Thinking Through Bodies: Bodied Encounters and the Process of Meaning Making in an E-mail Generated Art Project

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In the West we are accustomed to thinking of knowledge largely on the basis of vision, which is distant and objective, a perspective that posits the separation of mind and body. In contrast, theories of touch pose a proximal understanding of knowledge production. It informs how we experience body knowledge as encounters between beings. Body knowledge through touch includes sensory knowing and bodied encounters. In this article, I examine the ways in which students encounter emotional knowledge through an e-mail exchange. The article will attend to theoretical considerations of touch, posing the question: How is touch encountered through digital environments? The focus is on discerning the nature of student understandings of body knowledge that unravel in an e-mail generated art project.

In the West we are accustomed to thinking of knowledge and perception largely on the basis of vision, which is distant and objective, a perspective that posits the separation of mind and body (Foti, 2003; Vasseleu, 1998). 'I see' commonly understood as 'I know or understand' reveals the use of visual terminology to convey mental processes. The other senses marked by the body's effluence were historically separated from reason and knowledge. Understood as interior sensibilities, touch, taste, and smell establish boundaries between private and public, normal and abnormal, familiar and strange. Western sensibilities mark the senses as physical rather than cultural, a hegemonic practice which controls and objectifies bodies (Classen, 1993). In contrast, body knowledge through touch poses a proximal understanding of knowledge production, troubling the boundaries between inside and outside. As a contact sense, touch offers contiguous access to an object. Touch is differential and comparative (touching texture, we can distinguish objects) while sight only intimates this on the level of judgment (Vasseleu, 1998). It is a temporal sense bounded in space and time. Touch alters the ways in which we perceive objects, providing access to depth and surface, inside and outside.

Touch as a way of knowing can be understood through two modalities: One, as a physical contact of skin on matter that includes experiencing things as sensations conveyed through the skin. The second modality is a sense of being in a proximal relation with something. In visual culture this has often been addressed as *synaesthesia* (Carson & Pajackzowska, 2001). *Synaesthesia* refers to the blurring of boundaries between the senses

so that in certain circumstances art becomes a synthesis of imagined and material experiences, where evocations of touch, taste, warmth, and smell are possible and we are immersed “in a world where we can hear painted images” (Stewart, 1999, p. 24). Both modalities express active engagement and involve the body in the process of meaning making. Touch poses different ways of ‘making sense’ of the world, challenging the mechanisms of visual perception.

It is precisely because touch is a bodied sense that threatens boundaries that it becomes a powerful and disruptive theory for thinking through bodies, visual culture, and education (Springgay, 2004). Touch poses a relationship to the world that is proximal, contiguous, and sensual. It informs how we experience body knowledges as encounters between beings. As a contact sense, touch is a way of *thinking through the body* as opposed to *about* particular bodies. It is a mode of inquiry that dislocates binary opposites questioning the role the body plays in the construction of knowledges.

Similarly, within the field of art education, scholars are responding to research that places art making as a process of knowledge production (Sullivan, 2003). This shift in awareness from art as objective and illustrative of culture, towards an understanding of art as a way of knowing and being, is a displacement that calls attention to the body and the ways in which we come to know, with, in, and through the body (Springgay, 2001, 2002). If we align ourselves with the perspective that experiences are mediated with, in, and through visual culture then it follows that questions need to be asked about the ways in which the visual is negotiated as a bodied encounter. My research in working with a group of secondary students examines the ways in which youth understand and negotiate body knowledge through touch. This article highlights one such visual encounter, posing the question: How is touch encountered through digital environments? The focus is on discerning the nature of student understandings of body knowledge that un/ravel in an e-mail generated art project.

