

Being touched

Being touched is the condition to become politicized suggested the psychoanalyst and philosopher Miguel Benasayag in a conference gathering four popular university¹². Inspired by Paolo Freire's emancipation theories and his own revolutionary experience, he argued that knowing is not enough to bring freedom and integrity, mind has to come from practical affective learning situation. In order to achieve that, the popular universities projects he was involved with, in Italy, France and Argentina, choose not to give but to produce knowledge with people, about to what touch their life. Instead of starting from the researcher perspective, the people decide of what matter to them, and from this elective affinity, develop a research for a better understanding and possible modes of intervention of their affecting situations.

The underlying hypothesis is that people are touched by their experience, by what they meet and what meet their sensibilities. And then politicization is the possibility of acting from those understanding and shared sensibilities. We could eventually imagine politicization to associate a collective affection associated with a sensitive intelligence of the possibilities of (re)action.

In the recent student strike, I thought of this again, when I was surrounded by the police with a group of people, composed of students, strikers and passer-by. We suddenly all got trapped in a kettle. Most of us where passing by at the wrong moment. In a trice, we were encircled with others. Concerned. Touched, affected, all together, by similar circumstances. For hours, we shared a collective embodied experience of what police brutality means. We also felt strong forms of solidarity, in the forms of mutual warming, clothe sharing, comforting distribution of sweets and improvisation of collective songs. A few days later, a beautiful movie taken from outside the kettle³, gave a larger historical and political sense to this moment.

« *Being Touched* » is the title of a recent exhibition by the interdisciplinary relational artist and theorist Massimo Guerrera, that he presented in New York in fall 2013. I could not see the exhibition, but as I've been working with the artist, i have insight of what being touched is about. It worked as a question, open to the participant. What it is to be touched, what does it take to be touched ? There is probably not universal answer, as being touched implies a subjective relation. Massimo Guerrera is inspired by dharma art, a movement funded by the lama and artist Chögyam Trungpa, who engage with contemplative methods in order to create the condition of affection. For instance, meditation bring practitioner to more authentic relation to oneself, and to his or her own feelings and thought in order to be present, receptive, aware of one own senses and vulnerabilities before engaging with a practice or a social relation.

Following this approach, I would like to give a subjective proposition of what being touched could mean. I believe that being touched implies a self and an other. It also implies a meeting, a form of junction or connection with this alterity. I believe that being touched described a form of surprised empathy. Therefore, the nature of this connection is not yet rational. Being touched happens trough affects, the embodied dimensions of cognition. Affects works through senses before making sense. Being touched probably involved subjectivities, personal stories,

1 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6nsMNOHNw3A>

2 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y2by3MDBCng>

3 <http://moisemarcouxchabot.com/autour-dune-souriciere/>

but first of all, it depends of an ability to connect to ones senses. It also probably implies removing layer of analysis, layer of rational or preconceived understanding. Being touched implies a presence and there for a form of slowness. It is also possible to not be touched, to be insensitive, to inhibit affects. I have the intuition that some cultural contexts reinforce relation with affects, when some other (more violent or fast moving) encourages inhibition.

Being touched in a digital world ?

In 2002, Brian Massumi wrote a book about *Movement, Affects, Sensation trough Parables for the Virtual* in which he comes across those different modes of relation to the world, in order to better comprehend the possibilities and potentialities of the virtual. In chapter untitled *On the Superiority of the Analog*, he presents« *The virtual, as such, (as) inaccessible to the senses. [...] It requires a multiplication of images. [...] The virtual that cannot be felt also cannot but be felt, in its effects. When expression of its effect are multiplied, the virtual fleetingly appears. Its fleeting is in the cracks between and the surface around the images.* »

This presentation creates different potentialities to imagine how the virtual can become affective. If the virtual has to produce effects, it has to multiply them, and even still, it is through the interstices of its production, or though the impressive effects of its multiplication, than one can feel the virtual.

Massumi then produce an important distinction between the virtual and the digital. The first one referring to an imaginary dimension of semantic projection, the second to a form of medium, which is made of a numerical creation and based on some electronic, computerized, screened materiality.

« *nothing is more destructive for the thinking and imaging of the virtual than equating it with the virtual. All arts and technologies, as series of qualitative transformation (...), envelop the virtual in one way or the other. Digital technologies in fact have a remarkably weak connection to the virtual, by virtue of the enormous power of systematization of the possible. They may yet develop a privileged connexion to it, far stronger than that of any preceding phylum. But that connexion had yet to be invented or at best, is still an inkling.* »

In her book about *Affects and Artificial Intelligence* (2010), Elizabeth A. Wilson analyses the early ages of AI, and more precisely psychoanalytic theory in computer simulation. In the middle of the 1950, psychoanalysis conceived affects as a dimension of cognition. With the development of AI, researchers where trying to look at how to incorporate affect into computational models. She cites Silvan Tompkins, one of those majors thinker :

« *Many years ago, into the late 1930's, I as seized by the fantasy of machine fearfully and wonderfully made in the image of man. He was to be no less human than auto-mated. So I called him humanoton. Could one design a truly humanoid machine? This would either expose the ignorance or reveal the self-conscious of this creator or both...We may expect then that computer will evoke not only delight and excitement bit also contempt and shame, anxiety and anger.* »

This citation strikes me for the way computer (or machine) are clearly though potentially

un-consciously gendered as male. The expectation that machine will reveal the ignorance of its conceptor seems ironically very true and self applying. To what extent this conception of affect embodied by technologies as a male gender perspective? What forms of relation to affect does this suggestion reveal?

