

The Point of Being

The Point of Being

Edited by

Derrick de Kerckhove
and Cristina Miranda de Almeida

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P U B L I S H I N G

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Edited by Derrick de Kerckhove and Cristina Miranda de Almeida

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We are happy to be able to offer the results of this long work process to prepare the book *The Point of Being* to our friends, readers and to anybody who is interested in exploring the cognitive and perceptual changes in which we are immersed in the digital era. We expect that the book will contribute to the understanding of the role and power of the subject (being) in this epoch of change, in which we are still under the influence of the perceptual residues of the Cartesian paradigm of point-of-view and of the printing press era, but at the same time are already experiencing a paradigm shift towards what we call the Point of Being, as we are going to explain in the book.

The writing and editing of this book has passed through different phases. The idea started years ago with Derrick de Kerckhove, trying to understand the implications of a sensorial reset that McLuhan had predicted would be a consequence of electricity. By opposition to the point-of-view, which positions the subject in a visually dominant and detached experience, a tactile response would be a proprioceptive experience, privileging a sensation of the subject over its representation. The notion of the Point of Being, if embryonically, was introduced in the book *Skin of Culture* in 1998.

The second strong impulse to the materialization of the book happened in the summer of 2007, when Derrick invited a group of researchers to work together on the first nucleus of the book in his house in Wicklow, Ontario, Canada.

Later on, the very complexity of the concept required the inclusion of other authors (other Points of Being) who joined the group to contribute with their expertise to the different aspects that are implied in this concept.

The editors would like to thank the contributors to this book for their enthusiasm in writing its chapters. In particular, we are immensely in debt to their generosity and patience during the long editorial process during which we had the chance to work closely with each one.

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Cristina Miranda de Almeida, on behalf of other authors, would like to express a deep feeling of gratitude to Derrick de Kerckhove, for being such an inspiration for all of us.

Derrick de Kerckhove would like to acknowledge here the many conversations with scientists, artists and wise persons that led to insights about the Point of Being.

Lastly, the editors would like to see this volume only as a first step in trying to understand the Point of Being. We plan to keep developing other necessary aspects of this complex and rich experience in further books.

—THE EDITORS

INTRODUCTION

DERRICK DE KERCKHOVE
AND CRISTINA MIRANDA DE ALMEIDA

The Point of Being is a book of essays that explore the psycho-physiological dimensions of the ways people experience their presence in the world and the world's presence in them. While it is intended to interest every kind of culture, *The Point of Being* addresses conditions that apply principally to Western alphabetized societies. Indeed, the basic premise of the book is that the alphabet has emphasized a visual dominance among the senses people use to perceive the world as a whole, a trend that has repressed or toned down information from other senses. This literate¹ bias is well documented by Eric Havelock, Harold Innis, Marshall McLuhan, Leonard Schlain and others.

Much research has focused on understanding how people experience their presence in the world. These publications generally analyse embodiment and new manners of exploring the sensorium beyond the inherited context. These contributions come from varied disciplines such as architecture, art, music, art history, cinema, psychology and proprioception studies, design, a variety of technology and engineering studies, philosophy, medicine, aesthetics, sociology, and anthropology, among others.² Although these contributions help construct the subject,

¹ Literacy is understood as the ability to read and write.

² Research focus varies: the role of all senses (Constance Classen; David Howes); commodification of sensation, the sixth sense (David Howes); synaesthesia (Cretien van Campen; Robin Curtis; Sean A. Day); interrelations between senses, sensorial sensibility (Arnold Berleant); the interaction between vision and touch in photography (Patrizia diBello); inter-sensoriality (David Howes); interrelations of noise, smell, touch (Harvey, Elizabeth); contextual interrelations of sound and space, aural architecture, spatiality without space, aesthetic spatiality, eventscapes (Barry Blesser; Michael Bull); urban experience (Niall Atkinson); hearing, listening, urban aurality, listening and sound spaces (Raviv Ganchrow; Les Back; Alexandre Vincent; Lisa Blackman); the hierarchy of senses (Jean-Marie Fritz); embodiment and sensory phenomenology; first person narratives and auto-

they do not fully examine the impact of electricity or that of digital technology on sensibility. The concept of the Point of Being aims at offering different ways to understand this new situation.

From the acknowledgement of this situation the book explores the research question: which are the psycho-physiological dimensions of the ways people experience their presence in the world and the world's presence in them?

The objective of this collective work is not only academic. Because they deal principally with issues of perception and sentience, there is in all chapters an invitation to experience a shift of perception. An embodied sensation of the world and a re-sensorialization of the environment are described to complement the visually biased perspective with a renewed sense of our relationship to the spatial and material surrounds. What is attempted here is to induce the topological reunion of sensation and cognition, of sense and sensibility and of body, self and world.