The Research Site: Context and Methodologies

The research setting is an alternative secondary school in Vancouver, Canada. Positioned in the school as an artist, researcher, teacher, I designed and implemented a Curriculum Project for the senior art class (grades 11 and 12 combined). The Curriculum Project took place two days a week during class time for 6 months. Students were introduced to contemporary artists and their practices. They participated in group discussions and written exercises, and they investigated and created art works on the themes *body surfaces*, *body encounters*, and *body sites*. Emphasis was placed on performance, installation, and new media art. Thirteen students formed the core group. The classroom teacher was involved in all aspects of the research. Data were collected through a

diverse range of methods, including observation collected through digital video and still images; written observations and reflections annotated in a visual journal; recorded interviews and group discussions; written assignments; and student-created and researcher-created art works. A/r/tography (e.g. de Cosson, 2003; Irwin, 2003; Irwin & de Cosson, in press; Springgay, 2003; Springgay, Irwin, & Kind, in press), action research (Carson & Sumara, 1997), and visual methodologies (Pink, 2001; Rogoff, 2001; Rose, 2001) shaped continuous analysis where daily reflections and material collected from the students informed the genesis of the project and navigated on-going dialogue amongst all of the participants.

The school, although part of the local public school board system, operates within a different philosophical paradigm. Key to this philosophical shift in curriculum and pedagogy is the absence of punctuation points, such as bells that mark the beginning and end of classes or the school day. The school is called *Bower* and embraces its name through school size (115 students from grades 8-12); learning is self-directed and students address their teachers by their first names.¹ The principal and other school administrators are also absent from the school building. Their offices are located in the larger, more traditional high school located “up the hill” from *Bower*. The student body is composed of different racial, cultural, and economic backgrounds. Students participate in a weekly school meeting, which is facilitated by students in the senior grades. These various characteristics contribute to student and teacher understandings of the school as a community.

Theoretical Perspectives: Body Knowledge in and of the Fold

Maurice Merleau-Ponty's (1968) critical project was to destabilize the pervasive binary categories that distinguish Western philosophy. The Cartesian legacy incised the mind and the body as distinct and separate. This separation poses thought outside of the body and as the nexus of existence and conscious reason. According to Elizabeth Grosz (1994) the body has inherited from Cartesian thought three concepts: the body as nature, the body as a passive vessel, and the body as container for personal and private feelings. These views posit the interior and the external worlds as separate and distinct. The separation between the body (inside) and the world (outside) is characteristic of dualistic thought. Dualisms such as human or animal, culture or nature, mental or physical, analysis or intuition, rational or irrational, vision or touch and so on, implicate the mind or body split within them.² The splitting objectifies, classifies and orders existence, privileging one term over the other. Dualisms also inscribe a separation between self and other. Individual consciousness is viewed as private, self-contained, and invisible. An individual's identity formation is removed from contact with other minds (or bodies) and is perceived as ‘outside’ of space and time. Yet Merleau-Ponty (1968) challenged this Cartesian philosophical order claiming that “to comprehend is not to

¹ A *Bower* is the name given to several Australian birds belonging to the Starling family, remarkable for their habit of building bowers or ‘runs,’ and adorning them with feathers, bones, shells, etc.

² In many configurations of duality the use of the slash is understood to mean ‘or’. For example the dualism of mind/body can be written as a slash. However, I employ the slash as a process of doubling as opposed to a dualistic meaning. For instance mind/body would mean mind and body or neither (see Springgay, Irwin, & Kind, in press).

constitute in intellectual immanence, that to comprehend is to apprehend by coexistence" (p. 188). Thus, a re-conceptualization of body knowledge must consider the possibilities of interactions *between* bodies—knowledge as intercorporeality. Intercorporeality permeates the visible, challenging us to 'see', 'to know', and 'to understand' through touch and as bodied encounters.

Merleau-Ponty's essay "The Intertwining—The Chiasm" (see Merleau-Ponty, 1968) has been dedicated to the thesis that maintains a relationship between interiority and exteriority. Rejecting a model that produces an isolated body, separate from the external world, Merleau-Ponty remains submerged in the notion that the body is the threshold of experience. He argues that subject-object distinctions need to be understood from the perspective of entanglement and as interconnected. "The bodies of others are not objects; they are phenomena that are coextensive with one's own body" (Merleau-Ponty, 1968, p. 118).

