one thigh crossed on the front face of the other, or one foot resting on the other... without this folding-over, this contact of the self with itself, there would be no internal sense, no body of one’s own, or even less coenesthesia, no body image, we would live without consciousness, featureless, on the point of vanishing.”<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Serres, Michel, *Les Cinq Sens* (Paris: Hachette, 1998), p. 20.



*Fig. 8*

Like Merleau-Ponty, Serres also believes that this notion of self-touching is not purely symmetrical. Each time one touches themselves, any consciousness, contingency, or even soul, can be overly saturated creating an imbalance, an imbalance which he believes is dependent on if you're left or right-handed.<sup>54</sup> Serres returns to this notion in his book *Le Tiers-Instruit*<sup>55</sup>, in which he suggests the world has a sensibility due to its lateral orientation; everything is either left-handed or right-handed, by leaning a certain way or being shaped, pulled or pushed by gravity, energy, instinct, or reflex. A desire to experience the everyday sensory field is essential to our physical, emotional, and social interactions. While it is difficult to discern one sense due to the complex sensory system that enables us to experience and interact with our environment, Serres is interested in limiting and restricting the sense of contact. The sense of touch is one of the most vital aspects in human existence, a fundamental tool for interaction, communication, language, and overall development; we learn almost everything through touch. Although there is extensive scientific and philosophical research into the importance of each and every human sense, we are still committed to a heavily visual society, while touch is often discouraged and instead, we are proposed with ways that allow us to feel and experience without physically touching. Perhaps, it is this inability to fulfil our innate want to physically touch our surroundings within contemporary culture that is contributing to a feeling of detachment from our interactions with other bodies and even art.

The surroundings in which art is most commonly received is galleries; often considered as untouchable, sacred places, where the spectator is expected to walk quietly between artworks and contemplate from a distance. Which not only hinders those who do not have the sense of sight but, as with our human nature, we often

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<sup>54</sup> Serres, Michel, *Le Tiers-Instruit* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991)

<sup>55</sup> Serres, Michel, *Le Tiers-Instruit* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991)

feel the innate need to bridge that distance and interact with the art more intimately. As Jean-Louis Chrétien said, “no phenomenology of life, of body and the flesh, can be constituted without basing itself on a phenomenology of touch”<sup>56</sup>. However, the evolution of contemporary art and technology has brought new levels of spectatorship. One of the most obvious examples of this is the works of Olafur Eliasson, whose works have been widely regarded to be bestowed with a multitude of sensory experiences, prompting “a critical attitude towards normative processes of perception while at the same time offering viewers opportunities to expand their ability to envision.”<sup>57</sup> The physical participation of the spectator within his work could be considered both as embodied and individual ways of seeing. When the spectator actively interacts with Eliasson's work by entering each spatial container, they define the dimensions of the work and in turn, are both sensorially and physically integrated into them. From this encounter, the participant is able to reflect upon their involvement, and in response, their perception of the temporal space becomes completely subjective. The specific interlacing of the physical outside and the bodily dimensions of the inside, an interlacing that is born out of the involvement and in some cases the absorption of participating in Eliasson’s installations, renders them applicable to Merleau-Ponty’s concept of the flesh<sup>58</sup>. A notion that I feel is relevant to mention again concerning the work of Eliasson, as it deals with the consciousness in the synergetic encounter between the spectator and the work of art, and the simultaneous flux between the internal and external carnality that interacts through the spectator and the artwork.

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<sup>56</sup> Chrétien, Jean-Louis, *The Call and the Response*, Anne Davenport (trans.) (New York: Fordham University Press, 2004), p. 86.

<sup>57</sup> Grynstejn, Madeleine. 2007. *Your Entanglements: Olafur Eliasson, The Museum, and Consumer Culture*; Madeleine Grynstejn (ed.), *Take your time: Olafur Eliasson* (San Francisco: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art), p. 17.

<sup>58</sup> Merleau-Ponty, Maurice, *The visible and the invisible* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), p. 130.

