

# BIPEDAL DREAMS

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Art Sense(s) Lab

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*All creative activities involve movement and gesture.*

– Tim Ingold

*The agent of our mobility and freedom, the human foot is also a symbol of our destiny.*

– Ahmed Achrati

## **Questions:**

How to integrate the sense of Touch in an artistic experience?

How does contemporary art affect the body of the audience?

What problems are encountered in creating interactivity for art experience?

## Introduction

When I was around sixteen, my grandma came to live with us for while. She was needing assistance due to Parkinson's disease. She had cared for me and my brother so many times in our early years. This time, as a widow, it was our turn to take care of her. As my mother worked full time, in some hours after school or during holidays, I helped her with basic tasks such as going to the shower, changing clothes, or walking her to the physiotherapy – which was a few blocks away from home. It amazed me to watch her losing control of her movements, gradually moving slower and slower, taking what seemed to be an eternity to reach for a glass of water. On our way to the physiotherapy I exercised self-control. Walking a few streets between home and the clinic was my challenge of the day. The energetic teenager that I was suddenly had to learn to walk as slow as possible, protecting my grandma from the cars waiting behind the pedestrian stripes. During those walks, arms tied together, synchronising with my grandma, I developed an infinite patience and I also become aware of something we usually take for granted – the skilful ways that our muscles, joints and bones articulate every single gesture, without us needing to put any thoughts beforehand. Empathising with my grandma's slow motion made me realize our own vulnerability, our own ephemerality.

This article wishes to address the role of the body in the encounter with art. How does one get affected and also affects the others, in the context of an artistic experience? I am fascinated by the *lived* experience with all sensory stimuli and the “noise”, the dissonance and the unpredictability of human behavior. When I chose to join the master of the Art Sense(s) Lab I wanted to further my practice around our sense of movement. The ‘sense of movement’ does not fall under the conventional “five senses” categories of human perception, although it can be roughly related to Touch. Our skin contains four kinds of mechanoreceptors which are embedded in various concentrations around the surface of the body. They are cells specialized in transducing mechanical stimuli (such as texture and pressure), thus depending on movement in order to relay information in the nervous system<sup>1</sup>.

Another important concept when studying human movement is proprioception (from Latin *proprius*, "one's own", "self", and *capio*, *capere*, to grasp, to perceive). Proprioception is the sense of the relative position of one's own parts of the body and strength of effort being employed in movement. <sup>2</sup> It is present in our everyday tasks and it can be highly trained in specific professions, from cooking, to ice-skating and to very delicate surgery procedures. In my artistic practice I have constantly explored the notion of proprioception to devise an art form which steps

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<sup>1</sup> U.S. National Library of Medicine

<sup>2</sup> Mosby's Dictionary of Medicine, Nursing & Health Professions

out of the vision-centered culture of the fine arts. I do not want to conform to existing art practices, as I believe that contemporary art making has to do with searching for and devising the unknown. Appealing for a minimum amount of verbal information I want to instigate embodied cognition and capitalize from the social aspect of the presence of the public. As far as I am concerned, this is not an existing art form, and this path has not been an easy one to walk. My experiments raise questions to be researched, tested and evaluated, because working with human behavior is complex and audience experience is highly contextual.

### **Bridges across disciplines**

In my research I borrow insights from biology, anthropology, sociology, ecological psychology and dance studies to elaborate my own experiments. I was very much encouraged when I discovered (or rediscovered) the works of Lygia Clark, Ernesto Neto, Tino Sehgal, Carsten Höller, RAAAF, Lawrence Malstaf, Cocky Eek, Tomás Saraceno and more recently Teun Vonk, because their works, in one way or another, cannot be defined as either 'sculpture' or 'performance' or 'installation'. They transcend these traditional boundaries. They approach the audience in unusual ways, they engulf the public.



