Haptic Hedonism
– a fiendish plot of the aesthetic flesh
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Haptic hedonism produces excessive pleasure through the sense of touch in all forms. Ethically it presents a challenge to how the body is excluded in current production of art. For what happens when one transgresses the taboo zone of intimacy? And absorbs the body of the participant into the artwork? Under the dominance of the eye “the non-visual senses have been actively forgotten and written out of the cultural history of the West”.[01] My work presented here focuses on the skin to use the artistic possibilities of the haptic senses, that is the senses relating to touch and movement.

The body is an aesthetic playground, but one so burdened by moral inhibitions and taboos. It ought to be skinned of its up to two square meter long [02] moralistic fear of the intimate, individual, even orgiastic pleasures. What would a lump of blind flesh not want to feel? The flesh turned “aesthetic” [03] is open to all kinds of experience, including sexual pleasures, even decadent, amoral beauty, trans-, inter- and multisexual appearances and practices. For the flesh in itself is blissfully blind to the conventions of perception. Governed by the mechanisms of biopolitics and the Freudian pleasure principle we tend to neglect pleasure in itself also being a form of legitimate experience. William S. Burroughs said that “perhaps all pleasure is only relief”. Perhaps we should see all pleasure as only an experience? Instead of bad, immoral, filthy or shame-ridden in itself. Pleasure forms one of the elements in the democracy of (sensual) experience. This democracy is based on relational experiences that constitute our actions and morals through negotiation, not by default.

Taking a Pagliaesque return to the cult of sex and beauty – and adding some of that fleshy feeling – art is an open, experimental field for playing with psycho-, techno- as well as socio-sexual possibilities. And why not? We have long since become postsexual. On the one hand we are tied to one physical body with an average lifespan of 70 years, on the other we are cybersexual libertines who have got used to identity and gender swapping. The postsexual condition is therefore not about the sexuality we are born and raised into, but the one we negotiate and construct within the complexity of sociocultural relations. One example is the porn generation now developing in Scandinavia. Porn is the new black, and toying with taboos is very important for the new generation’s process of defining itself as different from the previous.

Haptic Hedonism is about producing the ultimate corpo-sensual experience through corporeal stimulation in the context of art and technology. In the following I will investigate how corporeal pleasures can become an integral part of the art experience. How can corporeal pleasure even constitute the art experience? How can the sensations of the body be used as artistic material? Finally, can we aesthetically manipulate our bodies to sense a real and reproducible pleasure? How can the body become a canvas of sensations?

During a visit to Florence in 1817 the French novelist Henri Stendhal was so struck by the immense artistic beauty that his body went into tremor. He experienced a form of aesthetic
ecstasy. This was later defined as the Stendhal Syndrome by the Italian psychiatrist Grazziella Magherini. Symptoms of the syndrome are erratic heartbeat, dizziness, confusion, breathlessness, panic attacks, fainting and hallucinations, all occurring when one is exposed to art. The syndrome might therefore not necessarily appear a pleasant experience there and then. Yet Stendhal’s epiphany implies a strong dimension of overwhelming pleasure. What happens if one digs beyond the visual and impresses the artwork directly on the users body? How can the mental ecstasy of Stendhal become a real, live, physical ecstasy?

And I have found that of all the senses the eye was the most superficial, the ear the most haughty, smell the most voluptuous, taste the most superstitious and inconstant, touch the most profound and philosophical.
— Denis Diderot, Letter on the Blind, 1749 [04]