The perception of the Point of Being, to which the various chapters of this book invite the reader, proposes an alternative to the Point of View inherited from the Renaissance; it aims at offering a way to situate the sense of self through the physical, digital and electronic domains that shape physical, social, cultural, economic and spiritual conditions at the beginning of the twenty-first century. What is examined is how current digital processes of production, reproduction and distribution of information affect our perception of time, space, matter, senses and identity.

ethnographies (Jacquelyn Allen-Collinson); the urban sensorium (Aimée Boutin); history of sound (Veit Erlmann); deep sound (Steve Ferzacca); significance of touch (Anne Cranny-Francis); touch in painting, sculpture (Peter Dent); the sense of taste and food perception (Bettina Beer; Charlene Elliott; Karin Bijsterveld); body, emotions and senses (Suzannah Biernoff); psychology of smell (Rachel Herz); smell in space (Victoria Henshaw); technological sensorial augmentation in art in general (Francesca Bacci; Anne Cranny Francis; Jim Drobnick); non-human and cyborg sensing (Stefan Helmreich); cinematic tactility, theories of spectatorship, affect and embodiment (Jennifer Baker; Pia Tikka); human-plant interaction (Jo Day); Human-computer-plant interaction (Guto Nóbrega); theories of senses in theatre (Stephan di Benedetto); historical environmental perception (Nina Ergin); material culture, bodies in stilled mobility and bodies in movement in space (David Bissell); trade-marking of the senses (Charlene Elliott; Hultén, Bertil); metaphorical/cognitive projections of the senses (Nicholas Evans); politics of sensation, the impact of political environments on sensations, the political component of senses, the political mediatization of the networks of sensation; sensorial pluralism (Kennan Ferguson); somaphoric organization (Steve Ferzacca); and senses in literature (Hertel, Ralf), among others.

Nine authors explore different ways in which the paradigm of the Point of Being can help to bridge the interval, the discontinuity, between subjects and objects that began with the diffusion of the phonetic alphabet.

The following nine essays contribute to defining and expanding upon the understanding of these main lines of argument. Derrick de Kerckhove positions the concept and analyses the features that constitute the Point of Being, and especially the role of touch in relation to the interval. The interval, as used throughout this book, is the liminal space between – or within the overlaps of – body and world, self and other, mind and thought. It is fluid and variable and it privileges a tactile appreciation. Rosane Araujo, Gaetano Mirabella and Isabelle Choinière offer different and complementary analyses of the interval, from the realms of architecture, philosophy and choreography respectively.

The concept of interval is central to this book. The interval goes both ways; it is both within and without the perceived limits of self and skin. Proprioception is the internal front of the interval. The theme of the “milieu”, and its connection to proprioceptive experiences is treated in turn by Jung A, Semi Ryu and Loretta Secchi, the first two interpreting aspects of traditional Korean culture and the last named presenting her work for the museum of touch in Bologna. The last two chapters, by Cristina Miranda de Almeida and Maria Luisa Malerba respectively, propose a historical retrieval and a reflection on the possible future expansions of the perceptive features informed by the Point of Being.

To introduce the theme in the first chapter, titled *The Point of Being*, Derrick de Kerckhove defines the concept of Point of Being as the feeling of one’s presence in one’s own life, and opposes it to the concept of Point of View, involving a shift from the visual to the proprioceptive and tactile. While the point of view is still central to the Western mental ecology, there are signs that other ways of apprehending the world involving more senses are evolving albeit in a paradoxical fashion. As it extends the nervous system, electricity expands the reaches of all the senses. The Internet, the Web and the electronic grid of the planet provide humans with an extension of their central nervous systems, linking body to the environment and vice-versa. This insight borrowed from personal contact with McLuhan leads into considerations about how electrical extensions and transformations have accelerated and diversified uses of language and made the world more connected. If the alphabet reduced sensory information to abstract sequences of signs, electricity has re-sensorialized human communication, however at a secondary level. The virtual and augmented varieties of “reality” are external to the body and, today, act as interfaces to many human activities. Interactivity is the technological

extension of touch. Interfaces are created to manage things and the interval between them and the body. Hence they are extensions of the body and provide variations in the handling of things. Embodiment has become quite paradoxical: the engagement of the subject/user via networks and software programming is both discarnate, and yet so tightly connected to body and mind that it seems to be a reverse – externalized – image of the incarnate body. Hence the electronic enhancement of touch, either via interactivity or connectivity, generates an ambient secondary tactility.

The notion is substantiated by various examples taken from interactive arts, recent discoveries in neurology (mirror neurons) and cinema, haptic games, virtual environments and other interfaces that manage the interval between people and their existential situation. The study of this interval carries into considerations about presence and tele-presence to lead to conclusions about the social value and role of attitude, which is grounded in a proprioceptive relationship to the world.