Ernesto Neto's *Humanoids*

After graduating in the Architecture school in Rio de Janeiro, I did not wish to operate as an architect. I wanted to combine my many artistic tendencies into a new practice still uncertain to me. I went then through a new bachelor at the ArtScience Interfaculty, in The Hague, where interdisciplinarity is encouraged, and each one must devise his/her own field of art. Indeed one can only make something original by going through the unknown. I wanted to trigger audience participation not by confrontation, but rather by spontaneous situations, emphasizing and

provoking intimate, social encounters. Today one may situate what I do as combining choreography and architecture, addressing the public as the actors. Defining it as 'performance' or 'immersive installation' does not entirely reflect what is at stake – what the visitors actually experience or sense. I consider the term 'situations' more adequate, as I approach every presentation as a unique encounter. German artist Tino Sehgal also uses the terms 'constructed situations' for his works combining performers and visitors. Sehgal interferes and questions the institutional norms of the museum, by placing performers in the middle of the space, disrupting the regular traffic – often speaking, singing or kissing on the floor – radically provoking social awareness. This attitude of questioning behavior in the art space and creating unusual interactions is of crucial relevance in my view.

In 2013 I wrote 'The Body of the Audience', a quasi-manifesto claiming the activation of the audience by physical, collective and playful ways. I proposed that our body is the actual interface between us and the world. In the encounter with art, which usually occurs in a public, social domain, the presence of the others generates an interesting tension, where everyone interferes in each other's perception. Ultimately the works that I create can only exist if the audience is present. The materials that I use or the spaces that I design are simply the medium for an affective process. In this context that I find the research on the senses and how sensations precede thoughts, a major topic in the aesthetic experience. The dominance of sight, or visual experience, over the so called 'other senses' or 'lower senses' is now under threat.

The emerging practices of 'sensory design' and 'performative (or performing) architecture', converging the practices of theater, installation and contemporary architecture (with a book recently launched by Andrew Filmer and Juliet Rufford, from the University of Michigan, 2018, with the same title) also give proof of this performative turn. Some examples can be seen in the works of Arakawa and Gins, TAAT / Theater as Architecture Architecture as Theater ([taat-projects.com](http://taat-projects.com)), RAAF / Rietveld Architecture Art Affordances ([www.raaaf.nl](http://www.raaaf.nl)), PunchDrunk theater company ([www.punchdrunk.com](http://www.punchdrunk.com)). I quote the page of the latter:

"Punchdrunk's work is often described as immersive. Although we acknowledge this term and its importance within contemporary theatre, we prefer to use terms such as "site sympathetic" and "experiential". The use of these terms distinguish our practice from the familiar conventions of site-specific and traditional theatre. The physical freedom to explore the sensory and imaginative world of a Punchdrunk show makes for a unique, singularly intense and personal experience. Each show is different and complex, and often it can be hard to define the work. We

anticipate future works may need to be described in new terms not yet listed here.”<sup>3</sup>

‘Performing Architecture’ is not to be confused here with set design or scenography – the latter, in my view, is an applied art field for supporting live action, performed by real actors; while with ‘Performing Architecture’ I refer to a holistic approach towards the space, the senses and the public. It implies a certain symbiosis and spontaneity with the audience.

Most of my experiments aim to stimulate social relations, to value shared experiences, our *convivium*. We are moving bodies in a sensuous context. Therefore I propose that our senses must be integrated in the aesthetic experience. One must *feel* before thinking.

### **Touch and intimacy**

I began to explore more consciously and to (re)discover the sense of touch when I performed ‘*Approximation*’, for the first time, in The Hague, 2012. While aiming to discuss the notions of synchronicity and empathy (inspired by our mirror neurons), placing two performers touching each other’s faces, most of people found it highly intimate and even erotic. My experiments in tactility indeed stem from a desire to contextualize human perception in the social sphere. However this can be conflicting to the average public, mostly used to ‘gaze’ and not to touch in art. Neglected as a ‘primitive sense’ since Antiquity, touch has received more attention by art and science in recent decades. Tactile experience has become more intriguing for research in various areas of knowledge, deserving a field of its own – Haptics – due to the advancement of touch screens and virtual reality; inspiring as well immersive, multisensory contemporary art installations.<sup>4</sup>