In the case of Stendhal’s syndrome, simply gazing at artworks creates such a strong mental reaction that it triggers corporeal reactions. Visual art can, indeed, be pleasant to the senses. An example is Olafur Eliasson’s Weather Project at the Tate Modern (2004), where his immense ‘sun’ radiated low frequency light in the museums turbine hall. This massive environmental installation impressed many users with Stendhal-syndrome-like experiences. Such strong corporeal reactions are rare in a relational art industry dominated by visual art products. Excluding the body from the art experience presents a limbic loss equal to castration. The haptic as material is a literally untouched dimension and represents a potential for the production of new kinds of art. But why hasn’t this been exploited before? Our culture is still a captive to the craving eye. Visual expressions dominate our experience economy, as we know it from theater, film, opera, design, museums, TV and the internet. We are all fetishists of the image. We often view other ‘primitive’ cultures as superstitious cultivators of the iconographic, but strangely enough we are ourselves blind toward the daily influence of our own icons and the logo industry. The fact that we are ourselves – sensorially speaking – one-dimensional, doesn’t fit in with the wishful portrait of a modern, advanced and rhizomatically connected society. We are blind to the fact that the eye turns everything into a surface. It is even hard to understand literature and poetry without visual metaphors. Our visual culture makes itself into a superficial society. Our ideals of beauty, as well as the body culture and pornography, are built upon the surface and visual appearance of the body. The inner, experiential sensations and experience are left invisible and therefore ‘unimportant’. We perceive our bodies mono-sensorially – visually, whereby the corporeal escapes us. The dominance of the visual stimulates selfconfirmingly to further superficial gazing. Our understanding and knowledge of the world rarely escapes the visual spectrum of light. To break the curse of Cartesian dualism, penetrate the surface and internalize our gaze we need the ‘lower’ senses of the body. As Maurice Merleau-Ponty points out, our body thinks as a complete unit, not with singular and separated senses.

Status Questionis of haptic technologies

So how to achieve this? What haptic technology makes what sensation possible? Haptic and multisensory systems dealing with pleasure can be traced a long way back in fiction and fantasy. Several of the significant images and visions on haptic technologies within popular culture, literature and film have had an impact on the way we think and act with technology. Culturally rooted inspirations for such systems are the Feelies described in Aldous Hux-
ley’s *Brave New World*. Here a future movie format gives you a sense of touch in addition to seeing and hearing. In the Feelies people feel intensively as being part of the action, also when watching a couple making love on screen. [05] Another popular cultural inspiration is the Excessive Machine that appears in the 1968 fantasy-sci-fi film *Barbarella*, starring Jane Fonda. Shaped like an organ for the body, the Excessive Machine is an orgasmotron made to torture the user through over stimulus of pleasures. It’s the ultimate version of the Freudian id’s craving for the pleasure above all pleasures. With the superego out of control the id will pursue pleasures until breakdown and happily to death. Barbarella, the true heroine of corporeality, represents the ultimate hedonist. In her unending need for stimulus the machine burns out. Her id-entity overcomes and outdoes the machine because it cannot satisfy her libidinal needs. A third example is the SimStim (Simulated Stimulation), a concept for haptic media that William Gibson described in his book *Neuromancer*. [06] The technology wires your brain and body directly to a pre-recording of another person’s full sensory experience. Instead of seeing Britney Spears in concert you could for example experience being her, in her body, singing her songs, on stage, live. Or having sex with her boyfriend. As Britney.

A SimStim-like device, the SQUID (Superconducting Quantum Interference Device), is shown in the film *Strange Days*, directed by Kathryn Bigelow. [07] This is a hair-net like device that is put on the subject/user’s head. This minidisc-based system can both record all the users’ sensory experience as well as play them back to anyone wearing the player. Through SQUID technology one gets a direct access to immediate sensations. It’s a future model of Gibson’s SimStim in that it is real-time playback. In the film this is a part of the main plot as one of the main characters is killing people with a SQUID receiver on his head and a sender on the victim’s. In this way the killer enters the victim’s body and can feel himself being killed by himself, an ultimate and repetitive sexy-suicidal process.