In the second chapter, *Urbanism*, Rosane Araujo provides clues as to how the interval between self and world can be experienced as an unbroken continuity. It contributes an architect's vision to the understanding of the Point of Being from an analysis of how the personal and the urban spheres merge in holistic perception. The city is a concept dependent on personal experience. In this sense the city is experienced from the sphere of each Point of Being. As in Araujo's text the subject (being) defines and brings forth cities, globes, universes; the interval is built by a change of vision in which sensibility is expanded and the subject does not feel separate from an environment that is activated by each person.

This theme is directly related to the third chapter "Toward the Reunion of Sense and Sensibility: The Body in the Age of Electronic Trans-nature", by Gaetano Mirabella, but in a reverse mode. For Mirabella, it is nature, space, environment or outer reality that feels and touches the subject (being). Mirabella writes about the body in the age of electronic trans-nature, wondering about the possibility of teaching our senses to think and questioning whether that thinking could be a basis for the ontological constitution of a "definitive presence" inscribed in a "conscious space". The Point of Being brings together objectivity and subjectivity by means of a transductive tactile sensation of the world that fills the interval: the world touches you while you touch the world. This chapter contributes to the construction of the concept of Point of Being by offering a theoretical scaffold to support future conceptual developments reflecting on how our environment is starting to be aware of us, and

responds to our emotions, with the implementation of technologies such as computational fabrics that respond to our emotions.³

In the fourth chapter titled “The Interval as a New Approach to Interfaces: Towards a Cognitive and Aesthetic Paradigm of Communication in the Performing Arts”, Isabelle Choinière focuses on the interval that evolves between bodies in movement and the public. The spectacularization of dance was a result of the processes of fragmentation, dichotomy and duality present in Western analytic tradition since the Renaissance. The author proposes to overcome this heritage and to offer a new logic of interconnection based on an integrative and interdisciplinary approach. The chapter explores how the Point of Being emerges to fill the interval between performers and public. Here technology becomes the catalyst for the sensorial renewal process by creating a constant reorganisation of our sensorial mappings and a “vibratory space” that permits connectivity. These are also conditions for a “recognition” between bodies, which itself depends upon the dissolution of psycho-corporeal barriers. The result is a new and enlarged corporeal drawing in which Choinière explores possibilities to move beyond instrumentalization in the relationship between dancer, public and technology.

In the fifth chapter titled “The Aesthetics of the ‘Between’ in Korean Culture”, Jung A Huh analyses the concept of “between” or “in-between-ness” in Korean culture and how it emerges as unity, cultural and spatial convergence and social and spiritual integration in different cultural elements: in the flag, in the one-person opera *Pansori*, in architectural forms, in houses’ eaves and in the *Bibimbap* dish. Connecting opposites, the concept of “between” reflects the interaction between yin and yang or Derrida’s *différance*. The idea conveyed by the notion of “between” contributes to the construction of the concept of Point of Being by offering an integrative model of the concept of interval that helps to overcome dualist, fragmentary ways to deal with the interval opened between subject and object, being and world. The practical cases of analysis illustrate how this kind of integrative proposal can be achieved in different aspects of everyday life. This chapter and the following one are key to getting an impression of the epistemology of a different culture with different grounds as it is applied to the common understanding of the Point of Being.

³ For example, it relates to the experience someone can have with computational fabrics that actuate on human mood as proposed in the research project Textile Mirrors presented at the conference TEI’13 by researchers Felecia Davis (M.I.T.); Asta Roseway (Microsoft Research); Erin Carroll (University of North Carolina at Charlotte); and Mary Czerwinski (Microsoft Research).

In the sixth chapter, titled “Sensing Without Sensing: Could Virtual Reality Support Korean Rituals?” Semi Ryu explores how a shamanic ritual structure provides a model for understanding what is called the “potential experience”. This is a dimension of experience that takes place in two kinds of space concomitantly inhabited: an infinite imaginary (virtual) and the finite actual space. One could be tempted to compare this imaginary to the space of the mind of the reader versus the space of the book that is read. But it differs in that in the Korean approach, one space is not exclusive of the other as in the case of reading. Ryu frames this potential experience, accessed by imagination but affecting the physical sphere, as “sensing without sensing” (imaginary senses), a kind of hybrid sensorial regimen to deal with space that is incorporated in everyday situations in Korean culture. She explores a way to deal with this complex and paradoxical situation through art performances based in traditional puppetry, shamanic rituals and digital technologies. The chapter gives an indication as to how the Point of Being can be accessed in a Korean context and, by comparison, how the structure of the Korean shaman ritual can guide one through the paradoxical experiences triggered by the merging of digital and physical domains.

