Sensing Collectives as Sensing Selves

Two Artistic Interventions and Two Theories of the Self

Jacob Watson, Vanessa Farfán, Markus Binner

> All in all, the creative act is not performed by the artist alone; the spectator brings the work in contact with the external world by deciphering and interpreting its inner qualification and thus adds his contribution to the creative act.
> —Marcel Duchamp, 1957 (as cited in Klanten et al. 2011)

1. WHAT HAPPENED – TO WHOM?

My contribution[1] to the Sensing Collectives volume first and foremost documents two artistic interventions that pertain to the topic at hand and, secondly, to offer a simplified 'philosophical' inquiry into a central feature of all the work done in this book, but not always addressed directly. That feature is the *self* and more importantly the idea of a collective self, collective will, or the gathering together of multiples of willpower, which translates into 'political will.' Such a collective self would be that which an individual understands or projects herself to be a part of, one could almost say the group identity. Now, in a book that espouses a praxeological approach to studying aesthetics and politics, to want to look at—or rather look for—the self that does the practicing seems to be at odds with the premises stated in the introduction. I contend that the notion of a self, or lack thereof, is where one might best plumb the depths of the practice at hand, for that is where sensing and willing happens.

1 Vanessa Farfán and Markus Binner are listed as co-authors of this chapter as it is their artworks that I treat and thus they are authors of the experience I (Jacob Watson) describe as the writer of this chapter.

I am a translator who studied philosophy, and do not consider myself an academic in the traditional sense; nevertheless, my identity has been shaped by my experiences in this field of research and editing this book. Thus, my method in this chapter shall be to give a personal account of the two artistic interventions from our two-day Sensing Collectives workshop in November of 2018 by artists Vanessa Farfán for her "Collateral Aesthetics" and Markus Binner for his "Bitter Mass Cooking" experiment. In this account, many actors come into play, there are people and things, sensory impressions and complex affectations.[2] What I will present here is how the entire situation *in*fluenced me, flowed into my very being to mess with my *identity* and my *will* somehow, i.e. I will describe my experience of 'sensing' the situation. Why is this important to our Sensing Collectives project? I feel that the self is a collection of sense inputs, sensory experience, and affects, perhaps more primarily so than even conscious reflection. The combination of those inputs and affects gives the self a certain shape, and that shape can determine our conscious awareness of ourselves. If I have a bad night's sleep, it certainly affects my sense of self in the morning (if that thing called "self" here is even there, as we will get to). That shape can be then fit a class of things that other individuals see themselves as belonging to—or that others deem them to belong to, be they amateur enthusiasts of some activity or a political movement. Just as with a bad night's sleep, a few delicious meals and extraordinary eating experiences may help one who had merely been a consumer to identify with slow-food enthusiasts, for example. More radically, being assaulted during a protest may push a peaceful participant into an extreme camp.

But what is it that gets affected? What experiences the sense, does it do the *sensing*? The very fact of the sensual nature of the self is paramount to that collective belonging. This is where social science of the senses takes a view of sensing that is active, done by someone or someones, who then together become a group of sensers and willers. The degree to which sensing is active or passive here is indeed, however, an aspect that must be explored philosophically, as I do in my analysis below. As with the chicken and the egg, the philosopher always wants to know which came first. Since the self is an order of sorts, to my mind, of sensory experience and bodily affections driven by phenomena (for our context of a mostly social interaction origin), it is important to give some theoretical foundation to the idea of the self as a sensory being.

In my analysis of the two artistic interventions, I will work with two theories of identity, those of the Enlightenment philosophers David Hume (1739, 1748) and Maine de Biran (1802 and posthumously 1834, 1859), that could be analogous to what—I think—goes on in a sensing collective. In short, Hume's focus is on sensory

2 These are all topics that are handled in much greater detail elsewhere in this book. Since these topics are not my focus but constantly cloud the background of what I've written here, I have not cross-referenced in order to clear the fog for my own thoughts.

experience and the lack of an experience of self, arriving at identity as purely a bundle of one's sensual impressions and simple cognitive ideas; meanwhile, Biran perceives the effort in willing as the primary fact of his existence. While Hume perceives no sense of willpower, ergo no self to will, Biran's self is a trifecta of will, bodily resistance, and the effort that connects them. Whether shell or feather is primary here, I sadly cannot answer, but my exploration of the two discussants in exploration of where and what is will and power, and hence self, at least gives us a framework to think about the question of what a sensing collective is. It is also highly interesting to me that these two modern philosophers took more or less a praxeological view to interrogate the self. Arriving at wholly different theories, they nevertheless explored effects above and beyond all other considerations. This also gives me a lens for looking back at what brought me to co-edit a book on the subject:

What happened at our Sensing Collectives workshop—two artistic interventions described below—will be the object of my self-reflective study on how sensory experiences turned our individual selves, i.e. rather cerebral workshop attendees, into a sensing collective. The two artistic interventions helped the workshop participants to coalesce into a group brought together through shared sensory and affective experiences which arouse a sort of will to delve in further.

This is also a crucial political moment in that the self feels embedded in some form of collective subjectivity and volition, ready to collaborate, to follow a joint agenda, to act in concert. This circles back of course to the self and—through further processes of identity formation—into group adherence, i.e. belonging to a sensing collective based on common sensual experience.

2. FIRST ARTISTIC INTERVENTION: COLLATERAL AESTHETICS

Now, I will turn to the first case of an artistic intervention by Vanessa Farfán, which she entitled "Collateral Aesthetics." This name certainly intrigued us, organizers, when she applied to the workshop. The idea that she had stumbled into a problematic and political 'space' while creating artworks on the streets of Beijing seemed to be right up our alley. Farfán describes her experience as follows, accidently arriving at a clash between how people gather and the political consequences:

If I could speak Chinese, maybe my experience of the city would have been less experimental and I could have found out more about how the physical closeness affected social dynamics. However, my lack of knowledge of Chinese language led me in an apparently purely aesthetic direction: to focus on the aspect of the Chinese characters, especially on the ones embossed on drain covers in the city streets. Sometimes flanked with stars, those relief characters in which one could probably read something like, "Beijing City Drainage" fascinated me. I would have liked to take them with me to Berlin but stealing strainer covers would surely be highly punish-

able. Thinking on ways to "take" these symbols and realizing that I only had a notebook with me, I decided to "take them out" by embossed them on paper. I spend many days looking for all different drain covers in the city. As soon I found a new one, I would kneel on the street and placing a sheet of cotton paper on the metal cover, I would begin to emboss the symbols. This operation could take several minutes. I repeat this action in different zones of the city including the Embassy's Area of the city. This area, is in an exclusive neighborhood where the streets are usually empty of pedestrians but full of luxury cars. Once, while looking for new drain cover in front of the Swedish Embassy, the gate guard of the embassy run out to me. He spoke to me in Chinese, I guess he was trying to figure out what I was doing. Fortunately, I had with me a badge that I got at the residence with the word, "Artist" wrote in Chinese. I showed it to him together with the series of prints I had made earlier. For sure he understood what was about, since without straying too far from his work station, he helped me enthusiastically, to find other new sewers.
I continued my drain cover search in more crowded areas. There, it was common that groups of people would gather around me to watch what I was doing. As soon as the police arrived, the people moved away. I didn't understand what the problem was until I performed this near to Tiananmen Square. As usual a few minutes after I started, a bunch of people gather around me, some even started recording with their phones. The group of people around me grew up. Some seconds later three policemen came and tried to dissolve the group. First in Chines and after with signals they try to say that I should stop doing my embossings. Despite this, I moved out to repeat the action on another place, the result was the same: as soon as a small group of people gathered around me, the police came to break up to the group of people. Sometimes friendly, sometimes aggressively they try to stop me from continuing embossing the drain covers. Some days later, through a friend I have found out what the problem was: After the Tiananmen Square Protest of 1989 and the so-called, "June Fourth Incident," where a thousand of demonstrators were injured, and hundreds were killed, the assembly regulations in public spaces in Beijing change drastically. In 2014, gatherings of more than three people in public spaces were forbidden.

How can the grouping of more than three people in an overcrowded city like Beijing, where masses are bumping into each other all the time, be forbidden by the state? Why are subway queues not dissolved as a political gathering? There's a common purpose and a gathering of definitely more than three! What Vanessa Farfán accidently found out with her artistic experiment—her collateral insight—is that a gathering becomes political when more than three people's attention is drawn to a common focus. This makes them a sensing collective. And only then they become political in their gathering. And that is something the Chinese state seems to fear. But is the political a collateral of the aesthetic? Or are these aesthetic restrictions a collateral of political considerations?