Works of art using technology to produce haptic and touch experiences are uncommon. In 1921 the futurist Marinetti produced an essay on “tactilism” where he described the various values he associates with tactile sensations. [08] With this tactile ‘vocabulary’ he produced “the first abstract suggestive table”. What is interesting about this work is how the tactile sensations can be imbued with symbolic values. As Constance Classen comments, this points towards the day when touch comes into its own, and “the hands can be as knowing as the brain”.[09] A work to simulate the effect of touch is *Telematic dreaming* by Paul Sermon. The installation is based on a videoconferencing system where the participants lie on separate beds double functioning as screens, giving the visual illusion of lying beside one another in the same bed. In this intimate situation the users tend to (visually) touch each other and even report sensations of being touched. [10] Thecla Schiphorst’s installation *Bodymaps* works on a similar principle where the visitor touches the image of a body that is projected onto a reactive table covered in white velvet. The image will (visually) react to the touching. Here the viewer becomes participant in the work through the sense of touch. These installations use touch to let the user interact with media. But how to touch the user back? There are several haptic technologies where two-way touch is used as a tool of communication. There are various force-feedback systems like the *Reachin Desktop* by Reachin Technologies, exoskeletal and external devices for exerting tactile pressure on the skin or haptic displays that simulate shape and texture in three dimensions. [11] In Stelarc’s *Ping body* performance the audience can remotely access, view and actuate his body via a computer-interfaced electric muscle-stimulation system. This is usually too painful for be an option for pleasure, but not necessarily. That pleasures come in many forms and variations is
wonderfully illustrated by the Painstation project by Volker Morawe and Tilman Reiff. This subversive work of art is built as an arcade game where two players compete against each other based on the older Pong (table tennis). “During the game, the players place their left hands on the PEU (Pain Execution Unit) which serves as a sensor and feedback instrument. Possible feedback effects are heat impulses, an electric shock and an integrated miniature wire whip. The feedback generated is dependent on the playing process and can increase in its intensity.” [12] Literally this work is about the pleasure of pain. It’s ‘no pain no gain’. I have observed several users happily and laughingly playing themselves to bleeding and screaming. The social and competitive instincts take total control of users and make them into suckers for the pleasure of (haptic) victory – or simply the joy of feeling alive.

The most common touch technology is through vibrotactile feedback, much like the vibrator in mobile phones. In Mobile Feelings by Christa Sommerer and Laurent Mignonneau two people communicate via vibrotactile touch and body sensations through an egg-shaped ‘phone’ interface they hold in their hands.

Yet, these are not about hedonistic and orgiastic pleasures. They are more about tickling the possibilities of pleasure than exploiting them. What about artworks that deliberately work with the induction of corporeal pleasure in the participant? What about real aesthetic ecstasy? A wild, uncontrolled and orgiastic experience of art? How to produce a real Stendhal syndrome intentionally and directly?

Haptic Hedonistic Art Projects

Sexuality is a social, hierarchic system.
—Michel Houellebecq [13]

There is of course more to sexuality than physical stimulation. Sexual perception is, as Houellebecq says, also a socio cultural construction. But here we are concerned about the practical way of creating and reproducing physical, sensomotoric sensations. Sensations of pleasure are often associated with the skin and its many functions. It is both a sexual jewelry and a tool to sense. It’s a perceptual gateway to physical reality. My works use skin as an intersensorial surface to serve as a basis for sexual excitement (Anzieu). In my CyberSM project I used sexual contact as an aesthetic communication practice driven by orgasmic creativity. Or at least by the promise of achieving an orgasm through sexual stimulation. The CyberSM project includes touch, sound, voice and visual 3D navigable bodies into its sensory vocabulary, allowing humans interacting in a virtual space to actually feel each other with their bodies. Not only does this physical element of communication let the CyberSM project model inter-human communication, it also creates a new form of complex, multisensory interaction. The physical dialogue includes nipple-, anal-, penile- and vaginal stimulation. In terms of pleasure, sexual feelings can be provoked through a combination of visual stimulus and vibrators. This has a certain degree of sexual brutalism, and putting a dildo in/up your groin is not always necessarily pleasant. Or wanted. But the playfulness and multisensory sensations of cyberSM compensated for the brutalism and most of the 1000+ participants observed, had a good time doing it. Even without orgasm. Autoerotic pleasure was one of the themes of my Erotogod project. Here the user enters a seven me-
ter long and five meter tall installation of metal, screens and light. The user kneels down and is dressed in a fullbody bodysuit. The bodysuit is a two way interface. Through 90 sensors it records the user’s self-touch, thereby building an image of the user’s body in the installations computer. The installation use this virtual body to touch the user back through more than 100 vibrotactile effectors in the suit, immersing the user in tactile stimulus. Thematically Erotogod is a multisensory space of experience that lets the user interactively write his own myths of creation. These myths appear as real-time generated, interactive stories through three dimensional sound (16 channels), graphics and corporal experiences. One of the open aims of employing multiple sensory channels into the Erotogod projects was to explore what happens to experience when the senses play together in unknown and new ways. The project is a synaesthetic space of experience: from syn (joined) and aësthesia (sense), hence meaning crossmodal sense association, or the joining of sensations. [14] The synaesthetic combination results in sense experience that is experienced as more than, or different from, the sum of the individual components. It is often described as a neurological phenomenon, but the question is whether it also can be provoked, or triggered, through cross sensory linking like sound-to-vision and touch-to-hearing. One example of combining touch with hearing is the e-skin project by Jill Scott. [15] Through combining various wearable interfaces that can both respond and produce touch as well as sound, the e-skin project attempts to augment the “unique cross-modal potentials of human sensory perception”. In Erotogod the synergetic linking of stimulus aims at facilitating an action-oriented, multisensorial environment that promotes synaesthetic and pleasant experiences. One of the goals is a better and more persuasive perceptual manipulation of the participants. The synaesthetic is about experiencing unexpected combinations. The sound of Erotogod is based on breathing recorded during a live intercourse. The users’ autoerotic touches hence produce a live sound composition [16] creating an aural intercourse. The tactile patterns expressed in the bodysuit are all re-combinations of pleasant sensations felt and recorded by a female prostitute. The users slip into the body of a whore.