Several feminist studies (Oudshoorn, N. Et Al 2004, Wajcman, 2008) has been done on the gendered design of technologies and has shown that values are embodied with the imaginaries involved in the production of technologies. The wish to have machine feeling shame or anxiety sounds seems to be very abstracted, or disembodied, by diminishing the inter-relational dimensions of affects.

To the contrary, care givers (who have often been women) knows how that affects requires special skills and attention exactly can't be mechanized. Contemporary feminist theorist Silvia Federici who has been reflecting upon the gendered division of task in the Commons say the following about care and industrial technologies :

We cannot mechanize childcare, care for the ill, or the psychological work necessary to reintegrate our physical and emotional balance. Despite the efforts that futuristic industrialists are making, we cannot robotize care except at a terrible cost for the people involved. No one will accept nurse-bots as caregivers, especially for children and the ill. Shared responsibility and cooperative work, not given at the cost of the health of the providers, are the only guarantees of proper care.

Bodies of the digital world

In a striking conflicting performance untitled *The Massage is the Medium*, the Chinese artist and theorist Yin Aiwen, give a massage to a participant while bringing her or him to watch continues flux of images of the digital age. She brings the participant to be aware of his or her own body, while putting him or her in the usual context of disembodiment. The massage become the main mode of communication with the participant, when the rest of the participant and the rest of the audience is immerse into a sea of images. During all the performance, a soft voice talks about the massage as an embodied mode of exchange, and insists on the pains and affect inhibition associated with computer work and remind the audience :

« I know you thought that your body was irrelevant, didn't you ?

Otherwise, you wouldn't let it be like this...

[...]

Physical pain is easy to forget of course.

That's why you constantly hurt yourself.

Do you see how badly you have hurt yourself ?

It's so painful it almost becomes emotional.

Feel it...

[...]

The strain muscle you have, many people have it nowadays.

It used to be a professional injury for people doing paperwork.

But nowadays, almost everyone has it. Even children have it.

See how stiff your front neck is. It indicates the condition of your chest

*Like here, the end point of your chest muscles, and the starting point of your arms'...
Do you feel how it goes all the way down to the hand that types the keyboard ?
Your injured body has become the burden of your digital soul. »⁴*

This performance reflects upon a mental states of confusion and a physical state of suffering, that characterize digital age. By bringing the audience and the participant receiving the massage into a cognitive and physical dissonance, she stresses the silent contradiction that digital age has brought to its users. Yin not exactly depict a techno-determinism, but a self-indulged pain, through prolonged uses of technologies.

This disembodied relation to technologies partly derivation of technology production itself. Technologies has been often presented as artifact allowing human to do less effort. But particular, computer have first been conceived as abstraction calculator, ie has machine extending human thinking than human actions.

This disembodiment has also been indirectly encouraged by science fiction and technological discourses presenting the digital age as the (wel)coming of a civilization of the mind.

Finally, new materialists also point the de-materialisation associated with computer as they deal with abstract, immaterial informations (Braidotti, 2002, Jackson, 2014). To foster this impression, industrial modes of production, mass publicity and aestheticised marketing distract users from the toxic and abusive condition of mineral extraction, conception and destruction of electronic devices (Braidotti, 2002, Loeve 2010).

But their is not fate in those disembodied, dematerialised or disaffected approaches. Contemporary users, activist and artists, are bringing body, re-embodiment, affect and care, as central mode of relation to the digital :

Digital artist and feminist theorist Nancy Mauro Flude suggests that creative embodiment of technologies and feminist re appropriation of code and command line, can create new sisterhood for diverse poetics of technological imaginaries (or virtualities).

Technofeminist collective Akelarre Cyborg propose ritualistic performances inviting participants to see gender, bodies and technologies, as form of immaterialities to work with. They also propose workshop for *Becoming-witches* that suggest a take back on this traditional underground form of knowledge, and during which participant create contrasexual anti-normative body prosthesis.

Some feminist hackers creates feminist hackerspaces (Liz Henry, 2014), or gather in the Eclectic Tech Carnival /etc, where they suggest Do It Together and festive take back on digital materialities, where they work with affect, desires, power and intuitions in a safer and joyful environment.

Eventually, such explorations will help working on those lack of affective dimensions evoked by Massumi (2002, cited supra) but also by contemporary art theorists Hervé Fisher (2012) who underlied this lost of critical distinctive investigation in the world of high tech (and therefor industry related) digital art. Eventually, they will bring us, me, to new or renewed way of being touched, with, through, along with, machines and technologies as companions within touching human relations.

4 Citation from Emily King's transcription:
<http://lemassageenimages.blogspot.ca/2013/09/feel-what-medium-has-done-to-you-yin.html>

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