These last two are questions that pertain directly to our workshop, and the way Farfán proposed to convey this experience of unavoidable proximity to one another for our workshop was to go beyond talking and showing pictures in a typical presentation. She wanted the participants to partake, to feel something with their bodies—knowledge transfer via corporeal affect. What follows is my perspective on how she did this:

Before the intervention, we had already put out the seating in careful rows, as a typical frontal presentation calls for. But, Farfán came with masking tape. Her idea was to tape out square meters of space to stand in, so that everyone could feel what it is like to be somewhere with at least one person per meter, like in urban China.

My personal experience of her experiment was quite involved. As an organizer, and the non-university-affiliated member, i.e. with less paperwork to deal with, I had taken up the task of setting up the workshop space. It was the large open room of the TU's Hybrid Lab, which offered lots of freedom. The choice of where to place the 'stage' and the 'audience' was completely arbitrary. We had to come up with a conference design in the most basic sense, and at first we were fairly basic in our conception. Vanessa—now on first name terms—and I had to move all the chairs, draw a grid on the ground large enough for at least a fair number of participants to partake in the affect knowledge on offer. What would it feel like to stand so close to a bunch of strangers? Pre-pandemic, the thought gave me[3] chills; now, I involuntarily start to sweat at the notion; but at the time of the conference we were intrigued. Would this intervention indeed give us the feeling of a Beijing resident?

My answer is yes and no. Most clearly, we did not experience the threat of 'becoming political' in this way that would be a problem in China. There were no police marching into our conference to intervene in her intervention. And there is no way that simply standing too close to another person give a person a precise understanding of the multilayered sensorial, spatial, cultural norms of such a different world—as Farfán herself seems to acknowledge in recounting what it was like to be a 'foreign body' in the densely packed Hutongs of Beijing:

Nowadays, one can find different Hutongs areas: the ones located near of the touristic hotspots and temples, with wide streets and big residential spaces even with a private swimming pool inside, and the Hutongs with extremely narrow streets and modesty services, usually far from the center of the city. It is in these last ones where I found up the direct relation between poverty and physical proximity: families of 5 members living in 6 square meter spaces. With communal bathrooms there, the collective activities, such as cooking and eating, were carried out on

3 I coming from the very rural American state of Idaho with approximately 19 persons for every 2.5 km² i.e. each Idahoan has 1315789m² to themselves. Farfán also made the point that her Mexican cultural background sensitized her to proximity, especially physical touch, in a way that made her experience of Chinese ways of being together all the more alienating.

the streets of those neighborhoods. In my conception of a 'place to eat' I couldn't avoid the uncomfortable sensation of invasion by been walking through streets with people sitting on the floor eating off their plates placed directly on the floor too. Smells, noises, and such scenes made very difficult to establish a clear division between the private and the public space in those neighborhoods.

However, something definitely happened to us, to our bodies and to the conference from the moment Farfán bayed us stand up after her slide presentation. To explain, let me return to the rows of chairs. Chairs, especially the lightweight, stackable kind used for conferences, offer very clear affordances: sitting, not even slouching too much, and I wouldn't dare stand on them. They interlock to tighten and stabilize rows, forcing attentions forward. From in front of them, I found out as a moderator, they can seem threatening or cruel—especially with the first two rows empty—and have a mocking tendency to rattle and clack, as the audience shift from time to time (our of boredom one imagines). But we were asked to remove those chairs, to push them to the side, to liberate the space and to occupy it. Everyone got up and began wrangling with the interlocking links. The metal legs clanged and clattered as they got moved to the periphery, revealing a masking-tape grid of 20 one-meter squares on the floor.

Figure 1: Accidental dissidents: the feeling of one person per square meter.

Source: Markus Binner

The audience retook the center space and our bodies were close, very close as we balanced in our squares. I took the center square so as to encourage participants. There I began to sweat and instantly regret my choice. Surely, I feared, if the civilizing body-care products under my arms didn't hold, the olfactory affects invoked in others would destroy any credibility I'd gained by stepping into that middle square.

But all went well, and I began to exchange nervous glances and coy smiles with the others. Some giggled, some swayed to regain a feeling of personal bubble, the rest stood outside the grid, encircling us and taking mental notes.