In Artgasm the brutalism of cyberSM and the autoerotic from Erotogod comes together in an attempt to create true orgasmic art. The project is a work of art built on pure physical pleasure. It makes orgasms into art, thereby questioning our understanding of art and the artistic material. It’s a research-based art-medical performance. It medically manipulates the male audience/participant to experience the maximum of corporal pleasure, i.e. orgasm. The orgasms are involuntarily induced through a medical device and under the medical treatment of a doctor and nurse. By neural stimulation males will erect and ejaculate within two minutes. Artgasm trims down art to the original meaning of aesthetics: perception by means of the senses (from aisthesis: the appearance of that which, of itself, shows itself). Artgasm is a pure, measurable and visible corporal experience that engineers the pleasure of joy. This is literally orgasms at the push of a button. A dream turning unpleasant. It transgresses the Freudian id, creating the pain of pleasure. Asking when too much pleasure is just right. Or just too much. Or too little. It is indirectly a critique of the contemporary art-market and art-system ruled by socio-political control mechanisms and commercial interests. Further it comments on the biopolitics of pleasure control. In his History of sexuality Michel Foucault suggests that pleasure and truth are found under the rule of self-control. In a society where the individual’s life is dominated by the care for the self, excess becomes the danger. Artgasm makes pleasure a combination of the schism between sexual regulation and self-discipline versus libertine or permissive conduct. All forced onto the participants. The project questions the control of pleasure – by making it
uncontrollable. It physically forces pleasure on the participants and the involuntary orgasm therefore also represents a rape of the body – despite the sexual gratification experienced.

When the flesh turns aesthetic through the technologies of haptic hedonism we discover a new event horizon: the *Barbarella syndrome*. It is recognized by extreme sensations of corporal pleasure caused by art that physically manipulates the audience/user/participant. It is, like *Artgasm*, a disturbing pleasure, much like the sensations of omnipotence [17] that paraphilic exhibitionists report having. Few projects have produced extreme corporal experiences as participatory art, but for the open field of experimental arts it belongs to the tradition of transgression and the democracy of sensations. And the pleasure? As in some fiendish Nietzschean plot, pleasure is found neither in the Apollonian asceticism nor Dionysian ecstasy, but in the force field of friction between them.


[02] The skin is our largest body organ, covering up to two square meters and it is the largest membrane (surface of contact) between ourselves and the world.

[03] Aesthetics comes from aisthesis (sense-perception). For the pre-Socratic Greeks it was related to the process of revealing and concealing (alethia). Physical sensory perception was trusted as knowledge.

[04] Cited in M. Paterson, ibid.

[05] hhttp://www.huxley.net/studyaid/bnwbarron.html


[16] Made with real-time granular synthesis