

Not at a Distance
On Touch, Synaesthesia and Other Ways of Knowing

A thousand other things sing to me.
John Lee Clark

Every possible feeling produces a movement, and that
movement is a movement of the entire organism, and of
each of its parts.

William James

What if mirror-touch synaesthesia were not only misnamed, but fully misunderstood? What if, as Brian Massumi suggests, we were to begin by asking why the nomenclature for a synaesthesia that is said to move between touch and vision isn't called vision-touch synaesthesia like its sisters – sound-taste, colour-grapheme, shape-taste? (2017: 192). What shifts in the vocabulary of synesthesia, defined as that which occurs “when stimulation of one sensory modality automatically triggers a perception in a second modality, in the absence of any direct stimulation to this second modality,”¹ when we bring in the concept of mirror neurons, as occurs with *mirror*-touch synaesthesia? And what if, moving one step further, we were even to suggest that the vision-touch paradigm is the wrong place to begin? What if we were to consider vision-touch synaesthesia from the perspective of the DeafBlind? What kind of sensory experience would we be discussing then?

Neuroscientists would certainly balk: there can be no mirror-touch synaesthesia without vision, they would say. Their deficit model of sensation, which always begins with a body schema that senses in neurotypical, normative fashion, suggests after all that mirror-touch synaesthesia depends on one body seeing-feeling the touch of another directly on their skin: you touch yourself and I feel it because I see it, and in this exchange I lose a bit of what separated me from you. This is a deficit model not only because it begins with the presupposition that senses are fixed and located, but because it works with a pre-constituted body schema whose “sense of agency,” it is said, is fractured by the increase in sensation. Bodies lose their integrity in the encounter with the touch of the other. This approach, which places “sense of agency” as central to what it means to have a body, making intentionality, agency and volition central to the concept of the body, emphasizing that bodies are above all individual, separate

¹ (Cytowic, 1989, 1993; Marks, 1975; Motluk, 1994; Vernon, 1930)

envelopes. Bodies are only properly bodies when they can fully distinguish themselves from another, and when they have control over their sensations, and, by extension, over their movements.² The deficit model perceives any deviation from this norm to be a lack: “In the context of MTS [mirror-touch synaesthesia], one prediction from this would be that if there were agency-processing deficits these would exacerbate more basic disturbances in bodily awareness. We are clearly suggesting here that MTS is primarily a ‘disorder’ of ownership, which can have consequences for SoAg [sense of agency] and which in turn can further worsen ownership disturbances” (Cioffi, Moore, Banissy 2014).³ Bodies that sense too much, bodies that feel the touch of the world (including, as some neuroscientists admit, the touch of objects themselves⁴), are deficient: they lack the ability to distinguish their world from the world of others and thereby lose something of what makes them, properly speaking, bodies, and, by extension, human.⁵

Feeling the touch of another body or another object on your body is already a misnomer. It makes too strong a distinction between body and world, a distinction that is everywhere at play in the neuroscientific studies of all forms of synaesthesia, but perhaps even more forcefully so in studies of mirror-touch synaesthesia. “Individuals with mirror-touch synaesthesia (MTS) experience touch on their own bodies when observing another person being touched. Specifically, the images that participants had initially perceived as containing equal quantities of self and other became more likely to be recognised as the self after viewing the other being touched,” write Maister, Banissy and Tsakiris in a piece entitled “Mirror-Touch Synaesthesia and Representations of Self-Identity” (2013: 802). Self-identity is the starting point, and it is in the self-identity that the experience of touch is located: “These results suggest that observing touch on others not only elicits a conscious experience of touch in MTS, but

² In *The Minor Gesture* (Duke UP, 2016), I discuss at length the agency-volition-intentionality triad which I see to be at the heart of neurotypical accounts of the body. See the introduction and the chapter “Carrying the Feeling” for the most thorough discussions of this way of organizing experience. In an attempt to challenge the work the concept of “agency” does to normalize and individualize the body, I propose the concept of “agencement,” which emphasizes the movement of experience and its effects on bodyings. Here there is no account of a body separate from the world: a body(ing) becomes an ecology of practices, or, as Whitehead might say, a society of molecules.

³ <http://journal.frontiersin.org/article/10.3389/fnhum.2014.00256/full>. Visited 20 August 2017. np.

⁴ “It is unclear if MT synaesthesia is specific to viewing a real person, rather than a dummy figure [20] or an object being touched [19] since in their Supplementary material Banissy and Ward [19] discuss some cases of MT synaesthesia also being induced by viewing objects being touched” (Jewanski 2009: 293).

⁵ In her important video, *In My Language*, Amanda (now Amelia) Baggs demonstrates the degree to which the way she senses and perceives the world excludes her from the category of the human. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JnylM1hI2jc>

also elicits a change in the mental representation of the self, blurring self-other boundaries” (2013: 802). There is no mention here of the field of relation, of the emergent quality of sensation produced in the field itself: only one “distinct” body is studied, the focus on who that body feels the touch of the other on their skin. No attempt is made to explore the ways in which the relational milieu activates this singular composition. In addition, there is never an effort to explore how the touch that is felt might move beyond the limited concept of “simple location”⁶ – no questions are asked about how that touch alters the feel of the space, the quality of sensation beyond the actual location of the touch. There is no attempt to consider that what moves a body is transindividual,⁷ and that relation itself might be primary and not the other way around. For the scientific paradigm, since only the two bodies are seen as relevant, the only conclusion can be that the individual is “lost” in the exchange, that in their “becoming one” the one who senses too much loses the very quality that made it a body. The ensuing loss of the “sense of agency” that is presumed to be all-important to the development of the body schema is never itself in question. In study after study, the assumption is that the field of relation activated by the touch of the world *reduces* the ability to function: “when MTS individuals view touch on others, it not only elicits a shared tactile experience, but actually alters their body representation” (2013: 803). This altering of the body representation is a deficit because the assumed contours of the body are no longer intact. What if they were never intact? What if the promise of the body-intact were nothing more than the imposition of neurotypicality on the field of relation?⁸

In this return to an account of touch ten years after publishing *Politics of Touch*,⁹ I hope to do four things: 1) demonstrate that the force of reaching-toward, which is how I defined touch in *Politics of Touch*, troubles the model of “sense of agency” at the heart of accounts of mirror-touch synaesthesia; 2) build on John Lee Clark’s account of distantism as it plays out not only in DeafBlind culture but more broadly in the neurotypical worldview; 3) consider the ways in which accounts of mirror-touch

⁶ In *Science and the Modern World*, Whitehead writes: “to say that a bit of matter has *simple location* means that, in expressing its spatio-temporal relations, it is adequate to state that it is where it is, in a definite finite region of space, and throughout a definite duration of time, apart from any essential references to the relations of that bit of matter to other regions of space and other durations of time (1925: 58).

⁷ See Gilbert Simondon *L’individuation psychique et collective* (Paris: Aubier, 2007).

⁸ See “Toward a Leaky Sense of Self” in *Always More Than One: Individuation’s Dance* (Duke UP, 2013) for a more detailed account of the relational body.

⁹ Erin Manning *Politics of Touch: Sense, Movement, Sovereignty* (Minnesota UP, 2007).

synaesthesia as well as synaesthesia more broadly support a deficit model of sensation that is deeply neurotypical; 4) explore how ProTactile, a movement for language-in-the-making and DeafBlind experience, remaps the spacetime of sensation away from the categorical limitations that come with the imposition of sensory regimes that privilege the body-world separation.

The word on the breeze, and through the floor.
Liz Ball

“The TV is off, but I can still hear (and feel on my skin) the current of electricity powering all that equipment,” writes Aspiegrl on her blog “Autism and Angels.”¹⁰ Also mapped onto the deficit model of body-world integrity, sensory processing disorder is defined as that which disturbs normative sense perception. And in a world that is directed and organized by neurotypical norms, there is no question that the feel of electricity on our skin troubles the presupposition that we control our surroundings, that we have agency over what moves us. Continuously overwhelmed by the inability to process all that comes at us – or perhaps the ability to process too much – sensory processing disorder is considered to be a disability that prevents “normal” functioning.

Many autistics write about the complexities of sensory processing.¹¹ Aspiegrl’s list includes all senses – sounds that are difficult to parse because “in a room filled with inconsistent noises I hear everything at the same volume, which distorts my ability to understand what’s being said to me,” touch and texture, both in terms of clothing and food, light, especially fluorescents that flicker and hum, smell, good and bad both can be overwhelming.¹²

What if we were to turn the sensory model on its head and ask what it is that keeps so many feeling so little?

¹⁰ <https://aspiegrl.wordpress.com>. Visited 20 August 2017.

¹¹ See Amelia Baggs <http://withasmoothroundstone.tumblr.com/archive>; Amy Squenzia <https://ollibean.com/author/amy-sequenzia/>; Max Sparrow <http://unstrangemind.com>; Melanie Yergeau <http://autistext.com/2012/01/26/i-stim-therefore-i-am-loud-hands-blogaround/>; Lydia X.Z Brown <http://www.autistichoya.com/p/about.html>; Adam Wolfond and Estee Klar <http://www.esteklar.com>; DJ Savarese <https://www.deejmovie.com>; Michael Scott Monje, Jr. <http://www.mmonjejr.com>; Radical Neurodivergence Speaking <http://timetolisten.blogspot.de>; Emma Zurcher Long <https://emmashopebook.com> and many others.