Yet, contemporary artists still face the challenge of how to persuade the audience to *touch*. Ironically, the history of museums recollects the old *cabinets of curiosities* as a place where a highly selected public (often members of the royalty and its close guests) was in fact welcome to touch and explore artefacts with all their senses. In *Museum Manners*, Constance Classen has asserted that “part of the attraction of museums and of the cabinets of curiosities which preceded them, in fact, seemed to be their ability to offer visitors an intimate physical encounter with rare and curious objects. It was in the mid-19th century, when museums became public institutions dedicated to archive and preserve collections,

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<sup>3</sup> Source: <https://www.punchdrunk.org.uk/faq/>

<sup>4</sup> Vi, Chi Thanh.; Damien Ablarta; Elia Gattia; Carlos Velascob; Marianna Obrista. (2017) *Not just seeing, but also feeling art: Mid-air haptic experiences integrated in a multisensory art exhibition*. International Journal of Human-Computer Studies. Volume 108, Pages 1-14)

that the protection of objects superseded the possibility of experiencing things with the hands. (Classen, *Museum Manners*, 2005). Today, over 150 years of forbidden touch, we need to redefine the line again, between permission and protection. While the exhibit of objects is itself both conservation and access, the question of allowing touch highlights this tension even further. (Candlin, 2004).

In my practice I have been confronted with questions derived from the physical engagement and the *permitted* touch. In times of wireless telecommunication and social media, sometimes we seem to lose the sense of *convivium*, our ability to be together and/or to bond. On one hand I want to engage the audience in an embodied conversation that integrates the senses. For that I have attempted to find playful strategies and 'break the ice', to motivate people to *act* together. While *playing* one recovers the sense of agency (Harrell, D. Fox & Zhu, Jichen, 2009). On the other hand though, every artwork that involves tactility stumbles on social norms, on the thresholds of intimacy, safety and taboo. Much greater when it includes individuals touching each other. Since touch is a mutual sense, one touches and is touched at the same time, the proximity with the others is in fact an interesting psychological zone, where one needs to consent in order to experience it. This topic goes beyond the scope of this article, with deeper issues relating to culture, history, gender studies etc.

### **Thinking with the Body, Freedom of Mobility**

*"This potential of action, or subjective space, there are some movements that are completely repressed, some are really there, some are not possible, and some are yet to be evoked."*

– Hubert Godard

When I started the master at Art Sense(s) Lab I was looking forward to investigating the sensory input obtained through our skin, muscles and bones. This motivation derived from my research on proprioception, a phenomenon which takes place *through the body*, rather than by vision. I had been playing with the 'other senses', with motion, (in)stability and (dis)orientation for a while. Quite soon I realized how much the focus on the sense of touch could be limited to the hand's range, or else, limited by a vague approach to the skin. So I envisioned that this research should be expanded to the feet, as a symbolic link between the body and the world.



Yoko Ono *Painting to be Stepped On*. 1960/1961 (The Museum of Modern Art, New York)

Thinking tactility, the human hand obviously comes to mind as the most immediate and rather obvious object of study and appreciation of touch – architect Juhani Pallasmaa has brilliantly described it in his book *The Thinking Hand, Existential and Embodied Wisdom in Architecture* (2009). Yet, the foot is seldomly addressed, despite its astonishing sensitivity and intelligent potential, gathering as much as 200,000 nerve endings - the same as our hands. The human foot, oblivious, tucked inside the shoes, are most likely the last region of the human body deserving any kind of tactile investigation, let alone aesthetic experience. The feet have been concealed and even denied in various eras and societies, for reasons that are too vast to list. The feet are also subjected to cultural norms, religious codes, taboos and fetishization that obscure its potential meanings. Through its tremendous nerve linkages to the brain, however, our feet are highly responsible for interpreting the environment and supporting locomotion.