We milled around in too-close-for-comfort-ness only a minute or so, but a spell had been broken. We didn't learn much of anything—I'd say—regarding it *is like* to be dweller of the most populace nation on Earth. What we experienced was much more the everyday situation of being on a crowded street, but that combined with the thought of unavoidable closeness and political punishment did give me pause. A knowledge transfer of sorts did take place, one that can only be expressed in conditional terms: What *would it be like* to be arrested for gathering just because one is crammed into a group of random onlookers? The injustice of such a situation was now more palpable for me. The complex idea of what Farfán had told us about the Chinese control of public space plus that brief moment of affect-filled artificial proximity somehow combined within my being. Vague disapproval turned into a very clear discomfort with such an idea. I identified myself all the more with my prior appreciation for freedom of movement and felt indignation against a regime that could punish people by such ambiguous means. I venture to guess that I am not alone—that others present felt the same.

And, for the rest of the conference, we as individual presentation-listeners did encounter each other quite differently. Whether or not the others also experienced the sort of epiphany Farfán was aiming for, again, I can only guess. But our identities as strangers to one another did begin to fade, from within and without. The chairs also became different. Suddenly, they were a place of refuge. We pulled them haphazardly into a willy-nilly seating arrangement. When I took my place—up front but now sort of out halfway into a crescent of onlookers—to thank Vanessa and introduce the next speaker, there was no glaringly empty first row anymore.

The workshop went on, with mostly frontal participations—and all the technical glitches that belong to projectors, USB keys and the various operating systems people must subscribe to, but all these issues that caused delays seemed less dramatic. Know-how was shared by those willing to jump up from that mess of seats to help, or hold the mic while I fiddled with this or that cable. It seemed that people had woken up somehow. And during the talks, it seemed that people were leaning in now—until lunchtime.

This idea and aim, for me, echoes how Hume might conceive of identity wrapped up in a bundle of sensory experiences and their secondary affects. But for Farfán an important lesson was to illustrate that in China seemingly random bodily proximity could itself be used against the whole population. Sure, the focus off the crowd's attention is at play. That attention is what coalesces the sensing collective, the affects amongst the members is what 'holds it together,' makes it one potentially dangerous thing. And the chilling aspect is that that very aesthetic experience could be misin-

terpreted by the authorities, who may designate groupings of people as dissenters simply by the inescapable fact that there's not enough room to keep one's distance!

3. SECOND ARTISTIC INTERVENTION: BITTER MASS COOKING

Figure 2: Bitter Mass Cooking.

Source: Markus Binner

Our lunch break was designed as an artistic experiment in its own right. "A group cooking session with the widely disliked taste," is how Markus Binner, artist-chef, describes his piece entitled "Bitter Mass Cooking." The participatory artwork is a complex 'game' that unfolded from a fairly simple set of 'rules' or 'suggestions.' Color-coded cards had been distributed during sign-in at the beginning of the day. These cards randomly assigned workshop-goers to a task in collectively cooking our lunch. The assignments were a division of labor of sorts that broke the tasks into either making one of three courses or setting up and serving the food or disrupting the rest—a point I will go into at length.

Bitter as the taste of resistance, collectively rejected, breed out by the food industry, needed by the body builds the basis of this work. In a collaborative cooking process we'll have time for the taste and the term.

The ingredients for the food served had in common some degree of bitterness, from radicchio to the "Chinese bitter melon"—a cucumber variety of which one bite will cause lips to pucker upon any subsequent sighting. I assume that it was quite a task of refinement to create edible dishes from these ingredients, but alas I cannot report on this. As I walked through the door that morning, I was handed a gray (the dullest color) card with "Conductor" written on it. Thus continued my identity as an organizer, and I was so busy 'conducting' I only had a chance to pop a piece of above-mentioned melon into my mouth and suffer the consequences. The consequences of being a conductor mostly meant dealing with the final group: the guerillas. This proved to be bitter indeed!

Once again, I was confronted with the conference space. How to rearrange the chairs (again!) and make room for all to sit and eat? What shape should the tables take? Restaurant-style four-tops? Banquet hall seating? What is the most conducive to a convivial atmosphere in which all could make the most of this shared experience?