¹² <https://aspiegrl.wordpress.com> Visited August 20, 2017

Synaesthesia is usually defined as an overlapping or cross-mapping of the senses. In the most widely studied cases of synaesthetes – colour-sound and colour-grapheme – great emphasis is placed on the mnemonic systems synaesthesia facilitates, focusing on the parsing synaesthesia allows. Synaesthetes are acclaimed for their unusual abilities: autistic Daniel Tammet,¹³ for instance, is celebrated for being able to visualize PI to a previously unimaginable degree (22 514 digits), while others inspire wonder by their ability to visualize music through colour (chromesthesia), or being able to retrace their steps thanks to a colour-grapheme synaesthesia that enables them to see any day of the week as far back as they want to go.¹⁴ These stories – and there are many of them – are fascinating, and the abilities are remarkable, but they only touch synaesthesia at its limit. In addition, they foreground a model of value that is deeply neurotypical: they focus on the parsing capacities of the synaesthetes, emphasizing not the qualitative complexity of their sensual fields but what can be studied, and thereby quantified. And, insofar as they include autistics such as Daniel Tammet, they replay the well-worn narrative of autistic savantism,¹⁵ reminding us at every turn that while these abilities may be extraordinary, they are nonetheless connected to a model of deficiency: in case after case, we hear about (autistic) synaesthetes having unusual capacities but being otherwise limited in their everyday “functioning.”

¹³ <http://www.danieltammet.net> Visited August 20, 2017

¹⁴ <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2016/aug/19/experience-i-see-words-as-colours>

¹⁵ In “Savant Memory in a Man with Colour-Form-Number Synaesthesia and Asperger Syndrome,” Baron-Cohen, Daniel Bor, Jac Billington, Julian Asher, Sally Wheelwright and Chris Ashwin write: “*In cases of savantism, there is also an autism spectrum condition (ASC)*. In this article we can begin to test this fourth theory. This theory is at least plausible because savant skills are most often found in ASC (Hermelin, 2002). That is, it is already established that ASC increases the likelihood of savantism, so at a minimum it is important to test cases of savants for whether they have an ASC. Even well- documented cases of savants who have apparently intact social skills cannot be taken as clear counter-evidence for this theory, if they have never been formally tested for an ASC. ASC exist on a spectrum and a reliable way to measure this spectrum within high functioning individuals is to use the Autism-Spectrum Quotient (AQ) (Baron-Cohen, Wheelwright *et al.*, 2001). [...] Autism is defined in terms of abnormalities in social and communication development, in the presence of marked repetitive behaviour and limited imagination (A.P.A, 1994). Asperger Syndrome (AS) is defined in terms of the individual meeting the same criteria for autism but with no history of cognitive or language delay, and not meeting the criteria for Pervasive Development Disorder (PDD) (I.C.D-10, 1994).” As regards the deficit model in relation to Tammet: “He tends to take things literally and is reported to commit frequent *faux pas*. He avoids social situations and finds parties confusing. He is aware that he talks too much and has taught himself to stop. He has also been told that he doesn’t notice if someone is upset. Examples of his *obsessions* are that he has to have strict order in his routines and he showed severe tantrums at change of routine as a child. He constructed a library in his house, alphabeticizing the books and giving out tickets. He collected hundreds of ladybirds as a child and read books about numbers for hours as a child. He was obsessed with play-doh shapes for numbers, and with Rubic cubes. He showed head-banging in his cot. As a child, he sat with fingers in his ears in primary school and with his eyes tight shut. [...] With age, DT has developed more of an idea of how to behave and how he seems to others, raising the possibility that mindreading skills are not completely absent but are simply delayed. It helped when, at the age of 13, his mother was able to give him some feedback and tell him to look at others’ eyes and not at his own feet. This suggests that in individuals on the autistic spectrum, for whom such social insight and consciousness of others’ minds does not develop naturally at the right point in development, learning to consciously attend to key parts of the environment (faces, eyes, expressions) may help.” <http://hstrial-tridenttechnical.homestead.com/BaronCohenetal2007.pdf>

This approach to diversity as divergence from a norm is all over the writing on Tammet. Described as a “high functioning autistic savant,” his sensitivity to the world is bracketed by functioning labels that only serve to reinstall neurotypical norms. Functioning labels, as anyone in the movement for neurodiversity will tell you, say nothing at all except that neurotypicals are obsessed with categories that keep their way of knowing central to experience.¹⁶ To function, according to these labels, means to deploy language in a way that “passes” for neurotypical, to have body movements that do not announce too forcefully the sensory stimulation autistics are trying to process, to be able to meet requirements for independence imposed by a belief in individualism before all, to be able to perform competence in ways that do not endanger the body-schema of those for whom the template of neurotypicality has become second nature.

Study after study links autism and synaesthesia, suggesting that it is more likely for autistics to be synaesthetic. Indeed, this view has become so widespread that Simon Baron-Cohen, well known (and widely reviled) by autistics for defining them as “mind-blind,” the condition of not being able to feel “the mind” of another, has recently begun publishing on synaesthesia and autism: “I have studied both autism and synaesthesia for over 25 years and I had assumed that one had nothing to do with the other. These findings will re-focus research to examine common factors that drive brain development in these traditionally very separate conditions. An example is the mechanism ‘apoptosis,’ the natural pruning that occurs in early development, where we are programmed to lose many of our infant neural connections. In both autism and synaesthesia apoptosis may not occur at the same rate, so that these connections are retained beyond infancy.”¹⁷ In this research, rather than asking how “apoptosis” might challenge his theory of “mind-blindness” by demonstrating that the hypersensorial tendency in autism that is likely in part due to “apoptosis” results in them being *more* in contact with the world and not less, Baron-Cohen takes it upon himself not only to reemphasize the concept of mind-blindness but to counter other studies that suggest that those with mirror-touch synaesthesia may be more empathetic than those without. A recent article, entitled “Mirror-Touch Synaesthesia is Not Associated with Heightened Empathy, and Can Occur with Autism,” he and his co-writers (Robson and Allison) makes their position abundantly clear:¹⁸ “Our findings dispute the views that

¹⁶ For an excellent piece on functioning labels in autism see <https://ollibean.com/problems-functioning-labels/>

¹⁷ <http://www.cam.ac.uk/research/news/synaesthesia-is-more-common-in-autism>

¹⁸ <http://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0160543>. Visited 20 August 2017

MT [mirror-touch] synaesthesia is linked with enhanced empathy, is less likely to occur with ASC [autism spectrum disorder] or elevated autistic traits, and is specific to seeing a person being touched.”

Simon Baron-Cohen deserves no more of our time. I turn to his work here only because it is prevalent in the field and therefore affects both the literature on autism and on synaesthesia. To address the nonsensical claims he makes, and then to move away from him, it is necessary to underscore the following: 1) all models of relation that begin with a preconstituted body-schema and make human interaction the only marker for empathy are deeply erroneous. These are models of interaction, not relation.¹⁹ 2) empathy is a humanist construct that privileges a human-centred account of importance that is always organized around preexisting norms. These norms are based on neurotypicality, which also means whiteness, male-centredness, gender normativity and able-bodiedness. 3) synaesthesia is never going to be a condition that can be adequately studied with an experimental method that begins with a neurotypical body schema. This is the case not only because the quantifications of sense that are the results of such studies are only the tip of the iceberg, but because all sensation occurs in complex overlaps. Sensing is not limited to sense-presentation. All sensing is amodal and amodal sensation can only be mapped, if it can be mapped, topologically. To address synaesthesia, new modes of expression will continuously have to be invented. With them will come new modes of knowing. 5) autism tends to express itself not as a lack of feeling as Baron-Cohen argues, but as an overfeeling, as a feeling-with-the-world of such intensity that it is difficult to parse into the quotient scientists like Baron-Cohen use to measure humanity. I have defined this tendency of suprasensation or overfeeling as autistic perception, emphasizing that it exists on a continuum of neurodiversity but expresses itself most intensely in classical autism. As I have argued elsewhere, this intensity of feeling is relational to the core.²⁰ It is alive with the more-than. We all stand to learn a lot from a modality of feeling that is so ecstatically more-than human.²¹

¹⁹ For an important account of the difference between interaction and relation, see Brian Massumi “The Thinking-Feeling of What Happens,” in *Inflexions: A Journal for Research-Creation* (Issue 1, May 2008). http://inflexions.org/n1_The-Thinking-Feeling-of-What-Happens-by-Brian-Massumi.pdf

²⁰ For more on autistic perception see Erin Manning *Always More Than One: Individuation's Dance* (2013). For more on neurotypicality as a template for existence, see Erin Manning *The Minor Gesture* (Duke UP, 2016).