One example of Eliasson's installations that plays with our bodily senses is *Your Blind Passenger*, which I was able to experience at his recent retrospective at the Tate Modern<sup>59</sup>. Not that dissimilar to a sensory deprivation tank, this installation is made up of a forty-five-meter-long corridor filled with fog. Upon entering the corridor, the body of the spectator is suddenly engulfed by this dense fog and a blinding light. Only able to see a few feet in front of you, the density of the fog means that you lose perspective of the spatial container you are in and in turn your own body at times. But as Eliasson said himself, "quickly you realise that you are not completely blind after all, you have a lot of other senses which start to kick in. Showing the relativity of our senses is much higher than we think, we have it in our capacity to recalibrate or at least stop being numb."<sup>60</sup> This installation places the spectator in an environment in which they have to rely on their other senses and not only the visual. As you enter you become fully blanketed by the work, becoming a physical part of it. If you were to see the constructed tunnel, as an art object, prior to entering I think that it would completely alter your perception and in turn the experience as a whole. Instead, it is not possible to encounter this particular installation from the outside. It can only be experienced once you are inside; experienced through your entire body, and not simply your eyes.

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<sup>59</sup> Eliasson, Olafur, *In Real Life* (London: Tate Modern, 2019)

<sup>60</sup> Brown, Mark. 2019. "Olafur Eliasson to bring his tunnel of fog work to Tate Modern", *The Guardian* <<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2019/jan/31/olafur-eliason-your-blind-passenger-tunnel-fog-tate-modern-installation>> [accessed 7 January 2021]



*Fig. 9*

## YOUR BLIND PASSENGER

Once within, you become submerged, leaving the outside to melt away behind you, the sense of time suddenly lost. The eyes that could perceive clearly just seconds ago, now attempt to adapt to the pure light and thickness in front of you. Due to your hindered vision, your other bodily senses become heightened. Guided solely by the surrounding sounds that bounce off the fog, a body moving precariously, trying to find a way, estimating the spatial information. The deprivation means you suddenly become acutely conscious of your own body; your presence. What was initially blinding and disorientating, evolves into a serenity. Moving through the space, the water-soluble fog gets deeper and the colours change. You are now able to not only feel it on your skin, but you can taste its sweetness in your mouth and feel it in your nostrils. You become united with the fog as it fills your lungs, you are an elemental part of the experience; made from the same flesh. Towards the end of the corridor, (something you only know after the experience), it becomes perpetually darker, as if you are walking into an abyss. The change in light completely alters the experience, going from a bright yellow into blackness is more metaphorical than you might expect. The darkness implies a closing in as if the ceiling and walls were encapsulating you. Due to the removal of the visual sense, the emphasis shifts from the passage to your own bodily interior, forming a sort of non-space inside the already established one. It becomes clear that the act of participation is integral to this installation, and the perception of the artwork is significantly shaped by each individuals' preconceptions and past encounters.

## PERMEABLE BOUNDARIES

As we have now realised, the body is the flesh of the world and in turn, of all experiences. As Merleau-Ponty argues, there is a “belongingness of the body, to being and the corporeal relevance of every being”<sup>61</sup>, be it embodied physically in person, or in technological or virtual circumstances, becoming part of a mutual corporeality. This brings me to the consideration of the post-human and the non-human. What is now widely referred to as the digital age<sup>62</sup>, the turn of the 21st century brought us new levels of technology that were never dreamed of, with most young people not recalling a period when digital interactions, mobile phones, computers, and the Internet were not typical aspects of their everyday. Meaning that today, we are not only able to have deeply intimate relationships through these technologies but with them as well. As we use digital technology both to interact and to reflect ourselves through the spatial and temporal, these technologies allow us to articulate our entity, and at times, we may even experience these technologies as extensions of our own bodies. It is clear that contemporary spectators are concurrently embodied by organic flesh and digital prostheses<sup>63</sup>, whilst contemporary culture simultaneously retains a conceptual distinction between bodily experiences and online ones, it can also be seen to divide and discredit exhibition situated interactions.

So, what is the post-human? As Katherine Hayles, wrote in her book *How We Became Posthuman*, the most significant aspect is that the “post-human configures a human being so that it can be

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<sup>61</sup> Merleau-Ponty, Maurice, *The visible and the invisible* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), p. 118.