Not merely a physical extremity of the human body, I take the foot also as our symbolic link to the world. Tim Ingold and Jo Lee Vergunst have edited a collection of essays in *Ways of Walking - Ethnography and Practice on the Foot* (2008), where they affirm that our seemingly trivial walking is a “*quintessential feature of what we take to be a human life form*”. Poetically they continue: “*Life is as much a long walk as it is a conversation, and the ways which we walk are those along which we live.*” Contemporary artists and designers have yet to explore this archetypal image of the walk. There are a few exceptions which we will discuss below.



Ernesto Neto's *Célula Nave*, Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam

In the 1990's a young Brazilian artist elevated bodily sensations into a more nuanced appreciation. Ernesto Neto (Rio de Janeiro, 1964-) developed an oeuvre dedicated to the delights of the body, with emphasis on the proximal senses, notably touch and olfaction, materialized in immersive installations and wearables that echoed multilayered living organisms. Neto's pieces invite the public to explore and eventually rest in sensually elastic structures. Despite of the appearance of 'Célula Nave' ('Cell Ship'), for example, in order to enter it, one must endure the effort of walking on an extremely soft and thick matter, which makes locomotion barely possible. The alternative is to surrender, lie down, and experience the work in the horizontal position. An unusual posture, rarely seen in exhibition spaces. Lying here becomes an 'active' way of experiencing the artwork, as opposed to a 'passive' or 'resting' position. Neto embraces the idea of 'laziness', not due to an indulging attitude, rather to question our standards of learning and of art experiencing.

We use our feet all the time and even though 'we are in control', they seem to have their own intelligence. They provide our bipedal posture, which afforded us with a multitude of new skills. The arms, relatively free of gravity, help propelling the body (Godard, 1994). Around one year of age, walking becomes second nature for most of us. We grow up and move without putting any thoughts. Therefore I became inclined to research how contemporary dancers operate, so I could adapt that knowledge to our everyday movement and see if I could apply that to the public visiting an art exhibit. Collaborating with choreographers since a few years, I have learned how this medium may provide a key to our embodied cognition. Dancers are specialists in proprioception, so how to expand their knowledge to non-dancers? How to generate meaningful movement and enhance our everyday experience?



## **You Must Change Your Life**

*“Change your environment in non-trivial ways and you will change how you experience the world, what things are meaningful to you, and even who you are.” – Mark Johnson, 2007*

Added to the idea of dance in the everyday movement, the notion of ‘affordances’ in the writings of Erik Rietveld, has offered a deeper dimension in my effort to design sensory spaces and situations. In ‘*A Rich Landscape of Affordances*’ Erik Rietveld and Julian Kiverstein proposed the notion of *normativity* to human abilities, a dimension which defines our behavior as “better or worse, adequate or inadequate, correct or incorrect in the context of a particular situation” (Rietveld & Kiverstein, 2014). If, according to these authors, affordances are “possibilities for action that the environment offers to a form of life”, then changes in the environment may also impact in new possibilities for learning and/or acting responsively. That being said, we can imagine new situations and discoveries emerging from unusual engagements with the environment. More than affecting, art may provide an environment where new synaptic connections are created, causing an impact that physically changes the body.

This radical idea resonates with the visionary philosophy and design of Arakawa and Gins ([www.reversibledestiny.org](http://www.reversibledestiny.org)). Shusaku Arakawa (1936-2010) and Madeline Gins (1941-2014) were probably the most enthusiastic supporters of this philosophy that I am trying to convey. In the period of four decades, from 1973 to 2013, the couple applied their innovative ideas into outlandish architectural projects. Arakawa and Gins were convinced that their ‘*procedural design*’ would provoke such a structural change in the human brain that it eventually would lead people to overcome aging and death. Their poetic writings (also brightly illustrated) were published in books such as ‘*To Not to Die*’ (1987), ‘*Architectural Body*’ (2002), and ‘*Making Dying Illegal - Architecture Against Death: Original to the 21st Century*’ (2006). Arakawa and Gins articulated fascinating thoughts around the idea of unconventional living spaces, which would demand wilful adaptation and constant awareness of movement from each dweller.