²¹ For an important intervention on these issues, see Dani Alexis Ryskamp's multivalent contribution, including novels - *The Neuroqueer Handbook* (AutPress), *Spoon Knife 2: Test Chamber* (NeuroQueer Books, 2017) and *Monstrosity and Disability* (Palgrave, 2018). <https://danialexis.net/about/>

Synaesthesia, as I mentioned above, exceeds the limit-condition described through cases like that of Daniel Tammet. While those who deploy complex mnemonic devices certainly exist, they are not the majority: there remains a strain in the literature that prefers to focus less on synaesthesia as a limit-condition than as a continuum of perception, suggesting that all babies are synaesthetic and that this capacity is lost over a lifetime of being forced to parse experience and un-feel its complexity.²² If it is indeed so it follows that everyone is synaesthetic, at least in potentia. All sensation carries with it the overlap of other sensory tendencies. I say this not following a neuroscientific study, but speaking from my own experience and the work I have done, over the last several years, as an artist exploring colour-smell synaesthesia.



The Smell of Red. Erin Manning 2004 (ongoing)

In the work above, *The Smell of Red* (2014), the white silk was dyed by participants using a selection of 18 spices from the Americas, all of which create shades of red when diluted in water. Through the dyeing process, different shades of red stained the fabric, but even stronger than the colour differential was the range of smell from the softest peppers to the spiciest, from a bitter smell of red to a warming one. For non-

²² <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/infant-kandinskys/> - “Infants who were two and three months old showed significant shape-color associations. By eight months the preference was no longer pronounced, and in adults it was gone altogether.”; <https://aeon.co/essays/are-we-all-born-with-a-talent-for-synaesthesia> - “But now it turns out that synaesthetes might not belong to a club as exclusive as once thought. Their rich palette and vivid sensations might be accessible to us all. Even though not kin to Nabokov, we too could be reading our books in aquarelle. The under-examined complexities of ordinary perception, some neuroscientists and developmental psychologists contend, suggest that, like the Nabokovs, we all inhabit the synaesthetic spectrum – we just need to look back in time, to when we were infants with developing brains.” See also Daphne Maurer and Catherine J. Mondloch “Neonatal Synesthesia: A Reevaluation” in http://wyblelab.com/docs/jc/Maurer_NeonatalSynesthesia.pdf

synaesthetes, this does not cause much of a problem as they see the colour as separate from the smell, registering the two in juxtaposition. For synaesthetes, however, the complexity of overlapping smells on a relatively stable continuum of colour has a strange effect, troubling both existing synaesthetic associations between smell and colour and creating new and sometimes uneasy-making compositions. This dissonance is not necessarily uncomfortable, but it is unnerving. This experimentation has continued over several installations, including another version of *The Smell of Red* (Erin Manning, Nathaniel Stern, 2014, 2015) and *The Colour of Time* (Erin Manning 2017), all part of a larger project entitled *The Slow Colour Project*. The aim of *The Slow Colour Project* is to touch the synaesthetic potential in experience, creating the conditions for a sensing that gives dissonance its place in experience, bringing to the fore the unparsable limits of the sensible.

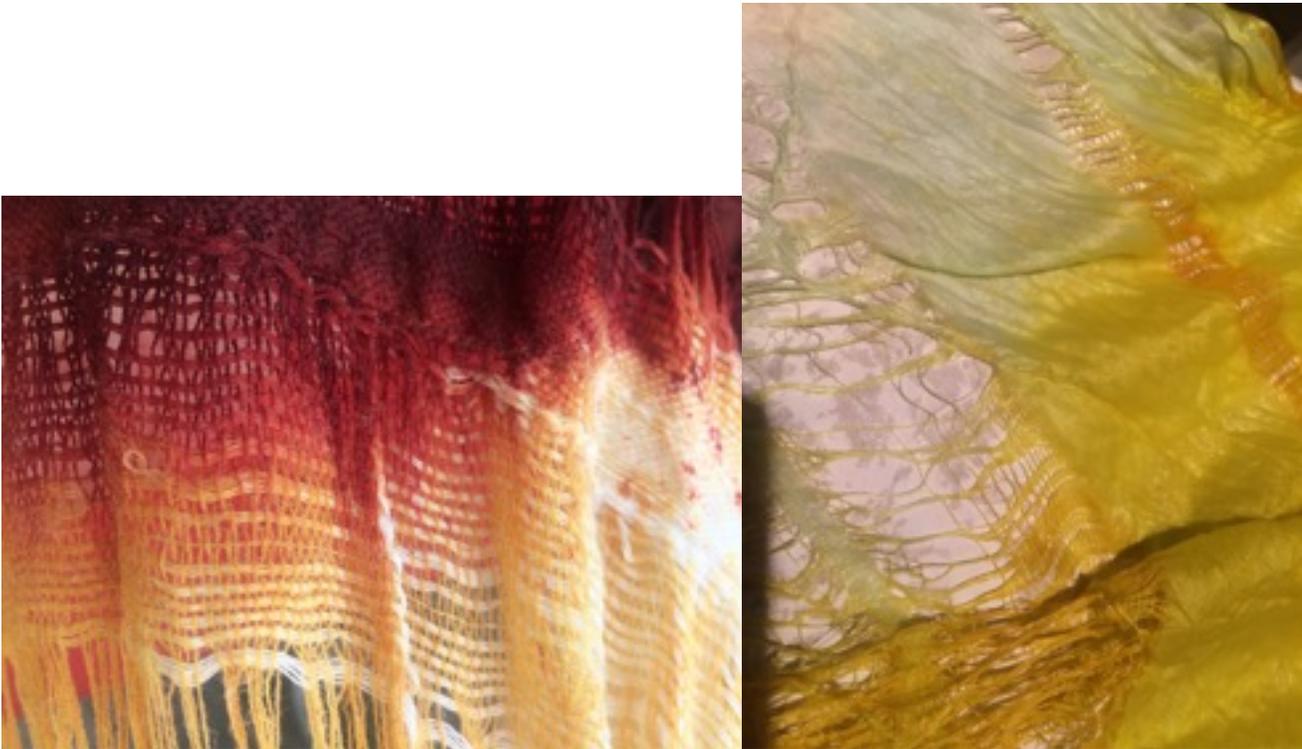


The Smell of Red, Erin Manning and Nathaniel Stern (Vancouver Art Gallery 2015)

In the second version of *The Smell of Red* (above), 50KG of cinnamon was mixed with sand in a large sandbox. On one end of the sandbox, 10KG of paprika was mixed in, and on the other, 10KG of cocoa. While for the most part the paprika and the cocoa were not visible to the participants (especially after participants moved through the space and used the hand-made broom to create pathways in the style of a Japanese

Garden), the quality of the smell was quite different on the far ends of the piece, the paprika side spicier, and the cocoa side warmer. The colour also tended toward red on the paprika side moving toward brown on the cocoa side. But in this case it wasn't the colour of the spice that moved the notion of "the smell of red" but the smell itself. How would the sharpness of cinnamon smell? Would it smell red?

To emphasize duration in the synaesthetic experience and facilitate different rhythms, we built three tornado machines and installed them in the space. Each of these tornado machines created a slightly different funnel of water vapour based on the strength and the speed of the fans that powered it. Should participants move quickly through the space, they would not experience the funnels. As we had hoped, the presence/absence of the funnels tended to modulate participants' movements in the environment, encouraging them to spend more time in the space, and by extension, with the smell. Again, those who were not synaesthetic might not experience the extreme sensation of the complexity of the overlapping colours (how could three smells produce one colour? Or if so, what kind of red would that be?), but they might touch on the experience by being immersed in smell and colour. What other synaesthetes experienced I can't say, except to admit that I had to leave the room several times because I was sensorally overwhelmed, the smell of red following me into the courtyard.



The Colour of Time, Erin Manning, Art-Rue Tunis 2017 [add picture]

The *Colour of Time* (2017) continues this proposition, this time exploring the range of colour produced by dyeing hand-woven silk and cotton with turmeric. In this piece, I work with the unravelling of fabric, exploring the time of the weave itself. After months of pulling apart the hand-woven fabric, I sew a portion of the thread back in, giving the fabric a new spine, and with it, a new sense of duration. Duration, as mentioned above, is key to sensation, and I am particularly interested in how it can be felt. For the installation, the three large un- and rewoven fabric pieces hang from the ceiling, their threads touching the floor, which is covered with 50KG of turmeric. Where the threads hang in the bright yellow turmeric, the turmeric is mixed with natural mordants – soda ash in one case, citric acid in the other and copper dioxide in the third. By themselves, the mordants have no effect on the colour of the turmeric, and they add no smell. But in contact with the wettened fabric, which is kept wet for the duration of the installation, the threads begin to take on the colour of the turmeric mixed with the mordants, the dye slowly climbing the thread. The combination of spice and mordant creates an extraordinary range of colour, as seen above, from a deep red to a golden green with all the shades of yellow in between.