In the seventh chapter “Between Sense and Intellect. Blindness and the Strength of Inner Vision”, Loretta Secchi presents a didactic and experimental method to help visually impaired people to read a work of art through the mediation offered by contoured reproductions on a plastic model of the work. The tactile exploration of the plastic model enables an aesthetic experience in blindness by integrating the sensorial and intellectual experiences (internal images, narration and touch). The contribution of this chapter to the Point of Being is found in the way a correspondence and a translation between the haptic and the visual experiences are developed. This approach helps to bridge the interval between the visual and the tactile comprehension of images and the recognition that it performs several functions: poetic-expressive, educational, narrative, informative, cultural-historical, psychological and speculative.

In chapter eight, “The Connective Heart”, Cristina Miranda de Almeida writes about how, in the West, a heart-centred ontology was substituted with a head-centred analytic perception, cognition and consciousness. The animated interval between objects, people and world was emptied out and turned into a bare and neutral space to contain everything that exists. In this spatial concept that has already been identified by Anaximander as the *a-peiron* (the infinite space) “subjects” are clearly separated from each other and from “objects”, conforming to a situation that is still dominant in Western cultures. Miranda de Almeida

claims that in the new global context, the Point of Being gains relevance, through the retrieval of the heart-based kind of perception and cognition, as a foundational reference for a society that is increasingly dissolved in a sensitive and interconnected environment due to the impact of digital technologies. The heart appears as the Point of Being, the interface that enables the diastolic processes of replenishment of the interval that are necessary for the construction of a different paradigm that overcomes polar dualities in relation to matter, space, time and self in contemporary sensibility in which physical matter, digital and social processes merge.

In the last chapter, “Quantum-Inspired Spirituality: Merging Science and Religion in the Post-Galilean Period”, Maria Luisa Malerba explores the epistemological changes from pre-Galilean to post-Galilean periods in order, space, time, matter, perception, logic and axioms, and the relationships between subject, object and truth. Addressing polar concepts such as complexity and simplicity, truth and fuzzy truth, chaos and order she proposes an alternative form of quantum-inspired spirituality, citizenship and attitude. Her approach offers a reflection based on cultural studies about different ways of dealing with uncertainty, and to go beyond the limited Cartesian framework regarding the concept of truth. By analysing cultural production, this approach contributes yet another cultural context, more future-oriented, to reflect the Point of Being in a time of change, uncertainty and deep cultural crisis in society regarding knowledge.

Then, of course, there is the question of the Point of Being, as in “what is the *point*?” That is certainly an underlying theme that plays across all chapters, but no definite answer can be given about this without including a total personal involvement. *The Point of Being* is a signpost on that journey.

CHAPTER ONE

THE POINT OF BEING

DERRICK DE KERCKHOVE¹

Chapter Index

Abstract

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Abstract

The Point of Being (PB) describes a sensory relationship with the world and to others that is grounded in touch. PB is the feeling of one's presence in one's own life. It is a multisensory and predominantly tactile experience of the world, of self and of others. By contrast, the Point of View (PV) is based on vision.

PV is characteristic of the Western perception of the world being framed by the eye. It has prevailed since the Renaissance and it largely owes to psychological consequences of the development of the printing press.

A crowning achievement of a process of individualization that is attributable to readers' appropriation of language through literacy, the dominance of PV is presently being challenged by the effects of electricity and electronic technologies. These are introducing a new sensorial equilibrium, still dominated by the eye but allowing more information from the other senses and, notably, touch.

PB is not a substitute for PV. It is complementary and may restore people's sensibility to a coherent social and personal order, even as PV is being weakened by the gradual externalization of cognitive and emotive capacities of the user on screen and in networks. The new order of sensibility is informed by a sort of "augmented tactility", supported and encouraged by electronic technologies.

The Internet, besides serving cognitive ends, also acts as a collective and connective limbic system that carries emotions instantly across frontiers, religions and cultures.

This phenomenon observed in several grass-roots social movements lately can be compared to the so-called "weak force" in physics. In physics, such a force can be expressed mathematically, by its integration within the balance of the other three, the strong nuclear force, gravity and electromagnetism. In terms of pressure (i.e., tactility), the weak force acts over short distances without direct contact.

In terms of society, it is attitude, the weakest but most precise expression of one's disposition towards the world, that is the equivalent force.

Keywords: *Point of Being, interval, point of view, electricity, touch, proprioception, augmented tactility, homeopathic change*

I

Approaching a definition of the Point of Being (PB)

The world of the eye is causing us to live increasingly
in a perpetual present, flattened by speed and simultaneity.
—Juhani Pallasmaa (2008)

The Point of Being corresponds to the sense I feel about myself, which cannot be represented exactly by a point (except when I feel an acute pain in a part of my body or a strongly localized emotion in the chest). It is grounded in a state of being that is a condition of life, and it is reflected as a field more than a single point of origin. It is also an epistemological experience. I can perceive that this physical and sensate presence in the world is the very origin of myself rather than all the thoughts I can muster about it.