The concept of *Flesh* emerges as Merleau-Ponty's designation for an ontology grounded in the body. Flesh belongs to neither the material body nor the world exclusively. It is both subject and lived materiality in mutual relation. It cannot then be conceived of as mind or as material substance. Rather, Flesh is a fold "coiling over of the visible upon the visible" (Merleau-Ponty, 1968, p. 138). Flesh is a chiasmic space in between the body and the world, where it folds back on itself in an intertwined and enmeshed relation. Flesh as Being gives rise to the perceiver (seer) and the perceived (seen) as interdependent aspects of subjectivity. Understanding self and other as a tangled chiasm, Merleau-Ponty insists perception must be understood as a reversal, a mode of being touched and touching. "Flesh is being as reversibility, being's capacity to fold in on itself, being's dual orientation inward and outward, being's openness, its reflexivity, the fundamental gap or dehiscence of being" (Grosz, 1999, p. 154). To illustrate this double sensation, Merleau-Ponty implements the metaphor of one hand touching and grasping the other hand, which in turn touches back. Cathryn Vasseleu (1998) annotates this concept: "A hand that touches is, in contact with the other, simultaneously an object touched. The two hands represent the body's capacity to occupy the position of both perceiving subject and object of perception" (p. 26). In this reaching out and crossing over, the hand touched (object) reverses or folds back on itself and becomes the touching subject, thus in the chiasm or the space of the fold, the body inserts itself between subject and object, interior and exterior. Perception is formed in proximity, reversible in and through the body. "Tactile perception involves perception of our own bodily state as we take in that which is outside of that state.... The pressure involved in touch is a pressure on ourselves as well as upon objects" (Stewart, 1999, p. 31). The act of touching inverts the subject-object relationship disrupting the boundaries between self and other.

Merleau-Ponty's thesis of reversibility poses that to see opens up the body to others. It is a way of knowing and being that is formed in proximity and through encounters. This claim is quite different from traditional philosophical models, which designate vision as distant and separate, controlled by the seeing subject. It is within the chiasm or fold that perception is doubled, embodied, and tangled.

In a fold the outside is never fully absorbed; it is both at once exterior and interior. The fold is a space of tension and excitement. The doubling between folding and unfolding displaces the possibility of reversal. The un/doing of a fold may result in additional folds, not through the elimination of folds, but rather the entanglement and doubling of interior and exterior. Un/folding resists unification; a fold is not absorbed, nor rendered neutral. Un/folding performs in the very space between and of boundaries, and as an activity of intercorporeality.

Deleuze (1993) translates the fold as sensuous vibrations, a world made up of divergent series, an infinity of pleats and creases. Un/folding divides endlessly, folds within folds touching one another. "Matter thus offers an infinitely porous, spongy, or cavernous texture without emptiness, caverns endlessly contained in other caverns" (p. 5). A fold is not divisible into independent points, but rather any un/folding results in additional folds; it is the movement or operation of one fold to another. "A fold is always folded within a fold" (p. 6). Thus, perception is not the sum of parts, rather it is distinguished by and within the fold.

Theoretical considerations of touch and the fold have been taken up in a number of ways including syneesthetic interpretations of visual culture (e.g. Marks, 1999, 2002) and embodied investigations of art making (e.g. Meskimmon, 2003). Touch has also been investigated from the perspective of feminist and post-colonial scholars implicating the body in the construction of difference. As a mode of knowing through proximity, touch produces different kinds of knowledge dependent on the different encounters it inhabits. For example, Sara Ahmed (2000) defines an *encounter* as a meeting of surprise and conflict. Encounters, she argues, produce bodies and knowledges in and through difference. In an encounter, bodies come together in a proximal relation. It is through proximity, she argues, that the idea of the 'stranger' is produced. One is not a stranger because of distance, but one is understood as strange because of a position inside or outside of boundaries. Thus, knowledge of self and other is produced in the moment of the strange(r). While encounters may carry traces of past encounters, knowledge is created and shaped based on lived experiences in the present encounter.