<sup>62</sup> Thomas, David. 2019. "What is the digital age?", *Blog.ventivtech.com* <<https://blog.ventivtech.com/blog/what-is-the-digital-age>> [accessed 9 January 2021]

<sup>63</sup> Patella-Rey, P.J., and Whitney Erin Boesel. 2014. "The Web, Digital Prostheses, and Augmented Subjectivity", *Routledge Handbook of Science, Technology and Society* [accessed 9 January 2021]

seamlessly articulated with intelligent machines.”<sup>64</sup> That is to say, the post-humanist perception of the original human form as the prosthesis that we evolve to operate. By looking at it from this perspective, the replacements or extensions of the human body with new prostheses is simply a continuity of the development that originated in the womb. Therefore, the post-human is able to embody multiple selves and is able to transform from the singular, identifiable entity of our origins. We may also consider the cyborg as a post-human representative. The term cybernetic organism defines a hybrid of human and technology, a creation from social realities that imply a merged image of the envisioned and physical. Forming monumental transformations; modified bodies to which exogenous extensions are attached, that can adapt and evolve to the contemporary surroundings. Merleau-Ponty is again vital to the disclosure of elucidating this post-humanist question. It may be considered that a type of post-humanist ideology was derived from Merleau-Ponty’s philosophies of expression, in order to question various ways of being in the surrounding realm. But in contrast, it may also be considered a post-humanist corporal ontology that questions the origins of corporeality from the divergence and malleability of our known ways of being, what Merleau-Ponty refers to as the ontology of flesh.<sup>65</sup> Incidentally, in Donna Haraway’s *Cyborg Manifesto*<sup>66</sup>, the word post-human is loosely synonymous with that of cyborg, allowing us to see the cyborg as a representation of the post-human theory. It is because of Haraway’s seminal essay that the cyborg’s metaphor became part of traditional scholarly vernacular. However, I would not go as far to say that Haraway’s essay is revolved around the post-human, nor does the paper even acknowledge the post-human, but it was the common acceptance of

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<sup>64</sup> Hayles, N. Katherine, *How We Became Posthuman* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), p. 3.

<sup>65</sup> Merleau-Ponty, Maurice, *The visible and the invisible* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), p. 130.

<sup>66</sup> Haraway, Donna J., *A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century*, in *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991).

the cyborg as a body, that merged the line between the post-human and the cyborg. As Haraway questions “why should our bodies end at the skin, or include at best other beings encapsulated by skin?”<sup>67</sup>. The interruption of the membrane symbolises the understanding that our bodies do not begin or end solely at the skin, but we are built up of many elements; biological or mechanical.

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<sup>67</sup> Haraway, Donna J., *A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century*, in *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), p. 178.