In each of these cases, I am touching on my own experience of synaesthesia, which tends toward colour-smell and colour-language. My synaesthesia has no perceptible

mnemonic attributes, though it may facilitate language acquisition somewhat (words have a taste, and sometimes a colour, which can make it easier for them to inhabit me even if I don't quite understand them, as is the case with becoming acquainted with a new language. This also seems to be the case with sign language, and movement more broadly). This experience of synaesthesia is only something I became aware of in the last decade. Until then, I simply assumed everyone sensed the way I did. I mention this to underscore the complexity of sense. How many folks sense beyond the neurotypical sensory schema but wouldn't inquire about it because they know no different?

This matters only to the extent that we continue to embrace the deficit model and build our account of the world based on a platform of sensation that is itself deficient. This is what Baron-Cohen does in his continued unethical attack on autistics. And this is what happens every day in classrooms where knowing is organized according to normative understandings of body schema and sensation. Bodies know *with* the world. To assume otherwise and to build our edifices of knowledge using regressive and normative models is to willfully sideline those from whom we have most to learn.

Feeling-with the world might be the best definition of synaesthesia. To feel-with is to be incapable of drawing firm boundaries between sensation, experience and world. Bodies don't lose their limits (as "loss of sense of agency" would suggest), they continuously trouble the edgings into experience of both, making apparent that there never was a firm boundary that separated body and world.

These are the assumptions that come with neurotypicality: that a body is an enclosure; that the world is at arm's length from the body; that certain bodies have more value than others (white bodies, able bodies); that there is a baseline of sensation that is "normal"; that there are five senses that can be delineated from one another; that life without any of those senses is a truncated life.

These presuppositions can be found in the vast majority of neuroscientific studies I have read on synaesthesia.²³ None of the participants are ever Deaf or DeafBlind, and if they are autistic or otherwise neurodiverse²⁴ they are only chosen to corroborate certain presuppositions about their divergence from the norm, as is the case with Baron-Cohen's studies using autistics. In the cases where "non-normative" bodies are used, there is no accounting for their difference in the experiments except as deficit. For

²³ A notable exception is Laurent Mottron, whose team includes autistic Michelle Dawson. See, for instance, "Enhanced Perceptual Functioning in Autism: An Update and Eight Principles of Autistic Perception" in *J Autism Dev Discord* 2006 Jan 36 (1) 27-43. And "Veridical Mapping in the Development of Exceptional Autistic Abilities" in *Neuroscience & Biobehavioral Reviews*

Volume 37, Issue 2, February 2013, Pages 209-228. Refusing the deficit model, they write: "We can hypothesize that an enhanced performance in domain-general peaks will not be observed if tasks are standardized on autistic performance. As a consequence, the extent of the size of any peak of ability is at least partly a function of the matching strategy used to compare the performance of autistics and that of non-autistics. If certain language-based instruments are used, autistics' intelligence risks being underestimated, thus their scores on areas of strength will be similar to those of TD persons with higher IQs on the same instrument. In contrast, the finding of superior performance of autistics may lose its statistical significance when tests which minimize mandatory language demands are used, as autistics will typically score higher and will, therefore, be matched to TD persons at a higher level (for a discussion of matching issues in the study of autistics, see [Burack et al., 2004](#)). Thus, some, but not all (e.g., pitch discrimination, [Simard-Meilleur et al., 2012](#)) domain-general peaks of ability may be favored or magnified by matching strategies. However, our focus in this paper is on the types of superior performance that are so robust that they transcend matching strategies, and on how these performances, in as much as they are found only among some autistics, contribute to within-group autistic heterogeneity." For a generate rethinking of neuroscientific paradigms and autism, see Ralph Savarese "Toward a Postcolonial Neurology: Autism, Tito Mukhopadhyay, and a New Geo-poetics of the Body" in *Journal of Literary and Cultural Disability Studies*. Vol 4, Issue 3, 2010.

²⁴ On his important blog, Neurocosmopolitanism, Nick Walker provides a series of basic terms and definitions for the neurodiversity movement. Amongst these is the suggestion that, when used as an adjective or an adverb, the proper term should be neurodivergent or neurodivergence (ie, she is neurodivergent). Walker provides strong reasoning for this view, including the ungrammatical nature of using neurodiverse as an adjective. He writes: "Neurodiversity is not a trait that an individual possesses. Diversity is a trait possessed by a group, not an individual. When an individual diverges from the dominant societal standards of 'normal' neurocognitive functioning, they don't 'have neurodiversity,' they're neurodivergent." (<http://neurocosmopolitanism.com/neurodiversity-some-basic-terms-definitions/>) The reason I continue to use the grammatically-strange "neurodiverse" is not in any way due to a lack of respect for terms autistics choose to define themselves. What I want to underline with the use of neurodiverse is that neurodiversity is a mode of existence that is more than the converse of neurotypicality. I am interested in mapping diversity from diversity. As I wrote in a lively conversation with Nick Walker, "I like the weirdness of "neurodiverse." I like that it doesn't quite work, that it forces us to invent a new way of engaging with language. I like that it doesn't yet know what it is diverse **from**, that it takes diversity as the starting point (rather than taking the neurotypical as the starting point from which we are divergent). I don't think there are people who are neurotypical. I think neurotypicality is a short-hand for a form of very dangerous exclusion that works at the level of knowledge (and intelligence as it is understood in that paradigm) as well as more obvious physical difference. If I am working (with SenseLab) to build an alternative to the university as we know it (the 3 Ecologies Institute), it is because I have taken very seriously how (neurotypical) knowledge systems organize bodies in ways that always position them in relation to the norm. Having that perspective I would need to be as fearful of grammar, which is a tool of neurotypicality. This is very important to me and is feeding my recent work on the bridges to be drawn between neurodiversity and black life, work spurred by Fred Moten's comment to me that "black life has always been neurodiverse life." Following Sylvia Wynter's important work, I am continuing my work as regards asking who gets to be part of the category of the human, and as you can no doubt surmise, that doesn't include neurodiversity. [...] I want to underscore that I am not trying to lose the distinction between different diversities, but I am saying that for me, divergent is divergent-from (divergent from the neurotypical), while diverse swims in a much more amorphous sea." In response, Nick Walker wondered whether we didn't need another term, and suggested polymorphous. I think terms always need to be proliferated, and, as I mention further in the text, neurodiverse is still too neuro-centric for all it attempts to mobilize in my work. That said, a strong battle against neurotypicality needs to be waged, and for that the concept of the neurodiverse is important.

instance, eye tests are used to measure empathy even though it is abundantly clear that for many of the most sensorially sensitive folks – autistics – eye contact is so overwhelming as to block out any other processing capacities. This is also the case with the use of the profoundly humanist Empathy Quotient, a measure for empathy developed by Simon Baron-Cohen and Sally Wheelwright that presupposes that empathy is measurable according to a singling out and recognition of human emotion above all else. Empathy, for Baron-Cohen and Wheelwright, is “a combination of the ability to feel an appropriate emotion in response to another’s emotion and the ability to understand the other’s emotion.”²⁵ All of this is of course associated with theory of mind, defined by Baron-Cohen, as “the ability to attribute mental states – beliefs, intents, desires, pretending, knowledge etc. – to oneself and others and to understand that others have beliefs, desires, intentions, and perspectives that are different from one’s own.”²⁶

Many autistics have written important pieces on the consequences of this approach, amongst them Melanie Yergeau in her recent book *Authoring Autism* (2017), DJ Savarese in *Passive Plants* (2017) and Tito Mukhopadhyay in *The Mind Tree* (2007). What I would like to foreground here is the dangerous lack of complexity at the heart of this definition of empathy. The problem is not with autistics, but with an edifice that produces and circulates knowledge based on exclusion and marked poverty of the imagination.

First, a poem from DeafBlind poet John Lee Clark, entitled *Clamor*.

All things living and dead cry out to me
 when I touch them. The dog, gasping for air,
 is drowning in ecstasy, its neck shouting
 Dig in, dig in. Slam me, slam me,
 demands one door while another asks to remain
 open. My wife again asks me

²⁵ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Empathy_quotient. Visited 20 August 2017. Note also that the Empathy Quotient suggests that connection to humans over animals is a sign of empathy. As with Theory of Mind, Baron-Cohen seems incapable to imagine the force of relation outside of a Humanist paradigm. <https://psychology-tools.com/empathy-quotient/>

²⁶ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theory_of_mind. For more on autism and theory of mind, see Melanie Yergeau. *Authoring Autism: On Rhetoric and Neurological Queerness* (Duke UP, 2017). I have also written about it in “The Ethics of Language in the making,” in *Always More Than One: Individuation’s Dance* (Duke UP, 2013) and in “Coming Alive in a World of Texture,” in Erin Manning and Brian Massumi, *Thought in the Act: Passages in the Ecology of Experience* (Minnesota UP, 2014). For a nuanced account of empathy reading neuroscientific studies in relation to a project of reading with autistics, see also Ralph Savarese, *See It Feelingly: Classic Novels, Autistic Readers and the Schooling of a No-Good English Professor* (Duke UP, 2018).

how did I know just where and how
to caress her. I can be too eager to listen:
The scar here on my thumb is a gift
from a cracked bowl that begged to be broken.²⁷

Baron-Cohen's study on autism and mirror-touch synaesthesia revealed to him that "individuals with MT [motor-touch synaesthesia] have a *reduced* aptitude for social situations" (emphasis in the original).²⁸ Working with the assumption (and supporting that assumption) that a large percentage of autistics are also synaesthetes, what he aimed to show was that those studied could not adequately pass the *Empathy Quotient*, nor could they adequately pass *The Karolinska Directed Emotional Faces* test. Autistics failed to demonstrate their empathy when asked to connect to faces and pre-constituted situations limited to a normative set of distinctions framed by a neurotypical approach to experience.

