

NOTE ON SENSORIA: AN EXPLORATORY INTERDISCIPLINARY FRAMEWORK FOR RESEARCHING MULTIMODAL & SENSORY EXPERIENCES

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INTRODUCTION

This note describes the development and salience of Sensoria, an exploratory interdisciplinary framework which combines methods and techniques from social science and artistic performance to address the methodological challenges of researching sensory/multimodal experiences.

The Sensoria framework was developed through an interdisciplinary research collaboration between a qualitative social scientist (Carey Jewitt) specialising in multimodal and multisensory research, a digital performance artist (Marloeke van der Vlugt), and an electronic sound composer (Falk Hubner). It was initiated following our meeting at a conference on touch in 2018 and became a case-study within of InTouch, a five-year research project which examines the sociality of touch and digital touch and seeks to advance methods for the study of touch. We sought to interrogated the methodological potentials and challenges of researching touch at the intersection of the arts and social science, specifically to explore ways to how to attune to touch in an ocular and text-centric society, to develop resources (vocabularies, metaphors, materials), processes and methods to talk, think and feel touch in order to engage with the sociality and aesthetics of touch/digital touch.

Thresholds an interactive performance experiment resulted from our research collaboration. It developed as an affective, intimate, challenging and playful exploratory research environment to explore the sociality and sensorial aspects of touch communication and its digital-mediated futures. *Thresholds* was ‘performed’ in a central London Theatre Studio at the end of January 2020, a few weeks before public awareness of Covid-19 started to build in the UK.

The Sensoria framework was developed through a two-year interdisciplinary research collaboration between a social scientist, a digital performance artist, and an electronic sound composer, and is a part of InTouch, a five-year project researching the sociality of touch and digital touch. Sensoria consists of two core components and three methodological principles, all of which are interconnected. The first component is the generation of sustained and substantial interdisciplinary dialogue and exploration which emphasises collaborative ‘doing/making’ focused on the development of materials and resources. The second component is the design of an interactive performance experiment. Three methodological principles thread through these two components these are to: first, research sensory communication *through the sensory*; second, bring sensory materials and resources to the research; and third, provide a range of multimodal/multisensory ways to document the sensory. Each of these elements and their relationships to one another is outlined below.

Component 1: Interdisciplinary multimodal/multisensory dialogue

Sustained and substantial interdisciplinary multimodal/multisensory dialogue which emphasises exploratory playful collaborative doing and making, moving and sensing is at the core of the Sensoria framework. This could include a variety of strategies to provoke sensory interaction, for example, reflective, playful, exploratory use of one’s own body through sensory experiments or artistic propositions; the creation of mini-sensory inventories (e.g. of textures); the re-enactment of sensory routines/practices; creating collective opportunities to respond to (everyday/unusual) objects or sensory

experiences; shared sensory walks (face to face or digitally mediated); seeking out points of connection through film references, imagery; annotating or writing into shared documents. Such activities need to be designed to provoke and embedded in regular reflective discussion to bring each other's disciplines and experiences to bear in challenging and critical ways. The purpose of this dialogic exploration is two-fold. First, it provides a foundation for the collaborative development of research materials, resources, vocabulary and processes to inform component 2 – the interactive performance experiment. Second, it serves to sharpen and situate the three methodological principles that underpin the Sensoria framework (see below) and to establish a shared understanding and conceptualisation of component 2.

Documenting of the process and the content of these dialogues is a key to Sensoria. This involves drawing on and trying-out the range of documentation practices used by the collaborators and the establishment of a collective space (e.g. a digital platform) for sharing content and ideas.

Interdisciplinary dialogue is necessarily filtered through the different disciplinary training and practices, expectations and experiences of the researcher/collaborators, making the formation of the collaborative team a vital consideration in the Sensoria framework. Alongside seeking a range of disciplinary practices, dialoguing requires experimenting with disciplinary boundary crossing, the sharing (through doing) of each other's practices, collective interrogation of terminologies and concepts. While the dialogue is ongoing throughout Sensoria, it is essential that significant exploratory interaction precedes component 2 as this informs the development of the interactive performance experiment. Depending on the timeline of a project, the dialogue at the heart of component 1 can be in the form of an extended unfolding dialogue or a shorter more intensive period of time. (In *Thresholds* the dialogue took place over one year.)

Methodological Principles

Three interconnected methodological principles underpin the Sensoria framework, these were developed through the collaborative case study and articulate multimodal/sensory sensitivities from both social science and artistic practice/research (Jewitt and Leder Mackley, 2019). Through interdisciplinary dialogue (component 1) these principles are fine-tuned to speak to the focus and context of the research collaboration and to inform the conceptualisation and design (e.g. its structure, content, and activities) of the interactive performance experiment (component 2). Each principle is briefly outlined below.

Principle 1: Research multimodal/sensory communication through the multimodal/sensory

The Sensoria framework is underpinned by the a co-opting of the sensing body to research to realise an intensive and immersive engagement with the multimodal/sensory to achieve a depth of collective attunement. Through *Thresholds*, for example, participants were offered possibilities to collectively and individually engage in embodied ways with themselves, one another, objects and the environment.