In light of this brief summary of theoretical considerations of touch, the question surfaces: How is touch encountered through an e-mail exchange? Marshall McLuhan (1994) asserted that the era of information communication technologies was moving "out of the age of the visual

into the age of the aural and tactile" (p. x). Cathryn Vasseleu (1999) contends that in naming "touch—as well as hearing—as a privileged sense of the electronic age, McLuhan recognized the emergence of an era of communication characterized by the disappearance of all sense of distance in a proliferation of contacts involving multiple senses" (p. 153). Sadie Plant (2000) reiterates these thoughts asserting that hypermedia allows the senses to collapse and connect. "Touch is the sense of multimedia, the immersive simulations of cyberspace, and the connections, switches and links of all nets. Communication cannot be caught by the gaze, but is always a matter of getting in touch, a question of contact, contagion, transmission, reception and connectivity" (p. 332). Touch constitutes an embodied experience that is not detached from the world, nor reducible to the body itself. Touch poses an alternative theory of vision, where vision is not structured as distant, separate, or in advance of an encounter, but formed in relations between subjects. Vision thus becomes an embodied interaction with the world. Charles Garoian and Yvonne Gaudelius (2001) further such claims, arguing that the physical/virtual is not signified "as a disembodied ontology, but embodiment that is in a continual state of liminality, contingency, and ephemerality" (p. 338).

Returning to the two modalities of touch introduced earlier, the first, skin on matter is often likened to the physical aspect of typing on the keyboard or moving the computer mouse. In addition, touch in digital environments implicates bodied encounters in the process of meaning making. The question that unfolds is this: What student understandings of body knowledge unravel in an e-mail generated art project?

Un/covering the Un/expected in an E-mail Exchange

In the thematic exploration *body encounters* students engaged in critical discussions on globalization, communication, and consumption, and the ways contemporary artists have taken up these themes. Students contextualized this through their own interests in graffiti and subverting, in particular, the journal *Adbusters*®. I introduced students to the concept of *mail art*. Discussions included the concept of a work of art as circulation.

Andrew, one of the students in the curriculum project, generated an e-mail that he randomly sent to over 200 addresses. I supplied him with addresses from my address book, including a number of listservs at the University. The listservs provided him with mass mailings instead of specific individual e-mail addresses. Andrew spent a considerable amount of time creating the initial e-mail so that it would not appear like a virus, and thus immediately deleted from an individual's inbox. Originally, the impetus for the piece was to focus on the transmission of e-mail, which occasionally malfunctions, sending emails to the wrong people. E-mails are often misdirected; individuals receive mass mailings of junk mails, and viruses fill up our inboxes with random messages. Misdirections are often said to be "lost in cyber space," as if it is an "out there" physical reality.

Andrew writes of his intent: "Strangely, when we receive a piece of mail through the post office that is intended for someone else we tend to blame the actual person involved, while when we receive an erroneous piece of e-mail, we assume that something electronic is to blame." To send his first e-mail, Andrew set up a Hotmail® account under the pseudonym Marty Holsten, a name he felt sounded plausible. The e-mail he signed "MH," inscribing his identity as ambiguous. The e-mail is a rather vague attempt at forgiveness, asking the receiver to move beyond the unsaid act that necessitated this forgiveness. The actual act of wrongdoing is left unclear.

I guess we all have things we'd rather have forgiven. I think in this case we all agree that it'd be best to just drop this here and now, and move on. Personally, I'm willing to forgive anyone if they'll forgive me. It seems like we've all just kind of fallen into something none of us want, and it also doesn't look like we're ever gonna figure it out. My vote's for just moving on. Things can only go up from here. Anyway, keep up the correspondence.
—MH³

³Personal names and addresses have been removed to maintain confidentiality. As an art project the e-mail texts circulate as visual culture and as image.

Andrew immediately received 32 responses. Some of the e-mails were simply one-line informing him that the e-mail had been misdirected. However a few e-mails were more specific and wanted to know what had instigated this forgiveness, and requested Andrew/Marty, to clarify his relationship to the receiver.