None of these questions mattered. The guerillas made sure of that. After causing several conflicts and false starts amongst the cooks with various seasoning skirmishes, they turned their disruptive energy towards table rearrangement. According to the 'rules,' the guerilla-group was meant to

… develop ideas, suggestions, attempts to influence and change work processes and their results. They care, for maybe unliked transportation of ingredients, between groups, they create shortage and crises. They improve dishes, they develop innovations.

They innovated towering stacks of chairs on tables. They innovated napkins laid out to replace the table cloth, upon which an attempt was made fold it into a massive swan, like a fancy table decoration. Decorations were made of silverware; plates were hidden; in short, chaos. As an organizer, I had a special conductor's wand: my microphone. I used it as a bullhorn to put down the rebellion and eventually shamed the guerillas into innovating the table settings back into something recognizable—to give up the fight. (I wonder if they let themselves be influenced by being called "guerrillas" in the first place.) I was keenly aware I had to get us eating within the allotted timeslot, and when you want to make the 'trains run on time' there's but one place to go: I remember Anna Leander teasing me and finally coming to my aid when she saw how her techniques were exasperating me, especially when she remarked on my penchant for authority ("You like that microphone, don't you."), that I never in a million years would have admitted to myself … and still bitterly look back on. The guerrillas, of course, weren't actually cowed into obedience, but I did have to raise my voice to convince them to switch sides. It was a careful negotiation of competing wills, the effort of which is akin to the philosopher Maine de Biran's confrontation between the active will and inert body, which I describe in detail below.

The whole Bitter Mass Cooking experience was a bit pressure-cooker for me, but I later learned it was a general feeling. All the participants were asked some time later to look back and give their impressions. Because the whole point of the experiment was to draw a collective response, here are a few others' points of view:

Figure 3: above: keynote speaker Hennion and Vanessa Farfán cooking with other participants; lower right: me looking rather worried at the chaos unfolding; middle: Landau-Donnelly improvising a means dish out; left: engaged eaters and talkers.

Source: Markus Binner

There are tensions between what both the six groups in their appointed roles or the individuals bringing their own norms and routines might consider 'good cooking' leading to clashes and compromises. There is no general definition for what is seen as 'good' in the process of food preparation nor one singular 'good menu' itself. What the experiment has shown, is that cooking is an inherently social practice and often equals a form of caring for each other.
—Julie Sascia Mewes

The participants were given three boxes of mixed up ingredients and an incomplete collection of recipes, and they were supposed to get together, define tasks, negotiate ideas and solve micro problems in order to prepare a three-course meal for everyone. The participants, aka cooks, enjoyed this process, because they were looking forward to the joint meals. This common experience really helped to form a cohesive group, which was capable of negotiating the challenges of collective forms of living.
—Torsten Klafft

A production machine set in motion—an initial division and ordering by task. Emergent, cooperative collaborations; breakaways renegotiating an assigned place to take on roles more fitting … Efficiencies and expertise emerging within some clusters; initiative and spontaneous redirection. A hum of productive, collaborative, inclusive activity. Anticipation—desiring the bitter? Desiring the disruptive; the unexpected. Sounds of chopping; sizzling. Pungency—nose-wrinkling, but with delicate back-flavors. The format (the feast) promising pleasure; the pleasure of shared experimentation, of a venture into the daring, the confronting–even the repulsive. The food is unexpectedly good—in small quantities.
—Susan Stewart

and even a poem:

Bitter mass cooking
if you cook rice for 30 people, it can be coarse or mushy
you get lots of free advice on how to do it
many cooks making lots of rice
what is an expert in this crumbling crunchy world
eating our wor(l)ds
granularity of rice
granularity of thought
food cracks open spaces of thought (and rice)
listening to people talking about practice
practicing listening
or not

hearing nothing while listening
doing nothing while practicing
what is practice worth if we're surrounded by walls
—Friederike Landau-Donnelly

In the end, we all ate and ate well. We all enjoyed the experiment and the buzz of excitement stayed with us for the rest of the conference. The next days' lunch was a prototype for the experiments carried out by my co-editors, Jan and Nora. The lunch experiments came up over and over over the next day and especially during our closing feedback session. Combined with Vanessa's ice-breaking intervention, they bodily, affective knowledge transfer that had occurred for "Sensing Collectives" really had created a collective identity of sorts. The workshop ended with us huddling in an extended circle, some sitting on the floors and table—those poor chairs, totally disoriented—and discussing intensely what exactly we had been 'getting into together' the last days.