PB is a boundary-less field of sensation experienced by anyone who stops to think for a second about how one perceives one's presence in the world.

The aim of this research is to focus on the physical and tactile sense (of being), its origin and the intellectual process behind it. Indeed, if I place the origin of my sensation within my body, I feel my surroundings and there is no way of really telling where the inside ends and where the outside begins. If I close my eyes, the other senses are highlighted. Though sound, smell and taste are involved, the effect is mainly a tactile, proprioceptive experience.² The point of being is the emerging interface, or connective source of perception, by means of which people touch and are touched by a “reality” in constant flow. It is felt as a flowing sensation that begins in the chest.³ But that occurs only if I try to locate it deliberately. Otherwise the PB is only the sensation of my presence in the world. It is a background sensation as people go about their business.

² The notion of proprioception comes from Latin *proprius* (one's own) and perception. It is the sense used to experience the relative position of parts of the body employed in movement. It is distinguished from exteroception (perception of the outside world) and interoception (perception of pain and movement of internal organs).

³ This sensation, which accompanies breathing, is probably why, according to Onians (1951), in the book *The Origins of European Thought: About the Body, the Mind, the Soul, the World, Time and Fate*, the preliterate Greek cultures tended to locate perception in the chest rather than in the head, a shift that began to occur with the appearance of literacy. See also chapter VIII.

Consequently, while there may be a point *to* being, there is no identifiable point *of* being. In that case, why does this book retain a concept that is misleading in the first place? It is because the merit of this metaphor is to immediately invite an experience of being. To feel one's being, one needs to relinquish the Point of View, displace the vantage point of the sensation. The contrasting metaphors of PB and PV allow one to better estimate a tactile and proprioceptive perception of the environment by opposition – or complementarity – to the PV. The latter positions the person in a spatial relationship to the environment from a specific angle within which to evaluate and judge it. This is what is meant by “getting a perspective” on things or events. PB, on the contrary, is a total surround condition. We could have agreed to call PB the “field of being”, but that terminology would not reflect the focus on origin. Though it has no precise limits, there is indeed a centre to PB.

PB and field theory

PB could also be described as occupying a middle position between thought, feeling and space. According to Augustin Berque, “Mesology” relates to the study of *milieu*; from the Greek word *meson*: middle, centre, half, average. The present use of the term dates back to Dr Charles Robin who proposed it to the Société de Biologie in Paris, June 7, 1848. The *milieu*, in effect, cannot be absolute: not only does it depend on a set of relationships at the core of which it is situated, but it also defines whatever is around the centre. The *milieu* of fish is the water that surrounds them, but each fish is also at the centre of the water, with which the fish has a unique relationship. Every living creature – humans in particular – is at the centre of its *milieu*. Berque explains that in French, the word milieu carries this ambivalence: it is what surrounds the centre and it is that centre itself. So we are confronted with a problem of logic, that is the co-existence of different logics, neither excluding the other and both composing a “meso-logic” that takes account of both inside and outside simultaneously.⁴

Thus there is a sort of Möbius strip effect in that while there is clearly an inside and an outside to every living being, there seems to be no suture or division. With this extended definition of *milieu*, the point

⁴ See also Maike Storks (2009) article on proprioception, <http://sixthsensereader.org/about-the-book/abcdarium-index/proprioception/> <http://ecoumene.blogspot.fr/p/argument-english-version.html> (accessed 2013/10/08).

of being could be understood as the general core of a sense of being, a place of synthesis of time and space, of mind and body, of feeling and consciousness that transcends models of reality ruled by a visual regimen. It implies an expanded state of perception and consciousness. It calls for the whole body to come into play. I feel immediately this correspondence in everyday life, as I perceive myself as a whole that includes me (*instant présent*). Henri Bergson said:

The more we succeed in making ourselves conscious of our progress in pure duration, the more we feel the different parts of our being enter into each other, and our whole personality concentrate itself in a point, or rather a sharp edge, pressed against the future and cutting into it unceasingly. It is in this that life and action are free. (Bergson 2008 [1911], p. 202)

Observing the role of the skin in perception, Michel Serres defines the experience against the notion of *milieu*:

In the skin, through the skin, the world and the body touch, defining their common border. Contingency means mutual touching: world and body meet and caress in the skin [...] I do not like to speak of the place where my body exists as a milieu, preferring rather to say that things mingle among themselves and that I am no exception to this that I mingle with the world, which mingles itself in me. The skin intervenes in the things of the world and brings about their mingling. (Serres 1998, p. 97)

In this sense, Serres provides another clue to the PB in that, while it is bounded by the skin, it can be felt not as a limit but as a portal to experience the world.