Marty,
Why are you writing me, re: forgiveness, which is of course the doorway to all inner spaciousness and freedom. I don't know you.
C

Andrew began to discuss his e-mail project with the class. What had initially transpired as an act of forgiveness, Andrew was now interpreting through an understanding of guilt. Andrew and a few of the other students believed that people had responded because they felt guilty.

I think if you prompt them they will [respond]. People can always come up with something to feel guilty about even if they haven't thought about whatever for a really long time. If I just walk up and forgive them then eventually they try and rationalize it by finding something that they feel guilty about.

Andrew continues: "But if you look at it totally objectively there is no reason why anyone would respond to the e-mail. But yeah, people seem to feel that being forgiven for something is plausible. It could certainly happen to them." Either the sender had done something wrong to someone and they needed clarification that this was in fact an e-mail

coming from the individual wronged, or individuals seemed to feel some sense of guilt in receiving a personal e-mail that they believed was intended for someone else. By responding to Andrew, letting him know his e-mail had been ‘misdirected,’ they might have been alleviating some of their assumed guilt.

I have received this email by mistake.
Please check you addresses and update to ensure you
privacy.
J

Hi Marty - thank you for your apology/forgiveness
but I'm drawing a blank about what this is about? I
just wanted to tell you that I'm not sidestepping
your words - my computer system crashed and I'm only
now getting it back into gear and back on line.
Movin' on is what life is about - but of course, we
carry what we've learned and experienced always
within the molecules of our bodies - best to make
peace always!
L

Through interviews and in-class discussions Andrew mused that he had discovered a “cheap renewable source of guilt,” but was also startled by the un/expected responses his project generated. Andrew’s own guilt surfaced because he believed he had invaded people’s personal space. What originated as a random act of forgiveness was returned to the sender as guilt.

I think I’ve been developing some kind of guilt over this. Ironically I feel I need to genuinely apologize for this—because I’m tricking these people. The longer it goes on the more complex it gets. I can’t keep this going without giving any details whatsoever and if I give any then it’s not going to work. But there is a certain point that I can’t just keep having this vague conversation. I want to actually tell them what I’m forgiving them for, but if I do I’ll have to make something up and they’ll know it’s not real.

While e-mail and the Web constitute public domains, an individual e-mail address is connected with a private or personal identity. Andrew’s “invasion” caused anguish on the part of the receiver—who are you?—and similarly for Andrew, as he felt somehow he had deceived these individuals. The tensions and uncertainty between the private and public space, convinced Andrew to take the project in a different direction than he had originally intended. For his second e-mail, responding to the responses, Andrew decided that the boundaries between inside and outside had shifted, necessitating that he disclose his identity and the nature of the e-mail as an art project. Andrew decided that what had begun as a “random message sent to thousands of e-mail addresses” had

collapsed the distance between bodies producing knowledge of self and other simultaneously. As Andrew began to make connections between bodies, he created a second e-mail in which *he* asks for forgiveness for his act of forgiveness.

All right, I have to come clean here; it was, in fact, a somewhat unorthodox art project under the guidance of Stephanie Springgay. The original premise mutated, for those of you interested, from my attempt to provoke an honest apologetic response, into something much, much stranger. My original message actually wound up generating feelings of guilt in me, for intruding, however minutely, upon your lives, and deceiving you. I'd be interested to know your responses to this info, and to my now-sincere apology.

- Andrew 'Marty'

All but one of the original respondents wrote back a second time. Some were fascinated by the art idea and wanted more information about the project, while others continued to think through the nature of guilt and forgiveness.

well that's a relief!!:) - all those sleepless nights trying to figure out who? what? why? when? how? - !!

your email was a stop- a pause. Not knowing the context of the apology - it was so beautifully worded, that one could not, not respond, not, not forgive - even without knowing what it was about:) - which is interesting - to me it speaks to the power of apology, of literally lying on your back, neck exposed (as dogs do in surrender and admission of the "cards are in your hands now" - terrible mixed metaphors - but hopefully you understand the gist of what I'm saying:)) Perhaps it suggests that apology as an opening move within the negotiation of difficult events is a good strategic move in terms of conflict resolution. For it opens up to the next step: what happened? why?(from your perspective) - this is why I responded the way I did?