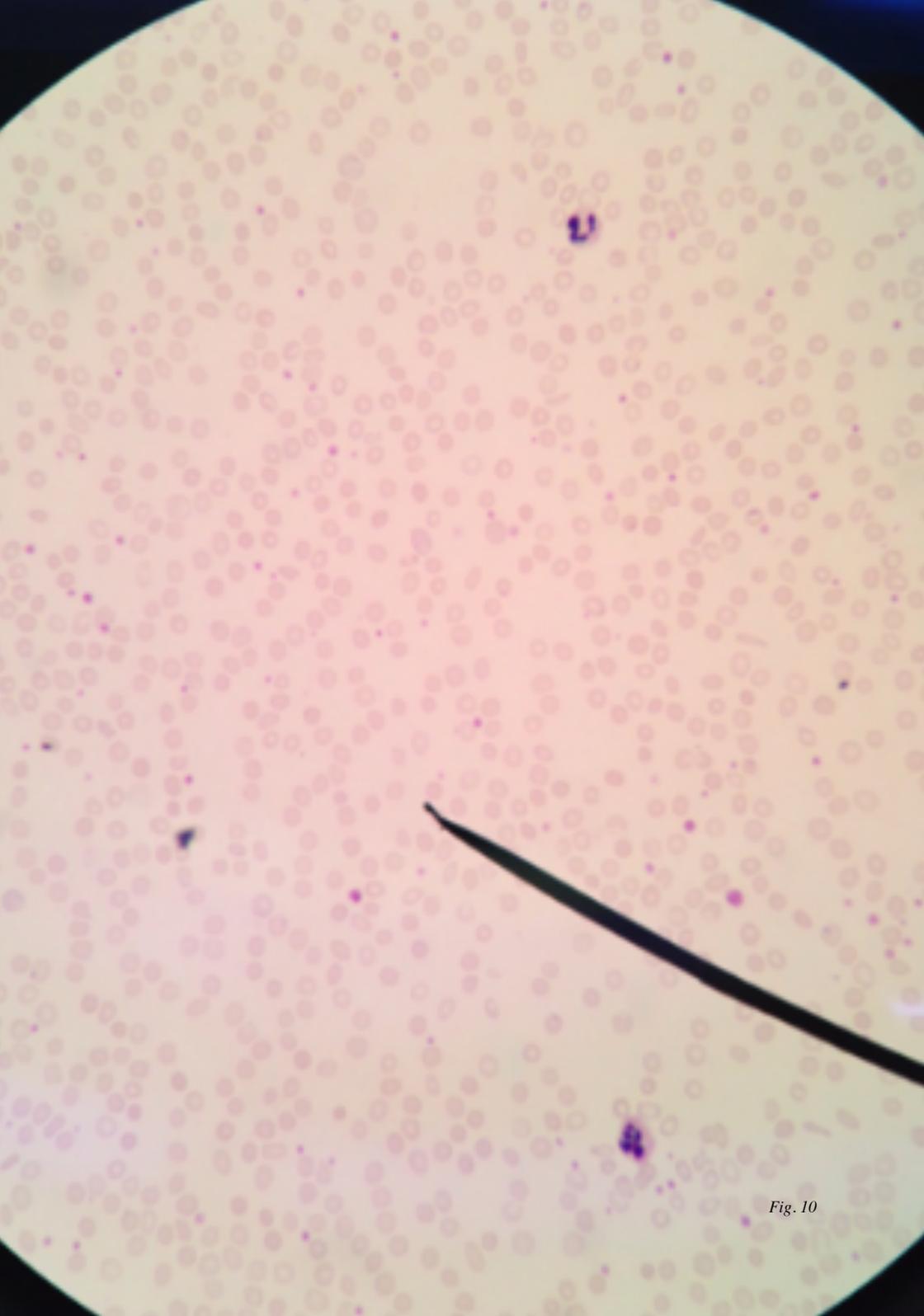


Fig. 10

## METAL OF OUR BLOOD

Sonochromatic artist Neil Harbisson, co-founder of the Cyborg Foundation, was born with a rare condition called Achromatopsia, meaning that he has only ever seen his surroundings in greyscale; a life without colour. Seeing colours could be considered a huge part of our sensorial embodiment and experiences, so understandably he often felt socially excluded from the world, and was reminded constantly that he was missing this layer of life<sup>68</sup>. In 2003, Harbisson collaborated with cyberneticists, to create himself an electronic eye, the Eyeborg. The extension attached to his head, transforms light frequencies in colour tones into sound frequencies, allowing him to experience colours that are even beyond the range of human eyes. Interestingly, this interface is not like a pair of headphones that you can remove and replace, the Eyeborg it is a permanent fixture of him, like an internal organ, it becomes biologically a part of him. Making him legally and officially accepted as the first cyborg in the world in 2004. A revolution for those who lack or lose a sense, and a technology that hopefully can be used with in art exhibitions in the future. As media theorist Marshall McLuhan states “to behold, use or perceive any extension of ourselves in technological form is necessarily to embrace it. To undergo the ‘closure’ or displacement of perception that follows automatically.”<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>68</sup>“This Guy is a Legally Recognised Cyborg that can Hear Colours”. *Vice.com* <<https://www.vice.com/da/article/r79yye/youneedtohearthis-this-guy-is-a-legally-recognised-cyborg-that-can-hear-colours>> [accessed 9 January 2021]

<sup>69</sup> McLuhan, Marshall, *Understanding Media The extensions of man* (London and New York: McGraw-Hill Education, 1964), p. 56.