Gestalt therapy has found a convenient scientific ground in physics. For example, touch therapy (TT), a lasting nursing practice developed by Martha Rogers in the mid 1960s, applies basic notions related to energy fields to human sensoriality. She says that human beings are energy fields - not have energy fields but are energy fields. Humans and the environment are continually, simultaneously, and mutually exchanging energy with each other (environment refers to everything exterior to human, including other people). Universal order is a force innate to all energy fields. (Rogers 1970)⁵

⁵ See also this link, accessed 2014/05/08, http://currentnursing.com/nursing_theory/unitary_human_beings.html and Sayre-Adams, J (1993), 'Therapeutic Touch - principles and practice', in *Complimentary Therapies in Medicine*. See this link, accessed 2014/02/10, <http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/0965229993901011>

Within the field, the experience of PB includes proprioception (internal) and exteroception (external) as well as the perception of the interval and the relative distances of external objects. Indeed there are enough varieties of tactile experience to warrant categorical distinctions; they require, for example, considerations about frequencies and vibrations, distances, rhythms and movements, various forms of pressure (texture, weight, haptics), and the extensions and modulations of touch in presence, intuition, desire, emotion, and aura, to say nothing about the unconscious. Juhani Pallasmaa puts it very succinctly and precisely:

Touch is the sensory mode that integrates our experience of the world with that of ourselves. Even visual perceptions are fused and integrated into the haptic continuum of the self; my body remembers who I am and where I am located in the world. My body is truly the navel of my world, not of the sense of the viewing point of the central perspective, but as the very locus of reference, memory, imagination and integration. (Pallasmaa 2012, p. 10)

Sensory transduction

Today, because electricity in its digital evolution puts everything in touch with everything else, artists, scholars and psychologists are rediscovering the senses as a whole and in this process the sense of touch has an insidiously dominant role. Touch is directly connected to the configuration of self-in-the-world as it can be considered a tool for thinking “with” the body, allowing for the displacement of consciousness from brain to body and instructing people about what cannot be grasped by the eyes.

The word touch comes from the Latin *tactus*, and *tangere*. Touch extends through the whole body’s surface⁶ and helps one to get data about things and their qualities, such as texture and temperature. In the concept of touch is also implied the idea of recognition and the ability to resolve difficult situations.

Tactile cognition is based not only on contact pressure but also on the interval of space between people and things. As a flexible and fluctuant kind of cognition, touch takes meaning from texture, resistance, temperature and other aspects of matter. French Enlightenment philosopher Denis Diderot (1916) explored this aspect of the relationship between body and

⁶ Paracelsus is credited with having said that the skin was the extension of the ear, not the other way around, meaning that the whole body could be construed as one big ear.

space, pointing out the collaboration between vision and touch in the experience of space:

Only experience can teach us if there is agreement between vision and touch. Both senses could be contradicting each other without my knowing it; I could even believe that what is presented to my vision is nothing more than sheer appearance, if I had not been informed that these concepts are the same I had touched. (Diderot 1916, p. 51)

What people perceive through the other senses are mere hypotheses, but touch provides me with the confirmation that something outside my skin is not part of myself. However, by transduction touch is involved as well my own subjectivity when I feel myself exactly at the moment I perceive something that is not part of my body. As Walter Ong famously put it: “I feel other and self simultaneously” (Ong 1967, pp. 169-190).⁷

Proprioception

Proprioceptive sensibility allows one to be aware of the position and the movements of each part of one’s body at any moment in time. The proprioceptor in the nervous system informs the organism in a mostly unconscious process about what is required to adjust muscular contractions so as to permit normal and fluid movements. Equilibrium, holding a posture, interoceptive sensibility (from the viscera) and exteroceptive (from the skin) are also part of proprioceptive information. From the proprioceptors, nervous fibres that are contained in the nerves reach the spinal cord and sense modifications such as pressure and stretching.⁸

According to Charles Sherrington’s classification:

Intero-receptors transduce information from within the organism.

Proprio-receptors transduce information regarding the body parts in relation to one another.

Exteroreceptors transduce information from outside the body and can be further subdivided into two additional categories, telereceptors and somatereceptors.

⁷ Full text at this link, accessed 2014/05/08,

<http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1525/aa.1969.71.4.02a00030/pdf>

⁸ More at this link accessed 2014/05/08, <http://www.vulgaris-medical.com/encyclopedie/proprioception-6821/physiologie.html>

Telereceptors deal with stimuli which are away from – as in not touching – the body.

Somatoreceptors transduce stimuli and events that occur on the body's surface (Sherrington 1961, p. 114).