thanks for coming clean - now you really do have to apologize!! :)

L

Andrew writes in his weekly reflections: "What interests me about guilt is that it can be viewed as an external blame or as an internal weight. We can all feel guilty for something that we have done that clashes with our own personal value system, but we can also assign guilt to external

sources.” If we think of guilt as an interior signification where moral consciousness judges and condemns (Ricoeur, 1974), then forgiveness or freedom from guilt is an exterior condition. This definition separates and makes distinct interior feelings, which can be controlled and abated from the outside, rendering affect as deeply personal and individualistic.

Megan Boler (1999) points out that this perspective designates emotions as natural and private conditions that individuals are taught to internalize and monitor through self-control. Through self-policing, individuals internalize social norms of emotions and their external expressions, “eras[ing] gendered and cultural differences through the discourse of universal biological circuitry of emotions” (p. 60). The ‘ideal’ body is thus one who controls his or her emotions through rational choice. However, as Boler’s critical project so aptly demands, how might we define emotions as a mediating space between bodies? In exploring this question Boler sets out a project of critical empathy and witnessing in which pedagogical practices and educational contexts need to attend to the emotional lives of students and to re-cognize the inherent power structures and struggles in the public articulation of emotions. Her arguments for emotional epistemologies bear significant weight in re-evaluating what counts as knowledge and the ways in which difficult knowledges need to be and can be addressed in educational contexts. Through a critical praxis of emotions, individuals will be able to publicly articulate different emotions, to listen with attention to all views and perspectives, and to learn to inhabit positions of ambiguity (Boler, 1999). While these outcomes are significant in the context of educational institutions that generally neglect the emotional and sentient lives of students, unfortunately her position continues to render the body as static. Boler asserts that communities (e.g. classes) are constructed from multiple identities, each of which embodies different emotions, and that critical emotional pedagogy needs to create spaces where these multiple identities can ‘give voice’ to these feelings. This instance links emotion with identity and assumes that an individual’s position is determined prior to a given situation. While we do carry with us bodied memories of emotions from past encounters, it is not the past that shapes lived emotional experience, but rather the act of remembering in the present. To remember a particular emotion from the past implies that in the instant of remembering in the present emotions are created (Ahmed, 2000). The act of remembering is an encounter in the present, an event that is un/expected. These encounters become part of the social interstice of lived experience. In constructing pedagogical contexts that attend to students’ emotional lived experiences, we must turn to the threshold of experience, where body knowledge is created as an encounter between bodies.

In doing so, non-dualistic understandings of emotions entail a re-thinking of the terms *reveal* and *conceal*. Instead of labeling emotions that

are hidden through institutionalized, socialized, and politicized control as concealed and the act of making public these emotions as revelation, an understanding that continues to divide the two terms, we need to investigate how emotions are *created* in the act of an encounter.

In the e-mail exchange, Andrew initially believed he had caused people's emotions to simply surface. However, as he and I later discussed, these emotions, including his own, were not already given, but created in the instant of circulation and exchange. Emotions are not static. They mutate and change with each encounter, attesting to their fluidity. We should not view encounters from the perspective of revelation. Encounters do not reveal; they create. Bodied encounters produce revealed *and* concealed emotions, but not as binary opposites.

In responding a second time, Andrew chose to ask for forgiveness himself. This doubling of forgiveness Ricoeur (1974) describes as an extreme form of interiority, where guilt anticipates punishment. Doubling occurs when we recognize that we have the potential and power to act against this guilt. It is this relationship of interior to exterior that dislodges the containment of guilt and shifts it towards the possibility of hope and forgiveness. Through the un/expected, Andrew's e-mail correspondences between bodies altered the perception of guilt to the idea of forgiveness—to possibility and agency.

During the second phase of the project, Andrew began to fold back on his acts of forgiveness, re-assessing the ways in which emotions are constructed. "Guilt" he writes, "can be determined by us. Guilt forms cycles, in the sense that it causes and is caused by actions and feelings. It seems that the only way to break out of this circle is to move sideways, to understand that within guilt is forgiveness."