This won't be a surprise to any synaesthete. And it won't be a surprise to John Lee Clark either, who, to my knowledge, has never been tested for synesthesia. How could he be, when the neurotypical assumption around the sensing body would automatically discount a DeafBlind person from mirror-touch synaesthesia, or any other kind. What would there be to measure? Indeed, the neurotypical view of DeafBlindness suggests that there really is no life to be experienced without the senses of vision and hearing: "The loss of both sight and hearing constitutes one of the severest disabilities known to human beings. Essentially, it deprives an individual of the two primary senses through which we acquire awareness of and information about the world around us, and it

²⁷ <http://www.wordgathering.com/issue36/essays/clark.html>

²⁸ <http://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0160543>

drastically limits effective communication and freedom of movement, which are necessary for full and active participation in society.”²⁹

And yet. What about the synaesthesia so clearly felt in these lines? What of the strength of feeling-felt?

All things living and dead cry out to me
when I touch them. The dog, gasping for air,
is drowning in ecstasy, its neck shouting
Dig in, dig in. Slam me, slam me,
demands one door while another asks to remain
open. My wife again asks me
how did I know just where and how
to caress her. I can be too eager to listen:
The scar here on my thumb is a gift
from a cracked bowl that begged to be broken.

These words of Clark’s are reminiscent of autistic Tito Mukhopadhyay’s account of the mining tragedy in Raleigh County, West Virginia in 2010. Mukhopadhyay writes:

It’s true that when I think of the situation, there may be empathy. But my empathy would probably be towards the flashlight batteries of those trapped coal miners if there happens to be a selection on my part. Or my empathy would perhaps be toward the trapped air around those coal miners. There would be me watching through the eyes of the flashlight cell the utter hopelessness of those unfortunate miners as my last chemicals struggled to glow the faint bulb so that I didn’t leave them dying in darkness. As the air around them, I would try to find a way to let myself squeeze every bit of oxygen I have to allow the doomed to breathe, for I

²⁹ John Lee Clark “Distantism” <https://johnleeclark.tumblr.com> Visited 20 August 2017.

Clark writes: “The final irony is that a DeafBlind man, the late Robert J. Smithdas, wrote these words. Many hearing and sighted people have expressed the same sentiments, but distantism is so pervasive that we all have internalized it. Helen Keller spoke of us as being imprisoned in the ‘double dungeon of darkness and silence’ and that we are ‘the loneliest people on Earth.’ She was being fanciful, but what is true is that the marginalization we experience is too often literal, involving physical margins.

Think about it. Billions of people on this planet, and all of them agreeing that hearing and vision are required for leading full, normal lives. Billions of people of one mind that being DeafBlind must be an unendurable fate. Billions of dollars poured into the hope of medical cures. Distantism, that old serpent, held the whole world in its remote-control spell.

And then our sisters from Seattle had the audacity to say that there’s a DeafBlind way. To say that hearing and vision are not necessary. To say that the only cure we need is each other. Can you feel the world shaking as it starts to, finally, come together?”

am responsible for their doom. And while I found myself trapped, I would smell the burning rice being cooked with neglect in an earthen pot.³⁰

For Clark, the touch carries a proximity that is also felt in Mukhopadhyay, though in Mukhopadhyay's case, the strong sensorial feeling-with is carried across senses in ways that more clearly make apparent what Brian Massumi would call a relational, or virtual body, a body of "pure variability" activated in the sensing. (2017 : 201-202) With Clark, the same force of relation is felt, but to register, the actual proximity of touch is added to the mix. That said, there is also in Clark's poem the sense of the activation of an emergent relation, a feeling-with that exceeds the actuality of the hands-on of touch. As with Mukhopadhyay, there is a sense of a more-than that accompanies the actual body, composing with the sensation that moves through that body.

A touch is here foregrounded, I want to suggest, that is synaesthetic, felt-across and with. Synaesthetic because it carries the more-than of sense. If synaesthesia is the making-felt of experience as emergent across a field of relation that is itself infrasensing, and what is activated in both Clark and Mukhopadhyay's words is the feeling-with of experience itself, these are synaesthetic experiences. This may be no surprise in relation to Mukhopadhyay, who has written extensively about his synaesthesia.³¹ But it might be a surprise to consider that someone who can neither see nor hear sees-hears with the world's touching.

Listen again: "All things living and dead cry out to me / when I touch them," writes Clark. A hearing in a touch. "My wife again asks me / how did I know just where and how / to caress her." A seeing in a touch. And even more than that. A feeling toward a seeing-hearing touch, a knowing with the world in the relation. A virtual body felt and activated. In Massumi's words: "Every 'single' sense experience is the envelopment in a dominant mode of appearance of an 'infinitesimal' (virtual) continuation of other-sense experiences. Every perception is a composition of the full spectrum of experience, 'practically' appearing as if it were disparate and disconnected from the continuum" (2017: 195). Synaesthesia is this experience intensified.

³⁰ "More Than a Thing to Ignore: An Interview with Tito Mukhopadhyay by Ralph James Savarese" in *Disability Studies Quarterly*, Vol 30, No 1. "Autism and the Concept of Neurodiversity," Ed. Emily Thornton Savarese and Ralph James Savarese <http://dsq-sds.org/article/view/1056>

³¹ See Tito Mukhopadhyay *How Can I Talk If My Lips Don't Move: Inside My Autistic Mind* (Arcade Publishing, 2011). There are several passages in this book that expand on Mukhopadhyay's synaesthesia, including the description of a woman's voice "that tasted like a tamarind pickle" (110) and a man's voice that "transformed into a long apple green with yellow strings" (200).

In “The Art of the Relational Body: From Mirror-Touch to the Virtual Body,” Massumi writes: “Synaesthetes do not add a deviation from the normal path of development. They just prune the same developmental path less fully” (2017: 194). To understand this process philosophical approach to sensation, it is necessary to begin with the fullness of experience and to see modes of narrowing or subtraction – such as consciousness – for what they are. Consciousness, as Alfred North Whitehead states, is the “acme of emphasis.” (1967: 182). It is the reduction from the welter of potential of what can be named, organized, categorised. But it never comes completely denuded. With all consciousness comes the tremor of what evades it, of what exceeds it. This is what I call the more-than. Synaesthesia is the more-than of sense, which is already always in excess of what can be quantified experimentally or otherwise.

The feeling-with of the world is never experienced consciously in all of its fullness. A certain parsing – or pruning, in Massumi’s terms – is always necessary in order to subtract from the welter and distinguish one sensation or perception from another. This is not detrimental to experience: experience grows from the cuts that propel it in new directions. To parse is absolutely necessary. The question is, as Massumi also asks, what kind of parsing is at stake? And under what conditions? Massumi speaks in this context of “artful perception.” “If a perception is a composition, there is an artfulness to it” (2017: 196). When Mukhopadhyay writes “I may select a fraction of the environment – say, ‘that shadow of a chair’ or ‘that door hinge over there’ – and grow my opinions and ideas around it” he is creating artful conditions for perceptual experience. The artful here suggests not that Mukhopadhyay makes an artwork of perception, but that he composes with the wealth of potential in perception as he experiences it in order to extract its most lively expression. This is artfulness: the effects created through a moving-with of experience that alters the conditions of existence. Mukhopadhyay explains: “This creates a defense system for my over-stimulated visual sense organ. Maybe poetry happens to grow around these things.” By finding artful modes of subtraction, he creates the conditions for expression, which in his case, means poetic writing. How might non-synaesthetes parse more artfully?

In Clark’s *Clamor*, we also hear artfulness. “I can be too eager to listen: The scar here on my thumb is a gift from a cracked bowl that begged to be broken.” A feeling-with the world is everywhere present, not as a frustration, but as a gift that brings to expression new ways of knowing. Cracked bowls feel their way into the urgency of a touch.

The touching evoked here is of two tonalities. It is both the touching of the hands-on feeling of the world, and the incipient touch the world calls forth. It is both the being in the world of feeling, and the feeling-with of the world emerging. In Mukhopadhyay we hear this through the personification of the oxygen, a personification which is not a making-human of the oxygen, but a more-than-human becoming-oxygen. What is heard here is the molecules struggling to counter their disappearance, the effects of this disappearance on the environment, and on those who most need it, the humans. All at once, each level of experience overlaps, the incipency of one affecting the coming-into-actualization of the other. If mirror-touch synaesthesia, or sight-touch synaesthesia is about feeling-with, these are two examples of it, it seems to me, neither of which directly require either touch or vision.