PB, then, is an ever-emerging, fuzzy, interface between the world and me. It enables people to perceive their inscription in reality as a constant flow in which no fixed point of view is necessary. It is akin to the characteristics of the quantum scale of matter field, movement and vibration – which are different from the visible reality of places, distinct solid entities or clearly separated objects. It includes, in addition to the physical aspects already mentioned, other features that are complementary to touch such as memory, imagination, awareness and intuition, all to be considered important multi-sensorial elements in the perceptive process.

Perhaps the most similar description of PB is found in this analysis of experience by Bergson

Let us then concentrate attention on that which we have that is at the same time the most removed from externality and the least penetrated with intellectuality. Let us seek, in the depths of our experience, the point where we feel ourselves most intimately within our own life. It is into pure duration that we then plunge back, a duration in which the past, always moving on, is swelling unceasingly with a present that is absolutely new. But at the same time, we feel the spring of our will strained to its utmost limit. We must, by engaging strong recoil of our personality on itself, gather up our past, which is slipping away, in order to thrust it, compact and undivided, into a present, which it will create by entering. Rare indeed are the moments when we are self-possessed to this extent: it is then that our actions are truly free. And even at these moments we do not completely possess ourselves. Our feeling is duration, I should say the actual coinciding of our self with itself admits of degrees. But the more the feeling is deep and the coincidence complete, the more the life in which it replaces us absorbs intellectuality by transcending it. (Bergson 2008 [1911], p. 200)

The role of the body

The first element that contributes to the construction of the paradigm of the Point of Being is the role of the whole body as the integral centre from where people become aware of all perceptions and from where they inhabit multiple kinds of place, matter and time, physical or electronic, and relate to other bodies and identities, where they too create, multiply and re-create their own selves.

The body is the incarnation (and the interface) of being. People experience the world with their biological senses and their bodies are the places where they feel a real sensation of weight and presence. They know their body mostly by tactile sensations of pain or wellbeing and by proprioception. Intuition and emotions extend proprioception into exteroception beyond the confines of the skin. Juhani Pallasmaa puts the body at the centre of experience:

Sensory experiences become integrated through the body, or rather, in the very constitution of the body and the human mode of being. Psychoanalytic theory has introduced the notion of body image or body schema as the center of integration. Our bodies and movements are in constant interaction with the environment; the world and the self inform and redefine each other constantly. The percept of the body and the image of the world turn into one single continuous existential experience; there is no body separate from its domicile in space, and there is no space unrelated to the unconscious image of the perceiving self. (Pallasmaa 2005, p. 39)

For Jean-Luc Nancy, the body is beyond discourse and description, a sign of itself that comes into existence only when is touched:

Bodies are first to be touched. Bodies are first masses, masses offered without anything to articulate, without anything to discourse about [...]. A body is what cannot be read in a writing [...]. It is by touching the Other that a body is a body [...] it is itself nothing but the being-exposed. (Nancy 1993, pp. 197-198 and 204)

There are many definitions of the concept of “body”. In this book the concept is explored in different ways by the authors, as it changes according to different cultures, disciplines and historical moments. For instance, Western medicine separates body parts (body and being are experienced as separate entities) while for the Eastern way of thinking the body is a single totality, and health problems are connected to energetic and spiritual issues (body and being coincide).⁹ This issue, of course,

⁹ Geurts points out “speculations in psychology [and we might add philosophy and physiology] are influenced by changing notions of the person and by the technology of the day” (Geurts 2005, p.169). See Maïke Storks (2009), op. cit. “Proprioception”, accessed 2014/04/10, <http://sixthsensereader.org/about-the-book/abcederium-index/proprioception/>

“Among the Anlo-Ewe people of Ghana, we find an integrative conception of the sensorium as expressed through the term *seselelame*. *Seselelame* translates as *perceive-perceive-at-flesh-inside* and is a more generalized feeling in the body that consists of a wide array of internal senses (e.g. proprioception) and external senses,

continues to generate endless debates between monists and dualists. One, author at least has thrown a genuinely new light on the subject. Mark Johnson, in *The Body in the Mind* affirms that,

any adequate account of meaning and rationality must give a central place to embodied and imaginative structures of understanding by which we grasp the world. (Johnson 1990, p. 13)

Defining his thesis, Johnson grounds meaning in physical experience:

The view I am proposing is this: in order for us to have meaningful, connected experiences that we can comprehend and reason about, there must be pattern and order to our actions, perceptions, and conceptions. A schema is a recurrent pattern, shape, and regularity in, or of, these ongoing ordering activities. These patterns emerge as meaningful structures for us chiefly at the level of our bodily movements through space, our manipulation of objects and our perceptual interactions. (Johnson 1990, p. 29)

Decades before the discovery of mirror neurons and their role in interpreting gesture, Karl Pribram and colleagues had identified experimentally the need that all mammals have to “pre-plan” any gesture as a rapid neuromuscular sequence before accomplishing the movement itself (Miller, Galanter and Pribram 1960). That is a kind of “body-thought”. Johnson proposes that thinking itself is a physical activity that finds its source, its patterns and the spring of its manifestations in the body. According to his views, the reason why people do not credit the body’s role is that they can only express themselves in propositional, i.e. linguistic terms. He explains:

To cite a simple example, my present sense of being balanced upright in space at this moment is surely a non propositional awareness that I have,

emotions, cognition, and intuitions. More precisely *seselelame* might refer to physical sensations; sexual arousal, heartache, passion, and pain; inspiration; intuition; or a generalized feeling in or through the body. It incorporates various sensations and actions such as aurality and hearing; balance and equilibrium; walking and kinesthesia; visuality and seeing; tasting; smelling; vocality and talking. In short, *seselelame* expresses a sensory order inherently different from the Western five-sense model. Proprioception, as experienced by the Anlo-Ewe as part of *seselelame*, is inherently intersubjective and based on shared feelings; it is phenomenological and processual in character. Thus, for the Anlo people perceiving their own body requires paying attention to the bodies of those around them” (Geurts 2005).

even though all my efforts to communicate its reality to you will involve propositional structures. So, while we must use propositional language to describe these dimensions of experience and understanding, we must not mistake our mode of description for the things described (Johnson 1990, p. 4)

Johnson is facing a misconception about the role of the body that is quite germane to the dichotomy explored in this volume between PV and PB. People, and scientists in particular, tend to adopt what Johnson calls the “Objectivist” stance that is to describe something experimentally or in some phenomenological way and then take the description for the thing itself. He adds:

I am perfectly happy with talk of the conceptual/propositional content of an utterance, but only insofar as we are aware that this propositional content is possible only by virtue of a complex web of non-propositional schematic structures that emerge from our bodily experience. (Johnson 1990, p. 5)

Johnson’s research is thus supported and even more so now that it has been established that mirror neurons serve as intermediaries for the understanding of gesture. The embodiment of cognition is also a major tenet of Francisco Varela’s work. Popular literature has abounded in that direction, as exemplified by various elaborations of Hans Selye’s Stress Theory, of Eugene Gendlin’s “felt meaning” and of Julius Fast’s “body language”. Not surprisingly, the scientific community has demonstrated a certain reluctance to embark resolutely into research in that direction. Johnson’s explanation of that reluctance seems to echo the thesis of this book.

II

The fragmentation of the sensorium

The subject-object fragmentation brought on by the processes of modernization had a strong impact on perception, on the body and on people’s relationship to nature, on the spiritual dimension of life and on processes involving knowledge. Literacy played a key part in this: with the transformation of reality into printed words,¹⁰ in the literate era the visual sense came to dominate and people began to feed on concepts

¹⁰ See Olson (1994).

stored in their private minds. Language was silenced and privatized in the inner theatre of the individual's mind. Silent reading, by isolating individuals from their community, has contributed to the processes and patterns of individualization that constitutes the worldview of modernity.

The paradigm of PB results from a change in the human sensorial order due to the impact of electricity and that of digital technologies on people's relationship to the environment. A gradual shift from the dominance of the sense of vision in perception and cognition is edging towards a multisensory order, in which many sensory modes are used, not only in cognition and perception but also in the creation, production and distribution of knowledge. This new sensorial order, in which touch and proprioception gain new relevance, is being established.

The concept of Point of Being has its basis in the critique of modernity and coincides with the scientific thesis of the continuum between matter and energy. These theories criticize the rational instrumentality brought by the separation of subject and object and look for the coordination of cognition, perception and consciousness.¹¹

Juhani Pallasmaa recognizes in strong and precise terms the opposition between sensory interpretations of the world:

The perception of sight as our most important sense is well grounded in physiological, perceptual and psychological facts. The problems arise from the isolation of the eye outside its natural interaction with other sense modalities, and from the elimination and suppression of other senses, which increasingly reduce and restrict the experience of the world into the sphere of vision. This separation and reduction fragments the innate complexity, comprehensiveness and plasticity of the perceptual system, reinforcing a sense of detachment and alienation. (Pallasmaa 2008, p. 38)

The isolation of the eye from the other senses appeared in art during the Renaissance when *trompe-l'oeil* was at its most refined. The separation of the senses was completed, as the eye took over depth and texture, signifying to the hand that it was not needed anymore to estimate depth. The fragmentation of sensoriality can also be seen in the way Western physiology, from the time of André Vésale's first dissections, has treated the body. This reflects the leap that occurred from a holistic paradigm to a pragmatic, empirical and quantitative paradigm. The body was dissected and fragmented into organic and mechanic systems.¹² A

¹¹ Critical theories can be consulted in Derrida, Barthes and Foucault.

¹² "The rise of individualism and the notion of private property, the implementation of industrialization and capitalism and the development of