Andrew began to understand this act of forgiveness as an exchange, an economy of sorts, something people need and want, but are unable to purchase freely at the local supermarket. People felt compelled to respond to his email for a variety of reasons, reaching out and giving back, shifting and interrogating emotions through encounters. Andrew says: "The interesting thing about forgiveness is it is a kind of virus. When someone forgives you, you forgive back. It transmits between people. I infected all those people."

Intercorporeality recognizes that emotions are negotiated and produced between bodies, as being(s)-in-relation. Empowerment shifts from learning to listen to different emotions, towards an encounter where the multiplicities of interactions shape subjectivities and emotions in the process of circulation. Articulating, experiencing, and exchanging emotions "depends not on detachment from others, but can only arise in and through our relations with others" (Weiss, 1999, p. 158). Emotional and bodied knowing becomes a complex, dynamic fold of being(s)-in-relation. Thus, the central question of my inquiry is: How might digital

environments contribute to an understanding of emotions as bodied encounters?

Well, Interesting project. Forgiveness is a topic that I have always found intriguing as it seems so hard to do. We prefer to hang on to our positions and being 'right' instead of being accepting, understanding and forgiving which would bring all of us a little closer.

I would have felt guilty too, as you never know what buttons you are pressing when this topic gets mentioned. I am personally having a crisis of forgiveness where I am the person needing it from a loved one. One thing is for sure – you can't make anyone do anything they don't want to do ever.

I forgive you – your guilt may be lifted. Although I am curious about the art project.

B

Like many individuals today, Andrew initially believed the Internet to be a space of unbounded possibilities, an open, endless space. Although he and the other students articulated these thoughts, his e-mail project demonstrates the tensions he faced in grappling with the complex nature of information technology and his relationship to it. Andrew's original idea was to examine the ways in which e-mail is misdirected and how people blame cyber space for this loss. He laughed and joked at the common misgiving that people have over a 'lost' e-mail. Andrew remarked, that individuals construe cyber loss (experienced, for instance, when an e-mail does not arrive at a particular destination) "as an e-mail that floats around in some vast open space called 'cyberspace.' As if cyberspace is a real place and no place in particular." In addition, Andrew was interested in the relationship contemporary society has with machines, most notably in this case—computers, adding that when things fail to work on a computer, individuals often blame technology. In his journal he writes: "Depressingly, any forcing of this issue reveals the somewhat disturbing idea that our blaming of machines is just another step in a long sequence of finding external scapegoats when in actuality there's only ever been humans." These articulations are understood through a sense of divided presence that is occurring here and elsewhere at the same time. Virtual space is understood as dis-embodied, disconnected, and distant. It is something we can't see or grasp. This sentiment places the body as separate from digital connections. Instead how might we begin to consider digital technologies as material, immanent, and inter-embodied?

Vasseleu (1999) claims that virtual touching develops a unique sense of intercorporeality. Touch produces an opening through which we become

sentient beings. Touch, as perception is important because it is established prior to any fixed entity or formal schema. It is a knowing through doing rather than through conscious acts. Thinking through *ticklishness* as a metaphor for the tactility of digital communication, Vasseleu elicits this sensation for its uncontrollability.

Regarded in this way, digitally manipulated currents flowing through contact points in electronic circuits become transmissions of excitement that can be taken to various extremes of intensity.

This measure would act as a perpetual reminder of the uncontrollable tactility of a sentient body.

She continues:

With its dual emphasis on maintaining contact and infinite communicability, digital technology is producing new ways of being moved, of being transported from context to context without reference to a formal body, or self-defined in relation to any overarching schema. (Vasseleu, 1999, p. 159)

It is not that technology discards the body, but that it replaces any formal schema of the body with a materiality that is multiple, unstable, and instantaneous. It is an embodied materiality that is uncontrollable and undetermined. Borrowing Katherine Hayles characterization of the body in virtual space as a “flickering signifier,” Garoian and Gaudelius (2001) are compelled to argue that it is the un/expected that constitutes an embodied critical pedagogy. They write:

Flickering between the randomness of digital information and its patterning, the body’s identity is continually negotiated and re-negotiated, a play of resistance between the disjunctive attributes of cyberspace and the conjunctions that occur as the subject coalesces meaning and interpretation. (p. 338)

Cybernetic folds are important in the context of education reminding us that learning is never an isolated affair.