*Fig. 11*

In some ways human and non-human bodies are formed of equal elements, as Jane Bennett observes “the mineralogy of our bones, or the metal of our blood, or the electricity in our neurons. All bodies are kin in the sense of an inextricably enmeshed dense network of relations,”<sup>70</sup> a combination of interactions that are in a continuous flux. The Anthropocene seems to be the domain for nascent dissipation, a ruthless grouping of all bodies and dimensions together in an environment inevitably beyond borders. An image of a world without defined limits, one without skin. Blurring the lines between what is the art and who is the beholder, as Pierre Huyghe states it is “not to exhibit something to someone, but to exhibit someone to something.”<sup>71</sup> Contemporary art is a clear facilitator for the compelling interactions between the human and non-human, depicting a unification, per se, a coming together of various entities, working together or alongside one another. Art then constitutes a portal between human and non-human, a realm in which the double-edged counteraction between object and subject disintegrates and spreads out into a plurality of experiences. This implementation of synergy from artists reaffirms the concept that the gravity lies in the encounter over the form.

So, in a time when social interactions, sensory experiences, physical exploration, and generally just viewing art in the flesh, is hindered, where do we go next? As I write this discourse, we are in the middle of the global COVID-19 pandemic, a pandemic that has rendered these experiences temporarily on hold. Across the world, limitations were implemented into our daily lives, as all non-essential happenings were cancelled and highly discouraged, we witnessed a sharp increase in digital and online interactions and the introduction of new or unfamiliar interactive technologies, structures, and environments. The contemporary art industry was hit hard, facing many challenges in presenting virtual alternatives for experiencing art online. With the

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<sup>70</sup> Bennett, Jane. *Vibrant matter - a political ecology of things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), p. 10.

<sup>71</sup> Bourriaud, Nicolas. 2019. "Coactivity: Between the Human and Nonhuman", *Flash Art* <<https://flash-art.com/article/coactivity-between-the-human-and-nonhuman/>> [accessed 9 January 2021]

pandemic came an unsurprising increase of online exhibitions, events, and talks. The employment of many digital tools like Zoom, Virtual Reality, or as the British Museum<sup>72</sup> did, virtual tours with Google Street View, has allowed many more people to view work they might not normally be able to see; free from time and geographic constraints. But like the virus itself, these experiences often leave you with some of your senses unfulfilled. However, it is undeniably clear that digital art has brought endless possibilities to the art industry. Whilst the use of technology in exhibitions has been used economically for many years now, the fear of change and losing audiences, the cost, and the attachment to the traditional art encounters, that many galleries have faced, has become a hindrance. If there's any good to come out of the pandemic it is the pressure it put on art institutions to invest more in their digital online presence, and make art more accessible worldwide. But with the distanced senses of smell, taste and most importantly touch, no longer a focus of experience, and even the use of vision and audio can be impeded through the online experience, is it the same as in the flesh? Is the virtual interchangeable with the real?

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<sup>72</sup> "How to explore the British Museum from home". 2020. *The British Museum Blog* <<https://blog.britishmuseum.org/how-to-explore-the-british-museum-from-home/>> [accessed 9 January 2021]



*Fig. 12*

## A REAL VIRTUALITY

When the term virtual reality is used, it is most probably the contemporary conception of a virtual reality, that simulates and mimics our visual encounters, that first comes to mind when considering how virtual reality can be. Gilles Deleuze, however, used the word virtual to allude to an ideal aspect of reality, though still completely real. The concept or sense of a proposition, which is not a tangible element of proposition, but is still an aspect of that proposition. Both Deleuze and Henri Bergson, who highly influenced Deleuze, established their perception of the virtual in relation to a quote of Marcel Proust's, in which he discusses a virtuality; a recollection as "real but not actual, ideal but not abstract"<sup>73</sup>. Deleuze and his take on the ontology of virtuality, is also considered by the theorist Manuel DeLanda, by affirming his foundation, "as biological organisms and as social agents, we live our lives within spaces bound by natural and artificial extensive boundaries, that is, within zones that extend in space up to a limit marked by a frontier."<sup>74</sup> These notions of natural and artificial remind me once again of our flesh and our digital prostheses, from which we construct the idea of the comparison of the intensive and extensive spaces. Our skin that defines an extensive perimeter of our body, and the intensive nature of intangible material. Deleuze defines the virtual as an intensive space, a real virtuality, embodied by the invisible matter of experience.