Principle 2: Bring sensory materials and resources to the research

Sensoria makes the case for the benefits of researching multimodal and sensory experiences by fostering engagement with a wide range of materials and resources - including unusual or strange sensory experiences and sensory conflicts/surprises. We argue that this helps to prompt and support sensory exploration and reflection, and offers new methodological starting points and routes into the multimodal/sensory. In the case of *Thresholds* a wide range of touch resources were made and used to position social, sensorial and aesthetic aspects of touch center stage: drawing out touchy temporalities, sensorial connections between touch and sound, touch vocabularies and metaphors, and creating future

facing critical spaces for collective speculation on touch anchored to the past and present.

Principle 3: Provide a range of multimodal/multisensory ways to document the sensory

The collaborative dialogue between arts and social sciences at the centre of the Sensoria framework is designed to open up methodological potentials for generating and documenting participants' sensory experiences. Through *Thresholds*, for example, we developed multimodal and multisensorial possibilities to collectively and individually engage with the material, embodied and tactile practices of mark-making and meaning making to capture and document and through which to further explore touch experiences.

Component 2: Interactive performance experiment

The second component of the framework is the development and production of an interactive performance experiment. This emerges through and is informed by sustained interdisciplinary dialogue and embodied multimodal and multisensory experimenting (component 1) and the methodological principles. These inform the dramaturgy and composition of the environment, experiences and reflections of the interactive performance experiment.

This component combines an exploratory interactive performance (which may also be a piece of artistic research in its own right) and workshop. The focus is on opening up and posing 'conditions' for experience rather than posing direct, explicit questions or asking for explanations. While the aesthetics and form of the interactive performance experiment may vary, the research environment created needs to provide:

- An immersive embodied multimodal/sensory participant experience/journey
- Space for both shared/collective and individual interaction
- Features that are affective, aesthetic, immersive, interactive, novel (e.g. making the familiar strange), challenging, exploratory, critical and playful
- Varied materials, resources, activities, exercises to provoke sensations and meanings
- Means to express and capture experiences of the performance and the multimodal/sensory more generally.

Given the interdisciplinary character of the Sensoria framework, while the two parts of the interactive performance experiment build on different disciplinary resources, methods and expectations there needs to be a strong sense of connection between and across them, to create a coherence that offers more than the sum of its parts. Its length can vary (*Thresholds* was 2 hrs long) but needs to be long enough to achieve a sense of immersion: we suggest that the two parts of the experiment be kept in equal balance.

CONCLUDING NOTE

Touch and the sensory more generally, is increasingly valued and understood as central to interaction, however, people generally find it hard to access and express these experiences, a difficulty compounded for touch by a paucity of tactile vocabularies and metaphors, and the limitations of visual and talk based qualitative research methods to bring touch to the fore. Sensoria, an innovative interdisciplinary framework and shown the dynamics and potentials of interdisciplinary collaboration between the arts and social sciences to support multimodal/sensory research.

The Sensoria framework seeks to facilitate and operationalize what Vannini (2015) has called the "impossible" desire of more-than-representational approaches to "make us feel something powerful, to

give us a sense of the ephemeral, the fleeting and the not-quite-graspable . . . without necessarily having to resort to spoken commentary, to extended captions, and to research informant's transcribed accounts and illustrating narrations . . . ' (ibid: 6). It does this by grounding the idealized impossibility of more-than-representational approaches in the form of interdisciplinary dialogue and interactive performance at the intersection of multimodal and multisensorial social science methods and artistic research/practice. While the arts and social sciences circulate within different spheres, we position the artistic dimensions of the case study as a form of "experimental humanistic science" occupying a position similar to that of experiments in social science (Elo, 2009: 22). The Sensoria framework is thus engaged in a 'critical encounter or confrontation' (ibid) which frames 'research into and through art' (Scrivener, 1999: 71) in the context of social science, to avoid the binary 'trap' of either leading or subsuming the other, to provide a methodological hybrid that combines experimental and established practices to amplify sensory, bodily and affective aspects of touch.

The Sensoria framework makes a methodological contribution through the creation of imaginative research environments for sensory research that foster entry into difficult to access experiences. In the case of *Thresholds*, the framework provided researchers and participants novel ways to get in touch with touch, it helped them to attune to touch, offered a platform and vocabulary for exploring touch, and generated insights on the felt, sensorial, and affective dimensions of touch. This helped to bring touch out from beneath the other senses in the aesthetic process, and to hold it up to critical reflective address and exploration. The Sensoria framework has also contributed to artistic practice: for example, Marloeke, is engaged with the *Threshold* materials to explore notions of affect through her "*felt responses to them*" towards the construction of a '*living archive*' – a reservoir of objects, questions and materials designed to be enacted and to evoke a variety of responses, and informing the development of a new artistic work.

The creation of exploratory interactive critical research spaces that can open participants and researchers up to, and immerse them in, the messiness of our sensorial worlds is central to the value of the Sensoria framework.

Link to case study

<https://in-touch-digital.com/threshold-touch-experiences/>

Bio notes

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Dr Falk Hübner is a composer, theatre maker and researcher and educator based at HKU University of the Arts and ArtEZ Netherlands, working in theatre, performance and interdisciplinary work. Collaborator on the *Thresholds of Touch* case study.

Marloeke van der Vlugt is a Dutch performance artist and researcher at the HKU University of the Arts Utrecht who explores living in a technology driven, networked world and its impact on the body. Collaborator on the *Thresholds of Touch* case study.

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