The experience of being embodied is never a private affair, but is always already mediated by our continual interactions with other human and non human bodies. Acknowledging and addressing the multiple and corporeal exchanges that continually take place in our everyday lives, demands a corresponding recognition of the ongoing construction and reconstruction of our bodies and body images.

(Weiss, 1999, p. 5)

Digital environments thus shape an important aspect of embodiment and bodied encounters, creating proximal encounters where knowledge between bodies is produced. So too, touch is an important aspect of emotional encounters necessitating an understanding of body knowledge as active, folded, and in relation.

Body Knowledge: Implications for Art and Education

In light of art education's current interest in visual culture, which challenges the ways in which subjectivities are constituted through images and imaging, understanding how students, and, in particular, youth, make sense of bodied experiences through art making is paramount. Scholars have insisted on a critical practice, which includes the investigation of imagery across disciplines, a social re-construction of identity through art making, and the role of visual imagery in the production of knowledge (Chalmers, 2002; Duncum, 2001; Freedman, 2000; Irwin, 1999a, 1999b; Springgay, 2001, 2002; 2003; Stuhr, 1994; Sullivan, 2003; Tavin, 2003). The cogency of such claims necessitates a phenomenological understanding of visual culture as an ontological position, where the re-construction of the visual is mediated, never isolated in its activity, but always already engaged with the world. This negotiation suggests a 'slip-page' from passive, submissive body, to active participant and learner. Re-visioning art and education that includes body encounters compels educators to move towards an open, folded, and porous space of knowledge construction.

Research that investigates and inquires into the ways in which youth make sense of their bodies has implications beyond the inclusion and re-construction of an embodied visual world. At the outset of the Curriculum Project students identified bodies as material substances and understood the nature of body discourse primarily as a critique of body imagery, often rooted in a healthy body paradigm, where bodies are marked as diseased, controlled and in a state of dis-repair. This follows Kimberly Oliver and Rosary Lalik's (2000) findings that students (girls in their study) need spaces in schooling to explore the potential and possibilities of the body. While their study was rooted in physical and health education, Oliver and Lalik believe that critical study of the body needs to be an integral part of all curricula. Such a condition calls for an inquiry based curriculum "in which learners are encouraged to ask questions about the body that are important to them and to explore the various curricular areas for processes to inform their inquiries" (p. 122). They demand curricular processes that involve: "opportunities to interpret texts, say what they mean, relate texts to personal experience, make links across texts, explain and argue with various ideas, make prediction, hypothesize outcomes, compare and evaluate and talk about doing these things" (p. 122). This list is remarkably similar to art educators who advocate a critical visual pedagogy (Cary, 1998; Hicks, 1989; Jagodzinski, 1997; Tavin, 2000; 2001). A necessary inclusion would be to conceive of texts as visual experiences and encounters, as well as art making. In addition, a bodied visual critical pedagogy needs to examine a process of *thinking through bodies* as opposed to [thinking] *about* bodies.

Subsequently, theories of touch shift the ways we conceive of art-making. Too often works of art are considered to be the traces left from processes of meaning production, rendering art as a static object. Yet, the visual as a bodied process of knowing and communicating focuses our attention and emphasizes the in-between and the un/expected spaces of meaning making, where art becomes an *active* encounter. Thus, “the work of art does not simply reside in the visual image, physical artifact, suggestive title or descriptive parenthetical line, but emerges in their relational play, a play engendered by an embodied, corporeal subject” (Meskimmon, 2003, p. 5). The outcomes of this curricular practice compel educators to include generative and multiple body discourses within the context of art education, and to *think through bodies* as a process of bodied encounters and meaning making.

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