4. A PHILOSOPHICAL INTERPRETATION

Now, there are many philosophical theories of the self, but only a handful offer us the tools we need to arrive at a self that is based on sensory experience and aligned volition—my two criteria for defining sensing collectives. I find though, that there are some fine examples in the works of the renowned Scotsman David Hume and an obscure Frenchman Maine de Biran. I will attempt a very short summary of the way that these trains of thought intersect to offer us a self whom the other authors of this volume and probably most readers may just take for granted—a self that is a *sensing self*, a self that at its core is a *will*. The reason such a self is important to sensing collectives is that its politics (will) are intertwined with the other part of its being: aesthetics.

The idea for sensing collectives, for me, follows a long and winding train of thought that I will try to summarize here as clearly possible. My aim is to arrive at a rough definition of self that can also serve as the basis of ideas about the kinds of collective identity treated in this volume.

So, what is identity, anyway? This is a central question of philosophy. What is the self? Where does it reside? How is it formed? What does it constitute? These are, in a roundabout way and in far simpler terms, the questions approached by the authors in this work and elsewhere, across the disciplines of not just sociology and politics but also to a(n ever greater) degree design, art, activism, among others. The key question to who figuring out the making and breaking of social orders seems again and again to be how do the selves of all those who make up a collective get influenced into forming their groups or leaving them as abandon causes.

Philosophy as forever been preoccupied with locating the self and through the centuries has looked in different realms. In ancient Greece, the obvious choice was in the realm of ideas. This world, it was thought, is merely a transitory and illusory: Plato's cave. But even here the idea of sense data influencing and forming those chained before the fire, marveling at the shadows—connecting them in a collective of unenlightened mortal misery—was central.

This is what struck me about the Sensing Collectives project. At the beginning we talked about a map or sorts, a typography of sensing-related ideas, practices, and actions that would help define, shape or destroy those very selves that make up the collectives. A strong methodological bent to much of the research presented in this volume is a focus on the first-person ethnographic perspective. Many of the researchers here are retrieving their fine-grained data from within themselves (and I too). Where philosophy and especially its sister discipline, phenomenology, struggle with the senses once inside our bodies and minds—wrangling between impressions, sensations, affections, and on and on to come to grips with the homunculus or lack thereof—, Sensing Collectives pragmatically takes for given that self can be acted upon via the senses and perception can be shaped to modify at least the self's adherence to some group or another. Nonetheless, I feel that it is important to deliver some*thing* to define what a sensing collective might be.

There is paradox at the heart of a sensing self. The philosopher who points this out most clearly to my mind is David Hume (1711–1776). He, for non-philosophers, is a founding father of skepticism and, weirdly, at the same time, epistemology itself. He held that we could know only through the senses and that anything that would require a leap of faith to believe in, just couldn't be called knowledge. Senses provided perceptions and "impressions"—think of a mind as matter and sensory input is pressed in, leaving an impression. These impressions could be cobbled together to give us "ideas": complex ideas and simple ideas. The who or what is being impressed upon isn't really Hume's concern, just that he has no experience of that thing. Now, this goes against the pragmatist philosophy of perception that underlies most of the thinking about sensing and sensation in this book—that it is an active and recursive constitution of sensory experience in that inputs are attended to according to a subject's notion of their relevance. But suffice to say that, here, I'm merely holding up as a frame Hume's bundle theory of the self, constituted of sense impressions and the simple idea that we in this volume are calling "affects." I am looking for a way of thinking about sensing collectives that gives some sense of the self that collectively feels the affect and where, potentially, a will emerges. Above, in my recount of Farfán's intervention I claimed that the affect of standing so close to one another transferred some knowledge; this requires some unpacking:

Hume was writing at a time when knowledge was mostly thought to be revealed by God to individual souls, or at least to priests who could disseminate authoritative knowledge. But he rejected this. For him, direct experience was paramount. Hume

famously even doubted causation was knowable, because you cannot experience it. That knowledge must be founded upon some sort of data is of course something we take for granted in scientific discourse today, but here's the catch: we also take causation for granted. You only have succession. Event A happens and something B follows, but whether A is the cause and B the effect, it's essentially impossible to know. Why? Because we don't see anything occurring or transferring from A to B that we could call a cause. Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) would later solve this conundrum, placing the idea of causation within human reason. We don't need to see the cause transfer to occur, because we understand time and succession. Our understanding is geared to do so, so says Kant. But all this is merely an aside to illustrate Hume's view.