Why call it mirror-touch synaesthesia, then? With Brian Massumi, I would agree that the nomenclature is deeply misleading. Building on research on mirror neurons – neurons that fire when an action is observed –³² the problem with mirror-touch synaesthesia is that it seems incapable of imagining a world that begins with a feeling-with, a world that begins in the relational middle, in the virtual body. As such, it carries the same implied bias of much work on mirror neurons, “that our perception is fundamentally a passive reception of an image constituting a private representation of the world, which, under normal conditions, is then cognitively corrected to purify it of illusions of perspective and other unthinking errors” (Massumi 2017: 192). In addition, the assumption that we ever perceive along single sensory routes is deeply erroneous:

What normally pass for mono-sense experiences are, in fact, cross-modal fusions presented in a dominant sense. For example, to see the shape and texture of the object is to perceive, in vision, its potential feel in the hand. To feel that potential touch is to see the potential kinaesthetic experience of walking towards the object. [...] It is well known that object vision cannot develop without movement. [...] Every ‘single’ sense experience is the envelopment in a dominant mode of appearance of an ‘infinitesimal’ (virtual) continuation of other-sense experiences. Every perception is a composition of the full spectrum of experience, ‘practically’ appearing as if it were disparate and disconnected from the continuum (2017: 194).

³² A more complete definition is as follows: “A mirror neuron is an neuron that fires both when an animal acts and when the animal observes the same action performed by another. Thus, the neuron ‘mirrors’ the behaviour of the other, as though the observer were itself acting” https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mirror_neuron Visited August 21 2017.

Senses are felt on a continuum in an amodal register. The world is felt across registers of sensation that bathe our bodies in complexity, a co-composition of world-bodilying that changes the environment and the bodies composed by it at every turn.

John Lee Clark proposes the concept of distantism to counter the tendencies at the heart of these assumptions. Distantism, defined by Clark as the tendency to privilege mediation over direct perception, is what allows the neurotypical worldview to dominate, what allows the body to be parsed from its environment, and what enables a worldview that DeafBlind experience – to speak of just one discounted form of experience – is no experience at all. Whether we are speaking of the necessity to frame our academic knowledge based on objective data, or whether as DeafBlind people our engagement with the world is considered by others to be impossible without the mediation of a sighted intervenor, or whether we are expected to diminish our experience of the world as autistics by limiting our sensory experiences in order to “pass,” or whether our black, brown or indigenous bodies are expected to be less threatening by moving to rhythms (including rhythms of thought) neurotypical (and the list goes on), we are engaging in distantism.

For Clark, distantism promotes the impossibility of a DeafBlind feeling-with the world. In this limit-case of distantism, a lived experience of feeling-felt is denied. Clark writes: “Researching our community’s history, I see that we have always been tactile. But hearing and sighted people have always attempted to keep our tactilehoods in check. We’ve always been denied access to some of the most basic human rights. What should we call this force of suppression? I propose to call it distantism.”³³

There is no distantism in the relational body. That is to say, distantism is not a quality of bodilying: bodilying is never parsable from the world with which is co-composes. “If one brings one’s perception to the edge of release and inhabits the resurgent complexity, has one acted upon experience—or released oneself to be acted upon by it?” (Massumi 2017: 196). Perception on the edge is always already with the world in its unfolding. This witness, as mentioned above, can never be articulated in its fullness, but the feeling of it remains with us nonetheless. It is this feeling that moves in the lines of Clark and Mukhopadhyay’s poetry, in the rhythm of the more-than-saying their feeling-with makes felt. Distantism is not how we perceive, it is how perception is imposed on us. It is how it is framed by Empathy Quotient tests. It is how it is made intelligible by baseline beliefs about the homogeneity of experience

³³ <https://johnleeclark.tumblr.com>

neurotypically parsed.

This has spacetime effects. In his piece “My Dream House: Some Thoughts on a DeafBlind Space,” Clark writes:

Now I’m going to discuss something very particular and perhaps difficult for non-DeafBlind people to fully grasp, so bear with me as I try to explain it. You know the saying “Out of sight, out of mind”? Well, for DeafBlind people everything that’s out of sight remains in the mind’s eye. We can relate to what Gaugin once said: “I shut my eyes in order to see.” This is why DeafBlind vision is often better than eyesight—we know where everything is and see them through walls, through doors, through drawer doors, through anything in front or under or below them. They aren’t hidden. The bad news is that we also see, or imagine that we see, everything that’s behind the walls, under the fridge, inside the gap between the floor and the bottom of the cabinet under the sink.³⁴

DeafBlind vision is topological. It is not restrained to the imposition of Cartesian perspective. Perception moves with the world, creating a lively image of its composition and altering that image, while retaining its complexity, through coming into contact with it. This account of DeafBlind spacetime is analogous to the account of the body-world continuum being put forward here. Bodies are not limited to their envelopes – they are extensive, moving-with the world in its transformation. Think of how the oxygen moves in Mukhopadhyay’s account. There too, space is topological. To move with the world is to have bodied, and to have bodied is to have worlded. The world grows in the bodying.³⁵

Qualities of experience overlap. There is no distance. Everything has an effect. Everything makes a difference. A body is this quality of multisense overlap in incipient contact with an infinity of sense potentials. These sense potentials are not located in a discrete sense, or in an object. They cannot be distilled to an ear or an eye, and cannot be located in a table or a marigold. They are always between, amodal, operating as thresholds of sensation that carry intensities themselves carried in the feeling. Following Lucy Blackman, and her emphasis on the verb carrying as a way of reminding ourselves that everything is always in movement, we might speak of

³⁴ <http://visionlossresources.org/blog/dbsm/my-dream-house-some-thoughts-on-a-deafblind-space>

³⁵ For a very interesting account of Deaf space with a particular focus on the dorsal, see Robert Sirvage’s TEDx talk at Gallaudet entitled “An Insight from DeafSpace” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EPTrOO6EYCY>. In this video presentation, he described the relational movement of signing Deaf couples walking together to demonstrate that their communication includes an attention to the incipient movement all around them. This is more than simple protection (watching someone’s space and making sure they are safe). This is included in the communication itself. It is at the heart of the ethos of Deaf communication.

feelings carrying the edge of consciousness, feelings not fully subtracted, not fully known-as-such, but nonetheless active and transformative, their effects lively the bodying recomposed in the relation.

Massumi writes: “A determinate experiential form origami into relief when an actual movement cuts its patterning and orientation into the vibratory intensity of the virtual body, drawing out a determinate stand-out expression of the potential it enfolds” (2017: 201). The virtual body is the topological shape feeling takes when it moves with the world. “The closest geometrical approximation to the hyperorder of the virtual body is not the extensive grid defined by the Cartesian coordinates. It is topological. Topology is the geometry of continuous deformation” (Massumi 2017: 202).

Bodying, always topological, is regularly projected onto Cartesian coordinates, the Cartesian coordinates in turn back-gridded onto it. If it weren't, Clark wouldn't need a Dream House and it wouldn't be necessary to continuously emphasize how the body is not limited to the form it most visibly takes. To give the body the shape of an outline is to impose distantism on the body. Having done that, the further imposition of Cartesian coordinates on the geometries in which we live and move is an easy second operation. If we are a limited spacetime, a bounded envelope, if we are already coordinated by a template that organizes us, why wouldn't we create architectures that support that very kind of body schema? And in that architecture, in those worlds, wouldn't it make sense that we should restrict our sensing to the coordinates it privileges? Of course, no architecture is fully capable of organising a body, but as Clark emphasizes, when you are DeafBlind, it can come close to negotiating for you the measure of your movement experience.

Clark's Dream House and Mukhopadhyay's account of the near-oxygenless mine remind us that the only people who take Cartesian coordinates and neurotypical limitations for granted are those who most easily fit in the category where the senses are nicely pruned and existence is organized according to preimposed restrictions. I am not saying that DeafBlind folks are neurodiverse in the sense of neurologically divergent. Some may well be, but I wouldn't want to generalize across a heterogeneous population. What I am saying is that their lived experience of topological spacetime and the effects it has on their bodying make them squarely non-neurotypical. It is time, perhaps, to think of another term that carries the force of the non-neurotypical without including the “neuro” as the marker of its difference. Because even autistics, who are most definitely neurodivergent, are diverse in an infinity of ways that expand from the

neurological. This is why I use the adjective neurodiverse – to remind us that we need a concept for a diversity within diversity that isn't measured by the standard of typicality. A diversity in diversity is one that senses fully and differentially, that lives and participates in a world still defining itself according to measures not yet in place. It includes populations historically excluded from the matrix of the human, neurodiverse life, DeafBlind life, black life, indigenous life, feminist life, trans life. It includes modes of life-living that exceed the human, that feel the more-than human world not as other but as with.