Arakawa and Gins: Bioscleave House. Photo by Leopold Lambert

Arakawa and Gins firmly believed that their architectural works would have such an impact on the residents' well-being and longevity that would eventually become *immortal*. An idea which they have called "reversible destiny."<sup>5</sup> Reading on transhumanism, neuroscience and new technologies, I have also played with the thought of longevity myself, imagining that in the near future, we will be living even longer than the average 80 years, with more vitality and less impact of aging. This has become one of the aspects I am concerned too when conceiving an artwork.

In 2014, Ronald & Erik Rietveld, from RAAAF (Rietveld Architecture Art Affordances) in collaboration with visual-artist Barbara Visser, presented the first version of *'The End of Sitting'*, a research and installation on the crossroads of visual art, architecture, philosophy and empirical science.<sup>6</sup> In a critique to our 'addiction to sitting', the brothers Rietveld focused on the human activities rather than on existing design. They studied the various positions we make at work in order to devise new forms of 'supported standing'. They later abstracted those positions and created a series of volumes to allow a multitude of body postures and interpersonal encounters. The result was a geometric landscape of various shapes and angles of inclination which defy the passivity of sitting and encourage people to alternate positions more often.

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<sup>5</sup> Source: <http://www.reversibledestiny.org>

<sup>6</sup> Source: [http://www.raaaf.nl/en/projects/927\\_the\\_end\\_of\\_sitting](http://www.raaaf.nl/en/projects/927_the_end_of_sitting)



'The End of Sitting', RAAAF + Barbara Visser, Amsterdam 2014

The progressive architecture of Arakawa and Gins and the flexibility of non-normative environments from Rietveld & Vergunst have invigorated my efforts in creating spaces and situations that challenge audience's collaboration. By providing a safe and playful context, the public may become more sensitized and ultimately society as a whole may be (re)vitalized.

### **The problem of interactivity**

Creating spaces for audience interaction is a complex duty. Public situations always involve a certain loss of control, a risk of damage of the artwork, or at least decay. One needs to be aware of the consequences, in order to make certain choices while inviting the audience 'to play'. Materials and design of the artwork present a major concern. In my works, for instance, the possibility of dirt, cracks, or total destruction by the touch of the visitors is latent. On the other hand, the design must be safe too, avoiding any chances of injury for the participants. So I have learned to prepare the installations to be as robust as possible. The alternative would be to regularly replace materials or completely remake the artwork each time it is presented. While warmly inviting the public to experience the works, I have faced difficulties, trying to measure the outcomes and to predict audience behavior.

The level of interactivity has forced me to observe two factors: enjoyability and durability. By enjoyability I mean the choice of materials and of design must consider whether the work will be safe for touch ("skin friendly") and also provoke meaning. With durability I mean the installation must be sturdy, accident-proof, still providing an adequate physical engagement with the body of the audience. The combination of both, enjoyability and durability, allows the *flow* during the interaction. This is the case of my work '*Flexor*', a system of interconnected

platforms, laid on rolling tubes, where four people can step on and sense each other, while moving in synchronicity. In the various versions of *'Flexor'*, from 2013 to 2017, I observed how visitors engage with this new, strange device that dictates their movements and demands a certain dose of learning. In many occasions I noticed that visitors wouldn't mind about accidentally falling from the platforms, even crashing on the ground, as long as they were enjoying the experience together. Connected by a system of elastics, ropes and pulleys, the participants must wave their bodies sideways and can influence each other by pulling the rope held in their hands. Due to the intense participation and the complexity of the installation (which became a site-specific, in each occasion where it was built), the piece required constant maintenance and often repairs, not to mention the constant supervision, with plenty of verbal instructions, demonstrating how interactivity can be costly, impacting in intensive hours of work.



*'Flexor'* in *'Performance, Objects, Bodies'* exhibition, at Quartair, The Hague, 2017

Despite my great drive to create ludic, physical experience, it is a major challenge to communicate with the audience. I strive to find the balance in the amount of information to be delivered before the actual contact with the work (either by text and drawings, or verbal and/or by video instructions) because the experiences that I propose are not commonly found in exhibition spaces. They subvert the usual codes of conduct of the so called "white cube" or the museum, they invite for touch and for action. More recently I have contemplated the idea of not presenting my works in a exhibition format, having instead specific group visits, or workshops, in order to provide the ideal attention to the audience. The management of such participative shows raise a great deal of questions and doubts faced by artists, curators and exhibition producers, often resulting in complex decision making.