Now to Hume's self. He also thought there was no *thing* that is the self. In accordance with sense impressions delivering the basis for all that there is, he looks but proclaims that

> [e]ven when my perceptions are remov'd for any time, as by sound sleep; so long am I insensible of myself, and may truly be said not to exist. And were all my perceptions remov'd by death, and cou'd I neither think, nor feel, nor see, nor love, nor hate after the dissolution of my body, I shou'd be entirely annihilated, nor do I conceive what is farther requisite to make me a perfect non-entity. [Someone] may, perhaps, perceive something simple and continu'd, which he calls himself; tho' I am certain there is no such principle in me… I may venture to affirm of the rest of mankind, that they are nothing but a bundle or collection of different perceptions, which succeed each other with an inconceivable rapidity, and are in a perpetual flux and movement. (Hume 1763)

Herewith, Hume founds his "bundle theory of identity"; it comes down to 'when sensing ceases, there is nothing,' no will, no perceivable self, nothing to speak of except some feeling of continuity based on successive sense impressions and the very fact that they are successive. The rest of Hume's argument is more or less semantic in nature, delving into what we might mean when we say "force" or "necessary connection"—that which would underlie a will(power) and a self, the perceiver of the necessarily connected succession of sense inputs. Kant, again, offered an alternative, an antithesis even, but, again, that's not the scope here. I merely propose that we could think of our sensing collectives through analogy as some sort of collective bundled self or bundled collective of bundles selves, bundled by the aesthetics of which they are intertwined. Again, Farfán's experiment helps me to apply this thought: A sensing collective coalesces around nothing more than a shared sensory and affective experience, which is surely also bundled together with the existent ideas we had about the Chinese situation, but which did not have the same quality as after the experiment.

The other vital aspect of such beings that willingly join or unwittingly are corralled into such collectives is the will itself. While Hume questions its existence, volition as a foundation of selfhood also has a long tradition. One minor character in the philosophical pantheon and in this topic specifically is a lesser known but highly influential French philosopher by the name of Maine de Biran (1766–1824). He lived and wrote after Hume and partially in response to him. His is also a response to the most famous of French philosophers, René Descartes (1596–1650), whose writings from a century and a half prior to the other three thinkers presented here pretty much got us into this mess. Hume was also responding, with skepticism, to Descartes's "I think therefore I am" argument, the so-called "*cogito*"—which exists in the face of a doubt about every physical fact, every sensory input, literally positing a tiny demon intent on giving false sense impressions to offer only lies upon lies, a dire situation countered ultimately by the famous phrase.

Descartes line of thinking split the physical body from the mental self, creating the very problematic Dualism. If all we perceive is physical and falsifiable and only that thing that thinks is the true reality, the world is of two non-put-together-able places—a thought which Maine de Biran just couldn't stomach. Biran's self is inextricable from his body. Biran begins with a self that is part will, not a thought but an urge or desire to move. That will only finds fulfillment in the other part: the body. And how is he aware of his self? Hume might ask, where's your sensory evidence?

Biran has two feelings that support his claim. When he wills his body to move, he feels his body's muscles needing a push. The movement isn't like jumping out of a chair for him, but rather like getting out of bed; it takes effort. The two sensations Biran pairs together are "effort" and its necessary flipside "resistance"—since effortlessness lies the lack of any resistance. Biran's self is therefore *a willed effort meeting a bodily resistance*.

Now, there is plenty to say about the larger conversation revolving around these figures and their bundle theory of the self and effort/resistance theory of the self and intricacies, contradictions, alternatives, etc. For one, Biran's conception brings us much closer to the pragmatic view of senses championed by the social sciences: that sensing is a willed act, an act of attention focusing. Derrida held Biran's treatment of touch to be the perfect example of how sensing works (Thorsteinsson, 2022). Tactile sensation is the product of voluntary, willed movement—reaching out to touch—but we must stay on track and therefore turn back to the analogy that I'm grasping at.