In the mid 2000s, a group of DeafBlind activists began to invent and share a mode of communication that would allow them to take back control of their own complex fields of sensation and to collectively invent new ones. The hope, as Clark articulates it, was to be able to move from a distantist engagement with touch to a metatactile one. He writes:

[A] response I often get when I interact with people [is] [h]ow did I know that their shoulder needed a massage, or that they were hungry or sad, or a spot on their arm was itchy? The owners of pets I meet are also amazed. Almost immediately I've found their pets' sweet spots. 'That's right! She loves that. But how did you know?' I wasn't conscious of it. It was natural. So natural, in fact, that I didn't have a name for it, this skill that goes beyond just feeling texture, heft, shape, and temperature. I'd like to call it metatactile knowledge."³⁶

This "skill that goes beyond just feeling texture, heft, shape, and temperature" sounds a lot like the feeling-with Mukhopadhyay describes as the feeling-being of oxygen in the miners' space.³⁷ The becoming-oxygen of the more-than-human is the way Mukhopadhyay enters into the touching of the environment. It is how he feels-with the texture, heft, shape and temperature of that singular ecology.

A modality that moves beyond but includes the hands-on gesture of touch, metatactile knowledge is the act of reaching-toward experience, allowing all co-composing bodily senses – including the kinaesthetic, the proprioceptive, the vestibular – to connect to the incipencies of a welling environment. Encouraging the welling environment to "grow around him," as Mukhopadhyay might say, enables the necessary parsing while facilitating the richest possible experience of sensation, or feeling-with. I say feeling-

³⁶ <https://johnleeclark.tumblr.com/post/130321809778/metatactile-knowledge>

³⁷ This is also a responsibility-before, a modality of touch I discussed more thoroughly in *Politics of Touch* (2007). Touch, in this way of living, is the emergent quality of the relation as it unfolds. This is different from a responsibility-for, which still suggests a hierarchy of interaction. I discuss this more at length in "Waltzing the Limit," in *Always More Than One* (2013).

with to foreground the Whiteheadian notion of feeling which also does its work without cognition and cannot be reduced to a human experience. “Consciousness presupposes experience, and not experience consciousness” (Whitehead 1978: 53). In a philosophy of pure feeling (as opposed to one of pure reason), the world is alive with feeling, and it is this feeling that moves through us, creating the lures that orient our experience.

When Clark speaks of the bowl asking to be touched he is resisting giving touch a primarily human inflection. To sense for him is to feel-with in the Whiteheadian manner, to be in experience, affected by it. This is metatactile sensing, to connect to the quality of an encounter as much as to the actual shape of the surface with which one comes into contact, to feel *with* the encounter, coming into contact with the complexity of relations the encounter calls forth.

Clark suggests that metatactile knowledge is a “protactile” mode of touch. The ProTactile movement celebrates the metatactile: it honours all kinds of tactility, including, I would hazard, the shaping of experience through the force of the relational, or virtual body. Foregrounding the importance for communication of a direct perception of relation, ProTactile encourages DeafBlind people and anyone who communicates with them to engage in continuous physical touch. This continued contact, they argue, allows them to finally become autonomous in their communication by being more attuned to the nuances of the nonlinguistic aspects of communication. Bringing out the full potential of TASL [Tactile American Sign Language], and allowing, as becomes necessary, for TASL to depart from the habits of VASL [Visual American Sign Language], which remains the mother tongue of many in the DeafBlind community, ProTactile is as much a linguistic as a cultural movement.³⁸ Claiming experience according to their own complex registers of sense, ProTactile teachers and

³⁸ With ProTactile, shifts have occurred with respect to “pointing to things in the environment, keeping track of conversations, describing things and events in terms of their size, shape, texture and positioning in space”. Roschaert writes: “I interned at the Seattle Lighthouse for the Blind in Seattle in 2005 and became fast friends with Granda, who introduced me to the yet-unnamed Pro-Tactile (PT) method. I was taken aback and confused when she would start touching my body more, but then I started to understand that they were ‘added’ social cues to inform me if her head was nodding (tapping on my lap or shoulder), her hand travelling down from my left to right shoulder (she was moving from my left side to my right side), and there was that ‘aha’ PT moment one night when we sat outside on the porch and I wondered the perennial question: how do we let Deafblind people know we were truly laughing? I hated the usual sign of “ha ha” in my hands when I tactiled with the person I was sharing my joke to. “ha ha” in my hand is akin to a hearing person bellowing out nothing but a fake laugh; a Deaf person slapping a hand on their lap and their expression shows they’re faking their jest. I experimented this PT move by placing aj’s hand on my throat and I laughed out loud, a true to heart Coco laugh and aj was shocked, still, then she tried it again. It was a true PT action, which included Deafblind in the ever-elusive world of pure joy <https://www.tactilecommunications.org/services-language-and-communication.html>.”

students emphasize that it's high time for the DeafBlind to be teaching the DeafBlind.³⁹ As Christine Roschaert describes it, ProTactile “broadens the spectrum of communication of the Deafblind outside of the standard Tactile with (American or any other international) Sign Language and several other manual methods.”⁴⁰

ProTactile does not limit itself to a set of preexisting coordinates. It is not a system of gestures or touches. It is not a grid that can be used generally across myriad situations: “we want to emphasize that PT is not a set list of symbols with associated meanings, like ‘touch signals,’” Nuccio, the founder of ProTactile explains. ProTactile is a linguistic-cultural paradigm, and an ethos. “ProTactile philosophy is not just about ‘accessing’ communication; it affects all areas of life, including DeafBlind culture, politics, empowerment and language.”⁴¹ Based on the strong belief, also prevalent in the Deaf community, that separating language and culture is an impossibility, ProTactile brings into action tendencies of listening and speaking that best address the singularity of DeafBlind experience. A mode of encounter grown from within the culture, ProTactile is a call for the DeafBlind community to reject distantism and embrace the incipency of feeling of a touch that reaches toward experience in the making.

Jelica Nuccio and AJ Granda describe the ethos of ProTactile this way: “The purpose of ProTactile philosophy is to support DeafBlind culture, language, interpersonal relationships, [and] politics.”⁴² While touch has always played an important role in DeafBlind culture, and much communication already moves through touch,⁴³ the modality of touch foregrounded through intervenors tends toward distantism: “We can see in the record how distantism set in, and how hearing and sighted people wanted things to look right. It didn’t look good when we went around ‘groping in the dark.’ It didn’t look good for us to cluster together and have too much fun. Education meant we

³⁹ John Lee Clark writes: “There are distantist modes of touch and there are protactile modes of touch. A distantist cannot truly teach or empower our children to live and learn as tactile people. Yet the field of education of DeafBlind children has never included us as teachers. Why is that?” <https://johnleeclark.tumblr.com> Visited August 22 2017.

⁴⁰ <https://tactiletheworld.wordpress.com/2013/02/18/pro-tactile-the-deafblind-way/>

⁴¹ Vlog #5 <http://www.protactile.org> Visited August 20, 2017

⁴² Vlog #5 <http://www.protactile.org> Visited August 20, 2017

⁴³ For an account of ProTactile from an ethnographic perspective, see Terra Edwards [https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4598582/Front Psychol. 2015; 6: 1497](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4598582/Front%20Psychol.%202015%206%201497). On Touch Signals, Haptic Communication and Back Back Channeling, see <https://nationaldb.org/library/page/2588>. See also <https://www.facebook.com/ntfdbi/posts/841440079290709>

had to sit behind a desk.”⁴⁴ With the intervenor, the practice is to create a communicational model that mediates touch. Touch is necessary, it is understood, but only at certain stages of the (mediated) encounter. “But when we go exploring or when we just exist, sighted and hearing people rush in to intervene. Can they help us? Please don’t touch. They will be happy to describe it to us. They will guide us. No, they will get it for us. It’s much easier that way. Hello! My name is Katie and I’m your Intervenor!”⁴⁵

For someone outside the DeafBlind community who cannot understand sign language, a proTactile video provides little to no information-as-content. I cannot understand the details of what is being said. What I can perceive, however, is the force of relation: bodies are actively listening and composing together. The conversation has a shape, and that shape feels dynamic. A vitality affect is felt in the watching. Communication has clearly taken on an emergent quality, activating the virtual body of sensation in the encounter.

Vitality affects, as described by Daniel Stern, are emergent attunements felt in the relation. Stern speaks of an overlap of movement, time, force, space and intention/directionality as being at the heart of all vitality affects, or what he also calls vitality “forms” (2010: 4). These five elements must not be seen to work in isolation. Together they form a Gestalt, and that Gestalt has affective tone. Describing vitality affects, Stern speaks of

the force, speed, and flow of a gesture; the timing and stress of a spoken phrase or even a word; the way one breaks into a smile or the time course of decomposing the smile; the manner of shifting position in a chair; the time course of lifting the eyebrows when interested and the duration of their lift; the shift and flight of a gaze; and the rush or tumble of thoughts. These are examples of the dynamic forms and dynamic experiences of everyday life. The scale is small, but that is where we live, and it makes up the matrix of experiencing other people and feeling their vitality (2010: 6).

Vitality affects are

the felt experience of force – in movement – with a temporal contour, and a sense of aliveness, of going somewhere. They do not belong to any particular content.