This debate on the format of artistic experience reflects the contemporary sensory-experiential practices which take hybrid formats at events held in Foam (Brussels), Marres (Maastricht), Mediamatic (Amsterdam) and

Waag Society (Amsterdam), to name a few. Inspired by both art and science, these platforms organize cross-over functions, performative lectures, dinners and/or educational walks as part of their daring agendas. The Odorama series, organized by Caro Verbeek or the Neo-Futurist dinners, both at Mediamatic, are the most consistent events that I have attended in the past 3 years. Inviting artists, journalists, biologists and so forth, they provide the settings for alternative and creative encounters. Coincidentally it was in the first Odorama evening, that I learned about a new department of PXL-Mad School, the still unborn 'Art Sense(s) Lab', back in 2015. That new master course announced an exciting approach towards the proximal senses. There are not many art schools in the world dedicated to the proximal senses – often also quoted as the 'lower senses' or 'other senses' – smell, taste and touch, as they have long been neglected by art historians, forbidden in museums and highly subjected to cultural norms and social taboos.

The reclaim of the proximal senses started approximately in the last two decades, part of a growing trend within museum practice that acknowledges the value of sensory experience (Candlin, 2004). This revolution is still in progress, and we have attested this friction at the Art Sense(s) Lab ourselves, with the lack of a discursive structure, of dedicated literature and of recognition within the school as a whole. Considering the study of the senses as a 'niche' in the academic context undermines their major role in aesthetic experience. In an article from 2004, "*Don't Touch! Hands off! Art, blindness and the conservation of expertise*", Fiona Candlin affirmed "Embodiment theorists have convincingly argued that knowledge is not detached from the body, suggesting instead that the body is the ground of culture and thought and similarly concepts of physical intelligence and bodily learning have become accepted within educational theory". Candlin was citing, among others, Merleau-Ponty (1908–1961), phenomenologist and Howard Gardner (1943–), developmental psychologist, who paved the way to more synergetic approaches towards intelligence and learning process. In her extensive work as curator and art historian, Caro Verbeek has been an important voice advocating for the 'other senses' in artistic research and education in the Netherlands. Other scholars, from Canada, have done intensive research on the history and anthropology of the senses – notably Constance Classen and David Howes from the Centre for Sensory Studies; Erin Manning and Brian Massumi from the SenseLab (all based in the Concordia University, Montreal). Their writings have hugely supported my process, and keep inspiring new works. They contribute to a wider discussion on the realm of sensory phenomena - not only relevant for artists, but for art education as a whole, which seems to be of high importance. The recognition of this transdisciplinary field of study starts to manifest in new projects at other academies and art schools around the world.

## **The Affective Turn**

As I continued my research on the senses, I came across the notion of affect, through different authors, with highlights to Brian Massumi, whose research spans the fields of art, architecture, cultural studies and political theory. It is not possible to summarize here all of the theoretical discussion influencing the so-called affective turn. Massumi explores the intersection between perception, power and creativity, developing an approach to social action. According to Saara Haacklin, “interest has brought to the fore the challenges of affect—those in-betweens that escape conscious thought—but also turned attention to emotions and aspects of human experience that have long been either unarticulated or considered unimportant.” In my view, affect is the power of sensations to print a mark in our body. Either an image, or a sound, or a smell, or pain, for instance, impressions may cause us physiological impact, in other words, unconsciously we are affected by everyday experience, which can culminate in deep psychological states. It is through my performative spaces that I try to bring a sense of sublime, by addressing not the eyes or the intellectual, verbal mind, but the physical mind. By ritualizing sensory experience, I attempt to reconnect individuals with their most inner states of feeling alive.

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Ludmila Souza Rodrigues,  
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