My intention with this contribution has been to arrive at some fundamental understanding of the object of study for sensing collectives. When I read our own subtitle "politics and aesthetics intertwined" I see a potential nexus where that intertwining takes place: a bundle of sorts. Where I'm going should be obvious. The sensing collective is a bundle of similar or common sensations and affections that drives some group or class of people together in a collective identity. But in a pragmatic and, further, in a Biranian sense, this is also an active, willed sort of sensing that is

entangled with a willpower, either springing from the affectation or driving the sensation. That identity would be a form of collective self, that is nothing but the intermingling of these sensations/affections which, at once, is the very thing wherefrom the thoughts, desires, and politics arise, i.e. a collective will expressed in the effort of doing, of performing, of carrying out one of the many practices that make up political action and identity expression. The other part of the coalescing of a sensing collective, besides bundling sensual experience, would thus be the willpower and associated resistance of the other bodies in that group and the effort of bringing them together.

5. INTERTWINING THE INTERVENTIONS

Finally, I would like to quickly link up each of our workshop interventions with the two theories I've summed up. Vanessa Farfán's proximity experiment is, for me, an excellent illustration of Hume's bundle theory of self. The similar experience of claustrophobia and discomfort of standing so close to a bunch of strangers gave each of those strangers something to shape who they were from there on out. And even Farfán's initial premise—that random bodily proximity had formed groups spontaneously, who, in the eyes of a Chinese authority, now belonged together in some sort of act of dissent—points to the double meaning of sensing collectives: The authorities ascribe group identity based on perhaps a common confusion as to why some Mexican woman is embossing the manhole covers. A collective self takes form or is given form whether judged from within or without. Regarding the self, Hume claimed there was 'no there there'—but only these constellations of sensory inputs or the combination thereof that correspond with the "simple ideas," or affects. In the social realm of multiple persons, this indeed has explanatory power, even we are talking about a very fluid or temporary collective, and 99% of the time it probably will dissipate.

And what is the glue that could hold it together? Here I reach back to Markus Binner's idea that the taste of bitter is the taste of resistance and link it up with Maine de Biran's notion of self as a trifecta of will, a resistant body and the effort to move it. In the lunch experiment, the various inputs and ideas of how to accomplish the task at hand was met with resistance on all sides—from within the collectives assigned to cook, from the conductors hurrying things along and from the guerillas monkeying things up. My guess, judging from the photos,[4] is that cooking together also broke down hierarchies to a degree—our keynote speaker, Antoine Hennion is pictured chopping veggies with master's students, for example. It was the interaction

4 For photos and more on our workshop: www.sensing-collectives.org/workshop-gallery/

of the will to eat and the effort to get all those bodies to work together that created a collective and coherent self from multiple moving parts.

There is obviously a logical issue I face with combining Hume's bundle theory with Biran's trio of identity, and that is: Where Hume finds no evidence of a separate substance beyond the impressions and affects that moves or wills the body, Biran simply asserted there was (Schmaus, 2022). Hume's argument is that we are simply habituated to see a change of state and assume a will is responsible. Biran claims to *feel* the will. But philosophical paradox is not the focus of this volume, and thus I will take a pragmatic view and say that I merely see these theories as analogies to describe the phenomenon of sensing collectives. Hume and Biran's ideas are useful (to me) as a heuristic to conceive of how a collective will might coalesce around a certain issue through aesthetic means or, conversely, how a hegemonic regime might be face resistance or disruption through aesthetic interventions. In fact, it serves as a sort of criteria list for identification of a sensing collective: What is being sensed and how says something specific about the group doing the sensing. How the sensing individuals then act or think in concert and react to each other is an expression of the collective will. This enters the research-rich territory of contemporary philosophy of mind debates on extended mind (Clark and Chalmer 2010) or interesting theories on the relational theory of self (Gallagher 2008, Kyselo 2014), i.e. that we are not just *ourselves* but always definable in relation to our surroundings and others.

As far as I can remember, I've heard the phrase "likeminded individuals" used to signify political constituencies. If we are to believe Hume and others, there may be no 'mind' at all to account for an individual or even a will, but only a common sensing apparatus. Therefore, it may be more helpful to talk about 'like-sensing' collective, in which we can identify behavior that mimics a will based on common sensory and affective input. A sensing collective could thus be defined as a bundle of like-sensing bodies whose collective will is expressed in actions and behaviors that are born of the very act of coalescing around *the aesthetic*, i.e. that which is aesthetic, and being such a thing—a sensing collective—is itself political.

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