⁴⁴ John Lee Clark <https://johnleeclark.tumblr.com> Visited August 20, 2017

⁴⁵ John Lee Clark <https://johnleeclark.tumblr.com> Visited August 20, 2017

They are more form than content. They concern the "How," the manner, and the style, not the "What" or the "Why" (2010: 8).

ProTactile is a recognition that DeafBlind communication carries its own singular vitality affect, and that this needs to be valued. One aspect of this singularity is the emphasis on movement. Without sight and hearing to facilitate connection to the world, DeafBlind people have to connect more deeply to their kinesthetic and vestibular senses. They do this by doing what we all do: they move. In a description of ProTactile communication in process, Clark emphasizes the role movement plays. In *Where I Stand*, he writes:

As a DeafBlind person, standing for me is almost never about being still or in one place. Waiting for a bus, I would move without realizing it. My way of standing by moving around gives me more information about where I am. I'm taking in the scene, being present in the world, and prodding things a bit, exploring. And when two DeafBlind people talk to each other while standing, they always move around so that, after a while, they're standing where the other person was. Later on, they'd be back to their former positions, having circled around each other. This phenomenon is the result of each person shifting to the left to listen to the other person tactilely in a more comfortable way, hand following hand at a certain angle. I would always find myself emerging from an engrossing conversation standing in a different place.⁴⁶

Movement gives experience shape. Speaking about the primacy of movement in experience, Stern writes:

[D]ynamic changes [...] occur constantly. Our respirations rise and fall over a cycle that repeats every three or four seconds. Our bodies are in almost constant motion: we move our mouth, twitch, touch our face, make small adjustments in head position and orientation, alter our facial expression, shift the direction of our gaze, adjust the muscular tone of our body position, whether standing, sitting, or lying (if awake). These processes go on even when not visible from the outside. Gestures and larger acts unfold in time. They change fluidly once an act has started. We can be conscious of any of this, or it can remain in peripheral awareness. In addition, with every movement there is proprioception, conscious or not (2010: 9).

How to well the chaos? "How do we not implode into the intensity, lost in the infinite

⁴⁶ Clark, John Lee. *Where I Stand: On the Signing Community and My DeafBlind Experience*. Handtype Press. Kindle Edition. Loc 116-120.

virtual folds of potential experience?,” Massumi asks. His answer: “through movement. Every movement makes a cut—it brings certain elements of experience into relief, origamiing the continuum on the fly” (199). Movement is primary: it is through movement that incipient sensation catches the world’s tendencies and moves into them, altering them in the passage.

Making movement primary by itself shatters distantism, for distantism requires position. It requires pre-choreographed placeholders that have already been given value, that have already been signalled as worthy of attention. This is why distantism is so central to the template of neurotypicality: it allows the value of experience to be mapped in advance. And this is why neurodiverse experience is so threatening: because it makes felt what would otherwise remain backgrounded, and gives it value, thereby reinventing the very concept of value.⁴⁷ New ways of living proliferate, and with them come new ways of knowing.

Movement is everywhere in the literature on ProTactile, itself called a movement. For too long, DeafBlind communication tended to be watered down to the most atrophied of communicational models: third party interpretation. Not only was this slow, it lost the quality of the vitality affect of the communicational swarm in the stagnancy of the ordered back-and-forth. Little could be shared in the making. This mode of communication was closer to reporting than conversation. With ProTactile comes a liveliness in communication that allows the vitality affect of the conversation to be felt by all. This results in “a true sense of empowerment” (Granda).⁴⁸ As Nuccio says: “Deafhood⁴⁹ involves so many things – ASL, culture, who you are, your identity – that is exactly what PT is.”⁵⁰ This is not to say that facilitators are never necessary: “I am not saying that we don’t need sighted assistants. After all, we do live in a distantist society, and we should avail ourselves of distance-information readers. However, the way our SSP services are performed can be smothering. That’s why a key concern of

⁴⁷ For a more comprehensive account of value in a neurodiverse context, see “For a Pragmatics of the Useless, Or, The Value of the Infrathin,” in *Political Theory*. Vol 45, Issue 1. pp. 97-115/

⁴⁸ Vlog #5 www.protactile.org

⁴⁹ On the Deafhood foundation website, Deafhood is defined in the following way: Deafhood “is a way of gathering together and framing what we already know of Deaf culture, life, politics, etc. The framing process itself reveals ways in which we can move “beyond” present Deaf cultural limitations resulting from the colonialism of Sign Language Peoples (SLP).” The concept was developed by Paddy Ladd in 1993.

⁵⁰ Vlog #3 www.protactile.org

the Protactile movement is autonomy.”⁵¹ When intervenors become ProTactile, they shift from mediators to facilitators, facilitators here understood in the sense given to them by autistics such as Lucy Blackman,⁵² who emphasizes that communication is relational at its core. Facilitation is important in all life situations not to mediate experience but to co-compose techniques that move beyond the insistence, in our neoliberal economy, on individuality-above-all. Metatactility, after all, is a collective action, an aliveness with the world that acknowledges the interpenetrating registers of experience.

Metatactile modes of touching put the dynamic shape back into DeafBlind communication: they make the vitality of the exchange felt to all who participate. This shape is continuously composing itself, as is the in all communication. Reinventing what it might mean to communicate is key to this practice, and this includes communication with the more-than, engagement with what else the world carries, and what else a body-world relation can be.

There is much to learn from ProTactile’s engagement with touch as an ethos that troubles distantism.

The neurotypical template moves at the pace of distantism, opting for mediation at every turn. Working with a pre-existing matrix, it organizes, categorizes, prioritizes, grids, excludes. Justifying forms of knowledge acquisition, modes of self-presentation, moral categories, it shapes the contours of education. It also organizes the vocabulary of sensation, of perception, of experience. When Suzi Guimond writes – “the world of deaf-blindness is far from a dead one. The world is constantly full of vibrations and smells and changes in temperature and air pressure. Many people seem to believe that without ears and eyes, the world becomes unmoving and still, but this couldn't be farther from the truth” – she is speaking about a value-system predicated on a neurotypical understandings of sensation. She is underscoring the ways in which the categorizing of experience in advance through neurotypical codes limits our capacity to imagine experience beyond the spatiality of distantism. Organizing bodies by limiting the wealth of sensation fosters a systematic account of experience that supports the kind of classification that marks many of us as less-than human and keeps us from

⁵¹ John Lee Clark <https://johnleeclark.tumblr.com> Visited August 20, 2017

⁵² See Lucy Blackman *Carrying Autism, Feeling Language* (self-published, 2013). For my analysis of facilitation based on Blackman’s writings, see “Carrying the Feeling” in *The Minor Gesture* (Duke UP, 2016).

receiving (or inventing) the opportunities we need to thrive.⁵³

ProTactile *immediates* experience.⁵⁴ Moving-with experience in the making, the intervenor-as-mediator no longer has a role to play. Experience is lived, from the edges in. “The formative relation of co-implication in the same event is the changing ground of experience. If the virtual body can be said to represent anything, it is this relationality of the life of the body” (Massumi 2017: 204). ProTactile is a reaching-toward the world that makes felt how the world is already poised to meet the encounter, the relational body of communication alive with the force of the touch that will give it dynamic shape. For what occurs in the encounter of emergent communication can never be reduced to two enclosed, pre-constituted selves, one active, one passive. Nor is the encounter only human. Or only interactive. “Society is not companionship or friendly association with others; it's companionship or friendly association without others, in the absence of the other, in the exhaustion of relational individuality, in consent not to be a single being” (Moten 2016).⁵⁵ The consent not to be a single being, Glissant's resonant words, is a call to a synaesthesia that honours the more-than of sense that includes the force of metatactility and vibrates with worlds verging toward consciousness. Not distantist, but not proximist either. In the field of emergent sociality where relational bodies compose with the force of the incipency of a touching beyond touch, ProTactile proposes a reaching-toward that touches experience in the making.

⁵³ In “No Humans Involved, An Open Letter to my Colleagues,” Sylvia Wynter writes: “How did they come to conceive of what it means to be both *human* and *North American* in the *kinds of terms* (ie, to be White, of Euroamerican culture and decent, middle-class, college-educated and suburban) within whose logic, the jobless and usually school drop-out/push-out category of young Black males can be perceived, and *therefore behaved towards*, only as the Lack of the human, the Conceptual Other to being North American?” in *Knowledge on Trial*. Vol 1, No 1, 1994. Or read Alexander Weheliye's introduction to *Black Scholar* entitled “Black Studies and Black Life” (vol 44, 2014) in which he writes “Black life is that which must be constitutively abjected – and as such has represented the negative ontological ground for the Western order of things at least for the last five hundred years – but can never be included in the Western world order, especially in the category of Man. Phrased differently, there can be no black life in the territory of Western, humanist Man, which is why the existence of black liufe disenchant Western humanism” (2014: 5).

⁵⁴ For a sustained encounter with the concept of immediation, see *Immediation*. Ed. Erin Manning, Anna Munster, Bodil Marie Stavning Thomsen (Open Humanities Press, 2018).

⁵⁵ <https://organizemyourown.wordpress.com/2016/12/05/bobby-lees-hands-by-fred-moten/>

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