Post-Covid art has brought us an undeniable depth of culture and history which we may not have previously been able to experience, let alone from our own homes. For example, QUAD gallery in Derby have highly utilised the virtual exhibiting tool V21 ArtSpace, to continue their exhibitions online throughout the pandemic<sup>75</sup>. Their

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<sup>73</sup> Proust, Marcel, *Remembrance of things past* (London: Chatto – Windus, 1957)

<sup>74</sup> DeLanda, Manuel. 2005. "Space: Extensive and Intensive, Actual and Virtual.", *Deleuze and Space Project: The New Materiality*: p. 2.

<sup>75</sup> "Virtual QUAD | QUAD". 2020. Derbyquad.co.uk

<<https://www.derbyquad.co.uk/about/news?category=13>> [accessed 10 January 2021]

collaborations have been tailored to create fully immersive 3D virtual exhibition and gallery environments, that are accessible on all web-based platforms, online, on mobile, and in virtual reality. This tool allows us to get as close as possible to viewing art in the current climate, enabling the spectator to navigate their way through installations, fully move around each piece, get as close as you like, as you would in person, enhancing the experience for spectators; undoubtedly as close to interactive immersion as we can get at the moment.

In 2018, QUAD Gallery commissioned the digital art pioneer, Rebecca Allen, to create a new virtual reality-based exhibition. Ironically, it was over thirty years ago now, that Allen first forecasted our new virtual society, by writing that “not only will people build highly detailed artificial worlds in the computer, but they will also create complex characters with “human-like” behaviour that will “live” in these artificial environments. These new worlds will be experienced by the viewer through high-resolution displays and the viewer will be able to interact with these synthetic characters.”<sup>76</sup> I say ironically, because I believe that now, in our post-Covid climate, Allen’s work and words have never been more relevant. QUAD Gallery documented the whole exhibition using 360° cameras, creating a digitalised virtual gallery that you can digitally move around and view at home through your phone or computer. It is as if this work was made and documented in light of the pandemic but in fact it was made two years earlier, but is the perfect example of exhibiting interactive and immersive art in a post-Covid world.

The spectators’ reciprocal interactions are at the core of the encounters within Allen’s active, innovative, and surreal virtual realms. Constructing immersive interactions that generate conversations halfway between thought and movement; between mind

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<sup>76</sup> "QUAD VR Season: Exhibitions — V21 Artspace | Interactive 3D Virtual Tours & Immersive VR Experiences", *V21 Artspace | Interactive 3D Virtual Tours & Immersive VR Experiences*, 2018 <<https://v21artspace.com/quad-vr-season-exhibitions>> [Accessed 3 April 2021]

and body. Reminding me again of Descartes' mind/body dualism, in this context, placing mind over experience, disconnecting our mind from our bodies; separate and detachable. However, Allen's work discredits this notion, continuously shifting fluently between art, technology, and theory to explore the mind and body in cohesive motion. Her ability to create artificial realms and artificial minds allows us to expand our perspectives, forcing us to draw new links between thought and surroundings, as well as mind and body. By understanding virtual reality as an artificial, digitally created universe, we can digitalise ourselves as virtual objects, and our intangible minds embody our intangible bodies. Our bodies react as if we're really there, able to feel real feelings within virtual worlds; the adrenaline peaks in moments of fear, and serotonin floods in moments of rapture, all within virtual environments. Our flesh, this veil, between what is physical and what is artificial is disrupted, leaving us in a state of transition, existing concurrently in a digitally constructed world and the physical world.



*Fig. 13*

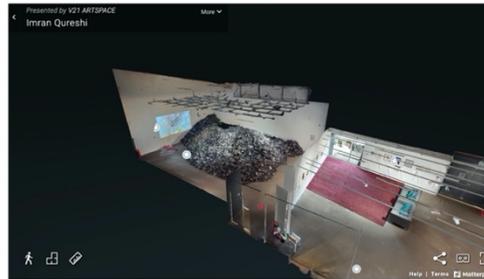
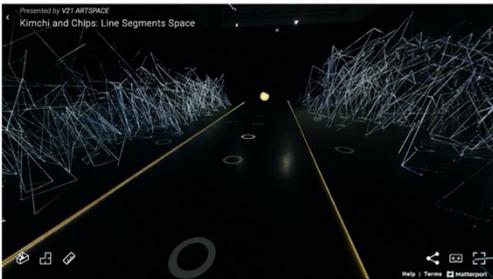
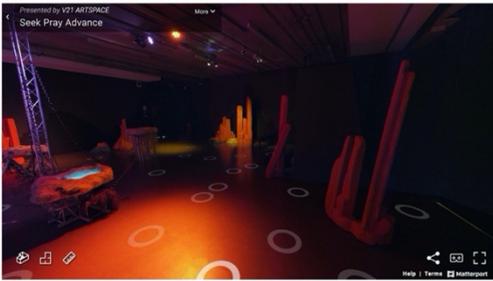


Fig. 14 - 21  
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As we find ourselves in a strange cartography, our sense of place is in constant flux, the point from which we experience is somewhat removed. On your screen, you see a reproduction of what seems to be a paper mountain, or a succession of screens, or a dark corridor surrounded by an architectural web of threads, craving to be sensorially experienced. The net of these illustrations has been projected from above, a perspective that is unnatural to the human body but intrigues. The images seem to shroud, settling at the margins and forming folds in reality. Forms captured and quantified via the frame of the structure, holding but exposing a wide spectrum of spatial dimensions, a surrogate reality created by a computer's interpretation. You are free to roam around and across the terrain from an almost all-knowing viewpoint. You move fluidly, at a defined pace, covering surfaces that your feet don't touch. Able to cross the threshold in one swift move, exposing flaws in the form of synthetic structures; an abstract framework of interaction from which this concept is centred. A parallel of the real. With the technologies you have at your fingertips, you can pass with fluency, towards the surfaces within; unlimited access across the geography, through a combination of physical signals and motions. But these rooms resemble a primitive interpretation of reality. Structures become bodies of data, while the vertical and horizontal are continuously collapsing. Something of an amalgamation has emerged, objects are eternally fused with their foundations, creating an artificial landscape in constant static. The reproduced encounters have been suspended in time, frozen and archived; a condensed collection of scattered events. The stimulating map you see is an unreal reflection of an experience. A stagnant mirror of the structure it emulates, an everlasting site defined indirectly by the digital manifestation of its self.

## CONCLUSION

Our mutual bodies are endlessly at the intersection of experience, experiences that have previously been restricted by reductionist thinking and constricting forms of exhibiting. The body, our interactions, senses, technology, our experiences, thoughts or feelings are in constant ever-evolving flux. For this reason, this debate will be forever open and until our fluid bodies are seen as beyond self-contained entities, who are now translucent to experience, I cannot conclude this discussion. Instead, my introductory insight, the knowledge I've obtained, and the encounters I've experienced, should be seen as an opening. An opening to understand that our shared skin acts as a mediator and by reflecting on the role of the body within the reception of art, we must question how art is formed out of the intersection between it and the spectator. As we find ourselves now operating in this new existence, where the previous structures no longer fit within our contexts, institutional frameworks that define objects and subjects as passive separate entities, are now nothing more than embodiments of vestiges, forms, or casts of the past. All that is left is the hollow void of the architecture, an emblematic arrangement that operates as a figure for revolution. In a world where the boundaries and limits are continually softening, we find ourselves in a space that houses a whole new collection of contexts. All narratives, artifacts, and interactions have previously existed in the vertical, but we must now understand that they are fluid, interchangeable and embodied, and have the capacity to materialise at any time, continuously. Navigating from the anatomical architectural structure and reciprocal touch to the emergence of android bodies, bound to our senses, a coexistence of polarities, an intertwining of experience. Our bodies, as we know them begin to fade, or dissipate, or evolve? The post-human is at once an eternal entity, to exist beyond the constraints of time, burdened only by our own limits. No longer solely organic, we are beings that go beyond the limits of bone and skin, formed from the very elements that make up the surroundings in which we exist. And here in this space of embodiment, encounters, immortality, and art, we drift through the cavernous space as liquid, becoming one with the art.

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